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LIFE

Children get history lesson as park plaque unveiled

Robert Hicks Park named after a founding father of North York

By North York Mirror

Children have been playing at Robert Hicks Park for 30 years but will finally learn for whom the small greenspace on Finch Avenue west of Bathurst Street is named.

Heritage Toronto and the North York Historical Society have created a plaque honouring Robert Franklin Hicks (1866 - 1942), a dairy farmer who helped found the Township of North York and became its first reeve in 1922. The plaque, which will be erected in the park in the spring, was unveiled by the two organizations following a presentation on the history of the Bathurst-Finch area and North York to 300 Grade 10 students at Northview Heights Secondary School Wednesday, Dec. 8.

"If we want kids to value our school as a community, we should value the school as part of the greater community. And recognizing its history is part of respecting that community," said Peter Paputsis, principal of Northview, which sits just south of Hicks's former 130-acre farm, itself now occupied by Beth Tzedec Memorial Gardens and Westminster Memorial Gardens.

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"I think it's difficult for our students to imagine farmland instead of buildings, especially on this corner," added Paputsis, noting the school has a high percentage of students hailing from recent immigrant families.

For Heritage Toronto, the school presentation gave it the opportunity to present visible evidence of local history on the same ground students were standing.

"There's not a whole lot of local history that students learn these days," said Gary Miedema, the heritage plaque co-ordinator for Heritage Toronto. "The local history is immediate, they can see it around them, it's a great hook to create some curiosity about history, whereas national issues might just seem like they happened somewhere else."

The area's councillor and former public school trustee James Pasternak agreed that schools tend to focus on macro-historical events.

"We rarely recognize the local hero and I think that's very important," said Pasternak, who said he will be pushing for more connections between the city and schools during his term.

If indeed a hero, Hicks was a quiet one, going about the oft-overlooked business of community-building. He established one of the first herds of Holstein cattle - "the machines of the dairy industry today," said Miedema - in the former York County and became involved in the Toronto Milk Producers Association. In the early 1920s, he joined with nearby farmers in the push to carve out the portion of York Township essentially north of Eglinton Avenue from the Humber River to Victoria Park Avenue to form North York.

"My understanding is there was a sense that the southern urbanized portion of the township were getting the bulk of the attention and that the northern rural farming areas were getting left out," said Miedema.

At the time, the newly incorporated North York had a whopping population of 600, according to the Canadian Encyclopedia. But Hicks predicted, correctly, it would grow into a city. By 2006, its population had multiplied more than 1,000 times to approximately 635,000.

While not alive to see that massive urbanization, Hicks helped lay the groundwork to make it happen. During his five years as reeve, the North York Hydro Commission, a public health board and water supply system were established. The new township also undertook improvements to local roads including Yonge Street, which allowed urban north Toronto to move north.

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