

Duo seeks tales of local black history

Toronto film-makers scout out oral history
at Emancipation Day picnic

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Toronto film-makers Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland of Hungry Eyes Inc. thought the 136th annual Emancipation Day picnic was a great opportunity to tap into the local history of black people.

The co-producers are relying heavily on the tradition of oral black history in this area to research a documentary for the National Film Board of Canada about the origins of Black Ontarians in Grey County.

Sunday afternoon, as more than 300 Ontario descendants of black pioneers gathered at the park south of Owen Sound to celebrate their ancestors' freedom from slavery more than 130 years ago, the two producers were questioning the elders of the community to see if anyone could fill in the gaps of a sparse history.

"We're building linkages here today," Sutherland said. "Oral history is something that has been shared for generations among black people."

Sutherland says it's important to try to document local black history now because the oral tradition has faded and the elders of the culture who have the ability to share historical information are dying off.

"We want to save it, get it before it is lost," he said. "It's very important that black stories are told in Canada."



Sun Times photo by James Masters

Film-makers Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland at the annual Emancipation Day picnic at Harrison Park.

The history of black Canadians has been largely ignored in books, encyclopedias and museums, which means that solid facts about black pioneers and black slaves in Ontario are few and far between.

Holness and Sutherland initially thought of doing the historical documentary in June, after they heard about an archaeological dig at the Old Durham Road Cemetery east of Priceville.

Historians, archeologists, and descendants were hoping to find headstones of pioneers dating back to the 1830s during the dig, which would have given them strong reason to believe that black people were the first non-native settlers in Grey County, but the results were disappointing. No tomb-

stones were found, leaving Sutherland and Holness to wonder what sort of unknown history the Priceville area has.

Grey County historians concluded that the black pioneer headstones had been moved from the overgrown cemetery and that solid evidence of black history may remain forever withheld if people in the area do not aid in the recovery of the past.

Holness says that research for the documentary has been difficult because not everyone agrees that black history should be made public, whether it is their own history or not.

"We've even come across some barriers within the black community," Holness said. "Some people feel that the stories, and the history is theirs, and they don't want to share it."

Terry Harding, a resident of Owen Sound and descendant of black pioneers, says he knows that people around here can be reluctant to give information.

"Anything to do with black history to some people seems like a bad idea, but it's not," he said.

He says it is extremely important to find a place in the Canadian history books for black people.

"It's always nice to know your past, and where you originated from," Harding said. "The documentary is a good idea."

He says that it is important for the children of today to know that their forefathers struggled and moved up to Owen Sound from the United States, with the help of the underground railway, to make a better life for them.

For Holness and Sutherland, any kind of documentation or lead is helpful to their research.

"We recently saw three or four wonderful passages from the diary of a white clergyman," Holness said. "He lived in the mid-nineteenth century, and described how it was a sad thing to witness slavery."

That type of hard historical evidence is imperative to their research.

Holness said they are not yet halfway through their research or footage for the documentary at this point, but that events like the Emancipation Day Picnic have helped to provide a modern context for the scattered history in their film.