

● Community News

Fallen canal workers finally get their memorial

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ST. CATHARINES — Dubbed by many as one of the greatest engineering marvels in Canada, the Welland Canal helped to shape Niagara as we know it today.

Since opening, the canal has become known throughout the country and beyond, but what's often lost in the discussion are those who lost their lives while building it. On Sunday, that was rectified and an 85-year-old promise, made on the day of its opening in August 1932, was finally fulfilled.

An unveiling ceremony took place on Nov. 12 for the Welland Canal Fallen Workers Memorial in St. Catharines. With Lock 3 looming in the background, The Gates of Remembrance stand, inscribed with the names of all 137 fallen workers. The oldest person was 69 years old, and the youngest just 15.

Hundreds gathered Sunday for the unveiling ceremony, including many descendents of the fallen — some travelling from as far as England to participate in the ceremony.

“At the end of the day, you are the reason we are here,” said the event’s emcee, Grant LaFleche, to the descendents in attendance. “This memorial is our community’s way of saying your loss will never be forgotten.”

LaFleche, a reporter with the St. Catharines Standard, was instrumental in helping to get the memorial built. After being approached by former St. Catharines museum curator Arden Phair and presented with what LaFleche referred to as ‘essentially a book of the dead’, he began writing stories about those who died during the construction of the canal. Phair received a standing ovation from the audience Sunday for his tenacity with the project.

LaFleche and then-publisher Wendy Metcalf, set about getting the community to fulfill the promise made on the canal’s opening day by then Minister of Railways and Canals, R.J. Manion, to

create a memorial honouring the men who died while building the fourth Welland Canal, construction that took place between 1913 and 1935 and saw what is believed to be the largest loss of life on any federal government infrastructure project in Canadian history.

A petition was launched, with more than 2,000 names collected — including some descendents of the fallen — and LaFleche and Metcalf appeared before St. Catharines City Council asking for the promise to be fulfilled.

Then-mayor Brian McMullan formed a task force, with work beginning in spring 2013 to select a site, design a memorial and begin fundraising.

“It’s exceeded all of my expectations,” said McMullan, adding he was blown away from the response by the community to the memorial, pointing to both the fundraising and the attendance at Sunday’s event.

Rick Dykstra, who was the Member of Parliament for St. Catharines when the project first got underway and sat as a member of the task force, referred to the monument as ‘dramatic’ and added it will be a special place for the community to come and remember the fallen.

Speaking on Sunday, current MP Chris Bittle said our relationship with the canal is a key part of what makes us Niagara, noting the path of the canal influenced the development of St. Catharines and other canal communities.

“That history and economic development is built upon the death of the 137 and the injuries of countless more,” he said, adding it’s difficult to fathom the working conditions that led to such death and injury. “This was a time in our history where a life, from management’s point of view, was expendable.”

Bittle said the broken promise by the Government of Canada to build the monument was forgotten for far too long.

For the descendents of the 137 fallen workers, the unveiling was an opportunity to see their loved ones remembered and honoured. Carol



The Welland Canal Fallen Workers Memorial was unveiled Sunday in a special ceremony. From left: St. Catharines MP Chris Bittle, St. Catharines Mayor Walter Sendzik, Roger Stenson, Anne Dodge, Suzy Hastings, Doug Oneschuk, Regional Chair Alan Caslin, and Grant LaFleche.

Macallister’s grandfather, Richard, died in 1930 and she was on hand Sunday to see his name spelled out on the Gates of Remembrance.

“It was a beautiful ceremony and a very nice memorial,” said the Port Colborne resident. She said she’d been following along on the progress through emails from the task force.

Sunday’s unveiling marked the completion of years of research and fundraising by the Niagara community. Fundraising chair Greg Wight expressed gratitude to the many contributors who helped them reach their goal, including the federal, municipal and regional governments, marine industry and labour unions that made significant contributions to the fundraising campaign, along with several members of the community and local businesses. Shortly after announcing his retirement as president and CEO of Algoma Central Corporation, Wight said he was approached by Mayor Walter Sendzik to meet for lunch.

“I knew it wasn’t just a lunch, I knew he’d be

asking me for something,” he recalled with a laugh. When Sendzik asked him to come on board as the fundraising chair, Wight said he was more than happy to oblige.

When he first started, Wight described the campaign as daunting — with the \$1.2 million budget they had to raise — but he said the biggest obstacle was the timing.

“This project was a project that had a big price tag and a lot of people didn’t think we’d be able to raise the funds we did,” said Sendzik. “We did because of the donors.”

The monument was designed by Derek Revington Studio Inc. of Toronto through a national competition. Components were fabricated by Mariani Metals in Etobicoke and then installed by Stevensville Lawn Service.

The memorial is now open to the public all year round at Lock 3 in St. Catharines, just north of the St. Catharines Museum and Welland Canals Centre.

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