

The lingering ghosts of Christmases past



By Nate Smelle

EACH YEAR, AS I am preparing content for the Christmas editions of our two local newspapers, I find myself digging deep into the archives from years past, in search of special moments from our local history. Through this annual period of reflection, I have come to appreciate what I can only identify as our community spirit. Unlike the majority of newspapers in Canada, The Bancroft Times has been documenting this process of communal evolution for more than a century ? nearly 129 years, in fact. To give you an idea of what life was like when our newspaper first began sharing local news, horse-drawn carriages in Toronto had only been replaced by electric streetcars two years earlier in 1892. Approximately a year after The Bancroft Times was established, Canadians took a huge step forward into the modern era with the erection of the first self-supporting steel framed ?skyscraper? in Canada ? the six-storey high Robert Simpson Department Store at the corner of Yonge and Queen in Toronto. When we think of North Hastings today, many take pride in the seemingly inexhaustible natural beauty of our local landscape and the peacefulness it inspires in us whenever we take the time to appreciate it. Back in 2013, after the first of a few 100-year floods to hit the north over the following six years, I had the opportunity to take in a birds-eye view of the Bancroft area while covering a story on the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry's aerial fish stocking program. Almost immediately after lift-off I was awestruck by the amount of greenspace ? forests, fields, lakes, rivers, and wetlands ? we are blessed with in this part of the province. Stretching out like arteries throughout this ecosystem I noticed the network of roads that initially provided me access to Bancroft in 2005. This brief, yet enlightening aerial adventure left me with a newfound sense of place and appreciation of our role as stewards of this magnificent gift. As stewards, it is our duty to responsibly care for and manage this most precious and peaceful living space, so that we may share its life-sustaining beauty with future generations. Soaking in as much information as possible as I turned back through the

rapidly aging pages of The Bancroft Times to better understand the nature of our community's evolving spirit, I learned that in 1913 ? about a year before the onset of the First World War ? there was a mere 50,000 motor vehicles in Canada. Reminded of my time in the skies over Bancroft a decade earlier, I imagined how different life must have been for people living in a remote location such as North Hastings in the early years of the 20th century. With so few cars and roads to travel on, the sense of place those who lived here possessed must have been extraordinarily influential in shaping this community's spirit. Thinking of how our community's spirit still exists today, I picked up another edition of The Bancroft Times from 1945 and read every word printed in December of that year. Flipping from page to page, there was one paragraph, an advertisement, that reminded me of how, despite all the progress we have made over the 28,470 or so days, we still have a long, long way to go. It read: ?Christmas 1945: This is a special kind of Christmas, the first in seven years without the darkness of war. At last we are free to celebrate the season in the old-time way. Our loved ones are home, the candles will gleam brighter now, the balsam bundles will breathe a more pungent fragrance, and more sweetly than ever will carols ring ? as if in answer to a world's prayers for peace. But none will forget ? now or ever ? those fallen sons who sacrificed their lives that we might know the joy of Christmas again. In their honour and to their glory we worship at home and shrine. And in our hearts shall we resolve to do those things which keep us strong and in the right ? the best way of all to banish war forever. In this, we shall be men who think of tomorrow, men of good will, making sure of even better Christmases to come.?This Christmas, before we celebrate with our loved ones, we must take a moment to acknowledge the suffering of those trapped within the grips of war in Gaza, Ukraine, Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and everywhere else where peace only exists in prayer. Until all sides in every fight realize the embarrassing stain on humanity that war truly is, can we truly appreciate the peacefulness we enjoy here in North Hastings.