

Harbour heritage

Documented for posterity: How we used it and abused it

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Hamilton's storied harbour truly comes to life in all its glory -- and all its shame -- in a sweeping new documentary created by McMaster University's history department.

The People and the Bay: The Story of Hamilton Harbour premiered to a private audience yesterday at the Marine Discovery Centre at Pier 8, and is now being distributed, free, to high schools across the city and beyond.

Substantial, sweeping and entertaining, it affirms the importance and character of the harbour itself, and the role of humans in exploiting, ruining and recovering its promise over more than a century and a half.

While it's not exactly Ken Burns, it's not far off, including rare archival photographs and footage played dramatically against recreated vignettes shot on scene and stunning nature shots from the harbour itself.

McMaster historians Ken Cruikshank and Nancy Bouchier narrate the documentary from the locations they are describing, including Dundurn Castle, LaSalle Park and -- via canoe -- from the waters of the harbour itself, making it easy to connect the dots between the historical harbour and the way it looks today.

The People and the Bay takes viewers through a formidable chunk of history: the harbour's early population by natives and United Empire Loyalists; its military importance in the War of 1812, when Burlington Heights provided a natural defence against the American enemy; early industrialization and railway disaster under Allan MacNab; the rise and fall of an active commercial and sports fishery; a shantytown along the banks of the marsh; amusement parks and swanky clubs along the north shore and the Beach Strip; and the dredging and filling of the natural inlets along the south shore that provided the physical platform for massive growth by Stelco, Dofasco and other industries which in turn provided the economic platform for the growth of Hamilton itself.

But, as the documentary shows, humans built themselves right out of their own harbour, eventually rendering it unsafe for man and nature alike. Ultimately, it became a "cesspool" until people began to take it back, starting with the environmental movement of the 1960s and leading to the opening of Bayfront Park on a man-made promontory first intended for industrial use.

The ambitious documentary was professionally produced by McMaster multimedia, film and theatre graduate Zach Melnick's Pixel Dust Studios and funded by the L.R. Wilson Centre for Canadian History, which is sponsored by the university's new chancellor.

The idea started on a 2005 history department cruise aboard the Hamilton Harbour Queen, where Cruikshank -- the department chair -- and Boucher, an associate professor in history and kinesiology, were giving a narrative tour to graduate students and local high school history teachers.

The history teachers said they'd love their students to hear and see the same thing.

That developed into the idea of creating a kind of high school field trip by proxy, and eventually, the documentary, Cruikshank explained.

Cruikshank said with a self-deprecating chuckle that the biggest challenge he and Boucher faced, as academics, was keeping the whole thing to just 47 minutes.

Exactly where it might go beyond the high school circuit and one confirmed public showing at the Bay Area Restoration Council's history night Nov. 20 is still an open question. Early reviews are encouraging, Cruikshank said, and broader distribution -- and other projects -- could still be on the horizon.

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Courtesy National Archives of Canada

The Brant Hotel, overlooking the Beach Strip, later became the Brant Military Hospital, a convalescent hospital for Canadian soldiers wounded during the First World War. It fell victim to the wrecker's ball in 1937.



Courtesy National Archives of Canada

A lakebound steamer in the Burlington Ship Canal around 1910 with crowds lining the pier.



Courtesy National Archives of Canada

The bath house pavilion at Wabasso (later LaSalle) Park built circa 1920. Bathers could rent lockers and towels and use the showers.



Courtesy National Archives of Canada

Fun and frolic at the beach ca. 1910. when Hamiltonians were able to enjoy the clean waters of Lake Ontario.