

March 2026 Speaker: Adam Bunch

Toronto's Wild Side in the Victorian Era

Booze, brothels, bamboozlers; kidnapping, murder, theft; police and firemen brawls; corrupt officials. This was Toronto in the so-called puritanical Victorian Era in the mid to later 1800s, "Toronto, the not-so-good," Adam wryly told us as he embarked on an account of Toronto's sordid underbelly then. Adam has authored books on the unusual in Canadian and Toronto history and has received a Governor General's History Award for Popular Media.

Adam began with showing us an 1856 picture of downtown Toronto. "It looks a little rough around the edges, right?" he said. "It was over sixty years since the city was founded, but it was still a frontier town with muddy streets and wooden sidewalks and had a notorious reputation. In 1857 one out of nine Torontonians was arrested for wrongdoing. There were plenty of nefarious people, a criminal underworld."

He regaled us with examples. The Brooks Bush Gang, headed by a woman Jane Ward, "The Bandit Queen of Riverdale" controlled the main Don River Bridge, at Kingston Road, extorting "tolls" for safe passage. They resorted to murder one night, killing politician and journalist John Sheridan Hogan for his bankroll. Jane was acquitted; a male gang member executed. Another story: Two brothers kidnapped wealthy Toronto grocer Robert Jaffray in a wacky scheme to get him to change his political allegiance from Liberal to Conservative. He escaped and they fled to Montreal. "They were captured because they misaddressed a letter to their mother divulging their whereabouts and plans and it wound up in authorities' hands."

King Street East was the chief locale of brothels, including one that masqueraded as an oyster shop. The building owned by the city's mayor who professed ignorance. There were street fights between then then volunteer firefighter brigades, rivals, over which would deal with a fire, and therefore get the praise and payment, while the fire continued to burn. The police, untrained and undisciplined, brawled amongst themselves and with firemen. On a memorable occasion firefighters took on touring circus performers – and lost.

"Toronto was one-third Irish. Eight-five percent of them were Orange Order Protestants. The police, firefighters, and municipal officials were mostly Orange Order and they protected one another. An Irish Catholic stableman was pitchforked to death when trying to stop a fight during the 1858 St. Patrick's Day Parade between the Irish Catholic marchers and Orange Order."

Adam concluded with swindler Elizabeth Bigley, born in Woodstock, Ontario, "the Queen of Con Artists," including in Toronto. Merchandise was largely bought on credit. Depicting herself as a heiress, she bilked merchants out of thousands of dollars' worth of goods. "Only Timothy Eaton wasn't defrauded, for the reason that he didn't allow buying on credit."

The famous expression "Toronto The Good" was the slogan used successfully by William Holmes Howland to become mayor in 1886. By it he meant that he would clean up the city's reputation to make it "good," including through the establishment of a Toronto Police Morality Squad.

Susan Goldenberg.