

Grace Morgan Meeting Speaker, May 25, 2022

Marla Weingarten, *'Yonge Street in the Rear view Mirror'*

In this centennial year of North York's independence, Marla, a board member of the North York Historical Society, recounted the fascinating story of Yonge Street, integral to North York's development for over 200 years. She provided a cornucopia of information along with historical images she researched so we could "visualize."

In addition to volunteering at NYHS, Marla is a consultant to the biotech and pharmaceutical industry. She has a BSc from McGill University and MBA from McMaster University.

Marla told the origin of the names of a number of places: "York Mills" from York County plus the many neighbourhood mills; "Hogg's Hollow" after 1824 Scottish immigrant James Hogg. Steeles and Finch, which both intersect with Yonge, got their names from tavern-inn owners Thomas Steeles and John Finch. "From the early 1800s to mid-1900s there were many inn-taverns along Yonge up to Steeles for farmers to stop over and rest when going to and from selling their products in Toronto. Yonge was unpaved and muddy with tree stumps that had to be got around, so the trip took a couple of days," Marla explained.

The North York Historical Society has in its keeping a life-sized carved gold painted lion that was stationed at the Golden Lion Hotel at Yonge and Sheppard in the 1800s. The lion is the Society's logo. "It will greet visitors to the new North York History Room at the North York Central Library, expected to open this fall," Marla said.

Land surveyor David Gibson owned a big farm and apple orchard that extended west from Yonge Street in the middle of what he called "Willow Dale" because of all the willow trees. The two words later were made into one. Because he was an Upper Canada Rebellion leader who participated in the December 7, 1837, Battle of Montgomery's Tavern, which occurred on Yonge Street in southern North York near Eglinton, the victorious government forces burned down his home, made of wood. He built a new one of brick on the same spot. It's now a heritage museum. An apple tree he planted in 1832 still stands near Yonge Street.

A general store at Yonge and Sheppard, built in 1860 and best known in people's memories today as "Dempsey's" after the family who owned it from 1923 until 1989 when they closed it, was "the community's hub," Marla said. "People going to work in the city left their muddy boots at the side of the store and put on good shoes and did the reverse on the way home. The North York Historical Society helped get it relocated to a park near the Civic Centre."

Angry that it paid 23 percent of York Township's taxes but had no representatives and was underserved, North York broke off on June 13, 1922. Population, 6,000. Marla brought to our attention that the façade of the first municipal building and the tower of the first firehall, both at Yonge and Empress, are at the back of the current Empress Theatre at that locale.

Another interesting fact noted by Marla: The Metro Planning Board recommended a trestle bridge over the Don Valley as part of the northward extension of the Yonge Street subway.

Club members reminisced about the destructive impact of Hurricane Hazel on Yonge Street; the popular Willow movie theatre; the fun of navigating around the big willow tree in the centre of the skating rink at the Jolly Miller to piped-in music.

Susan Goldenberg