

It's a piece of history often denied in the area, which prides itself on a heritage of Scottish and Irish settlers, said local resident Les MacKinnon.

MacKinnon spearheaded efforts to restore the black cemetery at Priceville. It had been plowed under as a potato field in the 1930s.

After reading about these efforts by MacKinnon's committee in a story first published in *The Star*, Holness and Sutherland set out for Priceville in the spring of 1999.

What the young black filmmakers found was area blacks reluctant to talk to them and a

stones might reveal about their own darkie ancestry," Holness said. Others objected on the ethical grounds of disturbing a cemetery.

Though ground-probing radar indicated dozens of probable grave sites, a two-day search of the field in 1999 failed to turn up any tombstones.

The filmmakers tracked down elderly residents who reminisced about the schoolhouse on "Darkie Corners," opposite the old cemetery.

The filmmakers also talked to Joyce Grimes, the stepdaughter of Billy Reid, the farmer who turned the ceme-



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DIGGING OUT: Howard Sheffield, who has relatives buried in the pioneer cemetery near Priceville, watches archeologists dig for lost tombstones in 1999.

Black cemetery's story unearths deep secrets

Locals reluctant to discuss missing tombstones in potato field

BY ROBERTA AVERY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

PRICEVILLE — Unearthing the story of a black pioneer cemetery plowed under and turned into a potato field in the 1930s was much harder than Toronto filmmakers Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland ever imagined.

"There was a conspiracy of silence out there," said Holness, who directed the National Film Board's documentary *Speakers for the Dead*, which will air on Vision TV Wednesday at 9 p.m.

The film tells the story of the black families who settled on the Old Durham Rd., near the hamlet of Priceville, about 50 kilometres southwest of Collingwood, nearly 200 years ago.



DIRECTORS: David Sutherland and Jennifer Holness shot film.

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white community divided and at times aggressive.

"You people don't belong here," was one comment Holness said she often heard.

Four tombstones were found in the late 1980s in a pile of stones by the potato field, but a plan to search for the dozens of others believed to be buried in the field had divided the cemetery restoration committee.

"It split the residents, many of whom fear what the tombstones might reveal about their

tery into a potato field.

Grimes said her stepfather used the tombstones in the basement of their home adjacent to the cemetery. She remembers using them as stepping stones across the basement's earth floor to reach the potato storage bin.

"We raised very good potatoes on that particular piece of land, they were excellent," Grimes tells the camera.

Grimes' candid comment didn't surprise Holness: "We found many people who had no sense of there being anything wrong in what happened to that cemetery."

There are no blacks left in Priceville, but while many descendants live in Collingwood, no one wanted to talk to Holness and Saunders.

Eventually Helen and Alan Miller of Collingwood, whose ancestors were buried in the cemetery, explained the reluctance. "Our people weren't allowed out there," Helen Miller says in the film.