

Old Schoolhouse Tea Room closes in Ormsby



By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

A piece of Ormsby's history recently ended with the closure of the Old Schoolhouse Tea Room after 19 years. In those nearly two decades, proprietors Ernie Pattison and his wife Debbie hosted a wide range of afternoon teas, dinners, live music and special events. This year also marks the 100th anniversary of the building as a schoolhouse. According to Pattison, the new owner of the building plans to turn it into a private residence.

The Old Schoolhouse Tea Room was a fixture in downtown Ormsby from the day it opened in the summer of 2003 until it closed in March of this year. It had accrued a five-star rating on Trip Advisor and in 2016, DaysoutOntario.com called it "one of the best places for a spot of tea."

Patrons were offered a glimpse into the past as they enjoyed their tea, as the tea room was fully restored with period authentic desks, a woodstove, blackboards, local history books, school books and photographs.

Before running the tea room, Ernie Pattison was a first call for the bass trombone in the Toronto music scene for many years, playing with a wide range of artists including Natalie Cole, Harry Connick Jr., Kenny Rogers and dozens more. He played trombone with the Phantom of the Opera and other musicals, and also played for the internationally acclaimed jazz band the Boss Brass.

According to his brother Gary Pattison, who owns and runs Ormsby's Old Hastings Mercantile and Gallery with his wife Lillian, Ernie had a list of about 50 or 60 people of varying celebrity in the music industry, and if you could guess what they all had in common, you'd get a free dessert at the tea room.

‘Of course, it was him, he’d played with all of them at one time or another. It was a really outstanding list of entertainers,’ he says.

Ernie's wife Debbie plays French horn for the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, and also played with Phantom of the Opera in Toronto. In fact, that's how they met. Ernie recalls that he suggested that she invest her money in buying property somewhere during their courtship.

‘She found an old schoolhouse on Weslemkoon Lake, so she bought that and restored it. Then along came another schoolhouse at The Ridge, and when we bought that, the real estate agent said there was another schoolhouse in Ormsby for sale, which was still pretty original versus the others that had been altered over time. So, we bought that to restore it and sell it,’ he says.

Ernie says they restored it and since it was big enough, they decided to have their wedding reception there in 1997, and then ended up leaving it for a few years. At that point, he decided he'd like to be up in the Ormsby area more often and get out of Toronto.

‘We'd moved to Kitchener, as my wife got a job with the Kitchener-Waterloo symphony, and I thought it would be a great chance to change course and do the tea room thing,’ he says.

While he says he didn't have any experience with running a tea room, he just thought he would see how it went. He did however have a love of baking, which he started doing when he was still playing with the Phantom of the Opera in Toronto.

‘There were 30 people in the orchestra. It seemed like there was a birthday every week. So, I was baking cakes for the players for quite a few years and sort of honed my baking skills,’ he says.

After adding a kitchen to the back of the schoolhouse, he opened up the tea room in July of 2003, the same month that his brother Gary opened up the Old Hastings Mercantile and Gallery. A lot of the period specific pieces like books, photos and furniture were donated by locals to the tea room, and Ernie says his brother Gary found a few school desks. There was an old parlour stove from the 1920s that they were able to procure. Ernie also mentions finding an old school bell, which he dragged up into the schoolhouse tower and put it in.

‘That was kind of neat, to have an original authentic sounding bell. It's still up there now. I don't think I'd be able to get up there to take it down. It was a pretty tough job just getting it up there!’ he says.

While they were firmly entrenched in their own business ventures in Ormsby, the Pattison brothers have quite a history in the area. In their youth, they used to visit their aunt and uncle at their farm on The Ridge, a farming community just south of Coe Hill.

Their family history there goes back to the 1860s and Ernie has owned a farmhouse there since 1983.

Ernie recalls some of the more memorable experiences at the tea room over the years.

‘All the Dickens and dinner by lamplight events were pretty special and so were the weddings. We had an interesting guest come in one day, Joni Mitchell's daughter. Since her family's ancestors had settled in The Ridge back in the 1860s, she had some questions about her ancestors, so that was interesting,’ he says.

Ernie says he also got to speak with Joni Mitchell herself on the phone and exchanged letters with her, as her mother was also very interested in the family history at The Ridge. As a result, he even began to play Mitchell's music at the tea room.

Ernie describes some of the more popular food offerings at the tea room, including the famous carrot cake. In addition to the finger sandwiches, scones, and little desserts that made up the high tea, he says they would also have specialty soups and sandwiches.

?We had two good soups, we had a butternut squash soup and a cauliflower soup. The butternut squash soup was really different. It had maple syrup in it, it was a very interesting recipe, and had great flavour to it. So, people came in for that. I gave out more recipes for that soup than I care to remember,? he says.

Gary also fondly remembers the popular Dickens and dinner by lamplight events held every year.

?People are still missing it. [Ernie] also had a bluegrass group, Hard Ryde, that would play there every September, for two shows on a Saturday. That was also quite popular,? he says.

Then there was Ernie's life as a musician and the expansive list of entertainers that he'd worked with over the years. Gary says that was something that he would talk to people about and there was quite a background there for him to draw on.

?It was quite interesting to hear everything he had to say about that. People enjoyed talking to him and he enjoyed talking to people,? he says.

Some of the best memories that Gary remembers at the tea room were the New Years' Eve dinners he would always share there with his wife.

?Not being licenced [under LLBO], it wasn't a late-night New Years' Eve party but an earlier dinner. Our anniversary, Lillian and I, I think we chose that day so I would never forget it and we'd be celebrating even if I did forget!? he says.

The high tea takeaways for lunches during those years were also fondly remembered by Gary.

?When we were working at the store, I'd get the full high tea takeaways; the little sandwiches, the fruit salad, the little cookies and the carrot cake. We did that more times than I can remember during those 17 years we were open together. Just being able to get our lunch there was very handy and very much appreciated,? he says.

He also mentions the fact that the tea room, in addition to his own store, brought people to downtown Ormsby. He remembers that bus tours would come into town. Sometimes, there'd be so many travellers that they would have half of them do lunch at the tea room while the other half shopped at the mercantile and gallery and then they would switch.

?The two businesses together basically gave people a good reason to find us here, basically in the middle of nowhere,? he says.

Linda Grant, aka the Crafty Gardener (craftygardener.ca) thought the tea room was a delightful place to visit when she would come by for tea.

?It is sad to see the Old Schoolhouse close and we will miss our visits there, but will still visit Ormsby to go to the Mercantile store to see Lillian and Gary, Jessica and McDuff. We'll miss chatting with Ernie about his music and memorabilia,? she says.

Folk artist Nicole Lisa Craig played at the tea room several times over the years, and was sorry to hear that it had closed.

?Performing there was a beautiful, nostalgic experience. One of my favourites in the seven years I spent touring,? she says.

Cindy Ouellette is Ernie's friend and was the co-administrator of the Old Schoolhouse Tea Room Facebook page, who according to her Facebook post from March 19, met Ernie when she and her husband visited the tea room on their way home from the cottage one weekend. She said she'll miss all the memories over the years, including anniversaries, Mothers and Fathers Days, the Dickens dinners, and the blue grass and folk music performances.

Linda Brumbill is a real estate agent with her husband Rich Morin in Tudor and Cashel Township. She remembers she used to take her daughters, Olivia and Megan, to the tea room many years ago, when they would visit her during the summer at her home on Weslemkoon Lake Road.

?My girls are grown now, but we used to visit three or four times a summer. We would get dressed up in our Sunday dresses, and go and have tea, cucumber sandwiches and treats. They loved being able to play on the chalkboards and flip through the old schoolbooks there. Some of the best memories I have of them at that age are us spending time together at the tea house,? she says.

Of all the things Ernie will miss about the Old Schoolhouse Tea Room, he says the interaction with his customers tops the list.

?Hearing their stories and talking with them about the history of the building, the history of the area, food recipes, my music career. It was interesting to hear about different things,? he says. ?I enjoyed talking with them so much!?