

GODERICH HISTORICAL AUDIO TOURS

By Paul Ciufu

South Street and East Street

Before exploring South Street, take a short stroll down Montreal Street which runs southwest from The Square. Your destination is the Goderich Library.

The library opened in 1905, boasting twin towers, Romanesque windows, high ceilings, and living quarters for the librarian. It was a Carnegie Library, built with money donated by businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

Carnegie was born in Scotland to poor but cultured parents. In 1848 the family immigrated to the United States where Andrew amassed a fortune in the rail and steel industries. His strict Calvinist upbringing frowned on idle leisure; his free time was spent reading classic literature borrowed from a wealthy neighbour.

Late in his life Carnegie made donations for the betterment of the working classes. He established free public libraries because he believed they were the best way to promote self-improvement. The terms of the Carnegie Library Trust were simple: the municipality had to provide the building site, plus 10 per cent of the building cost annually to fund the library's operation. Building designs could vary but had to include an ascending stairway to give patrons a sense of elevating themselves.

This part of the world was fortunate; the thousands of requests to the library trust were reviewed by Carnegie's secretary James Bertram, whose wife Janet Tod Ewing hailed from the nearby town of Seaforth. Of the twenty five hundred Carnegie Libraries around the globe, five were built in Huron County, including Goderich's sublime building.

Now pause the tour and retrace your steps to The Square, and make your way to South Street.

Walking away from The Square along South Street, you will see on your left a stone building known as The Livery.

For decades The Livery has served as a theatre, but it was first used as... you guessed it... a livery -- a stable where horses and wagons were for hire, and privately-owned horses could be boarded for a short time.

In 1873 Albert Meriam Polley bought the property for eleven thousand dollars cash. Born in Haverhill, New Hampshire, Polley and his wife Flora Fuller settled in Goderich in 1862. The family built a stately yellow brick home that still stands on North Street.

Polley's South Street livery is actually three structures. The building at the rear dates to the 1840s and the addition fronting on South Street was built in 1878 from stone cut from the Maitland River bed.

Polley's Livery was one of the best stables in the area and had five employees. In 1885 the livery was listed as one of the first telephone subscribers in Goderich. Polley's horses and coach picked up and delivered passengers from the harbour and train station; passengers were taken anywhere in Goderich for a fare of 25 cents. His pair of dappled grey horses, known as "Polley's Spots", were hired out for weddings, church picnics, and other important occasions.

On his 84th birthday in 1918 Polley was said to be one of the best-known men in the county, who brightened when you spoke to him about horses or politics. His 1921 obituary notes Polley was a staunch Liberal and an admirer of Sir Wilfrid Laurier.

Over the years the building was used for various purposes. In 1910 it was the first automobile dealership in Goderich. Later it served as a gas filling station and taxi stand. In 1974 it became a building centre.

In 1978 the owner applied for a demolition permit. With just hours to spare, the Goderich town council halted the wrecking crew. Given the building's historical significance, a group of volunteers had raised \$50,000 as a down payment toward buying it. Led by Dorothy Wallace, the committee was called the Goderich Performing Arts Foundation, and it transformed the building into a town cultural hub. Since 1983 concerts and stage plays have been presented at The Livery. The Livery has served as the beloved home of the local community theatre group, Goderich Little Theatre.

Pause the tour, return to The Square, and head to the Goderich cenotaph in Courthouse Park facing east. It's a large statue of a soldier.

Take a moment to observe the cenotaph, then walk off The Square all the way down East Street while listening to the rest of this tour.

You'll end up at the old train station.

When the cenotaph was unveiled on Dominion Day, 1924, its bronze statue faced east in memory of events that unfolded during Thanksgiving weekend, 1916.

The 161st Huron battalion returned home for one final five-day home leave before leaving for the Great War in Europe. On that remarkable weekend, East Street saw the soldiers arrive and depart. The cenotaph's bronze statue of a soldier lifts his helmet in eternal farewell to those who never returned. The tablet on the pedestal's base reads: "All that this earth can give they thrust aside; they crowded all their youth into an hour and for one fleeting dream of right they died".

The soldiers arrived on October 5, 1916 from Camp Borden with little notice, so there was no time to arrange a formal welcoming ceremony at East Street's Grand Trunk Railway Station. Maybe it was just as well; faced with heading to a bloody war and an uncertain future, every hour spent with family and friends was precious.

Private Arthur McCluskey received a wristwatch from his friends, nicknamed The Goderich Boys, as a token of their admiration for him putting on the King's uniform.

On Sunday afternoon, members of the battalion formed up in Victoria Park and paraded to The Square to deposit their colours in the County Courthouse. Over 3,000 people came to watch Colonel Hugh Combes present the Battalion and Union Flags to Huron County Sheriff James Reynolds. Sheriff Reynolds spoke glowingly of the honour of receiving the flags and told the crowd that the man who was physically fit and not in uniform was disloyal to his country.

On Monday evening the Town of Goderich hosted a civic dinner at the Bedford Hotel. Dignitaries gave speeches and the gathering ended with music. Everyone sang Goderich Private Thomas Pritchard's musical hall tune, "The Call", then linked arms and belted out "Auld Lang Syne". Then there was one last dance with wives and sweethearts at the Oddfellows' Hall (now the Goderich Legion). Couples were reluctant to part and it was well past midnight when the dance ended.

On Tuesday afternoon, the Goderich and area companies formed up at the Courthouse. They marched behind the regimental band around The Square, then along East Street toward the railway station (like you're doing now). Schools and businesses were closed as a huge crowd lined the parade route. For The Goderich Boys who gave Private McCluskey a wrist watch, it was their final glimpse of their friend; he was killed in October 1917 at the Battle of Passchendaele. Nineteen-year-old Private Joseph Glazier marched past his own East Street home for the last time; he also died in 1917 at Passchendaele. As the train pulled away from East Street station nearly everyone in town was there to cheer and shed tears.

Pause the tour until you reach the historic Grand Trunk Railway station from which the soldiers departed. It's at the very end of East Street.

The last story of the tour is about a train crash and has some gruesome moments. If you're sensitive to violent descriptions feel free to skip the rest of the tour.

On February 4, 1911 a train was heading for this station when tragedy struck. The Grand Trunk Railway train -- due at East Street Station at midnight -- departed Paris, Ontario at 9:05 p.m. The train was running 23 minutes late, so the engineer and fireman tried to make up lost time; about four miles from Paris they had the locomotive's steam engine working hard and the train reached 40 miles per hour. Suddenly they heard the shriek of a whistle from an on-coming train. The resulting head-on collision was Goderich's deadliest train disaster.

Baggageman Peter McFarlane was in the baggage car. Mail clerks John May and Daniel Tye were sorting the mail, watched by John Whitelaw, the express messenger or “shotgun guard” whose job was to protect the mail. Conductor Thomas Ausebrook had just walked through the train to chat with the brakeman, Schieffle. When Ausebrook heard the whistle blast from the on-coming train he cried, “it can’t be!”. “There it is again!” Schieffle insisted. Both men were thrown violently as the trains collided.

The body of the train’s engineer, Turner, was found with severe head injuries twenty feet from the wreck. The fireman, Smith, was crushed between the locomotive and the coal tender when the entire train telescoped and burst into flames. The fire trapped McFarlane, May, Tye, and Whitelaw in the wreckage of the baggage and mail cars.

People who lived near the crash site and passengers made heroic attempts to rescue them. Badly burned, McFarlane was pulled free and taken to a nearby farmhouse, but the baggageman died within hours. May was caught beneath the burning mail car but saved himself by crawling through an opening in the flaming wreckage; despite severe burns, he walked a mile and a half to a farmhouse for help. Tye, Whitelaw, and passenger R.M. Crozier died, and their bodies were described as burned to an unrecognizable crisp. Tye, the mail clerk, could only be identified by a Masonic medal around his neck, and Crozier’s knife and pocket watch were the only means of identifying his remains. Although friends denied the story, it was rumoured that Whitelaw shot himself with his pistol to avoid a fiery death.

All told, six people were killed in the train wreck and several others suffered injuries. The death toll may have been higher if not for the efforts of the passengers who tossed aside the burning beams of the cars to help others pinned by the wreckage. Female passengers, in particular, were praised; one small girl was singled out for freeing an older woman whose legs were trapped beneath an overturned seat.

Goderich mourned the death of “three good citizens” as the remains of McFarlane, Tye, and Whitelaw were brought home. All three were members of Maitland Lodge and received impressive masonic funeral services which attracted many mourners from all over the county. The Railway Mail Service dedicated a stained glass window in St. George’s Church to Tye’s memory.

A Coroner’s Jury was held in Brantford on February 8, 1911 to determine the cause of the deadly crash. The key witnesses were the conductor, Meacham, and the engineer, Earith, of the locomotive that collided with the Goderich-bound passenger train. Meacham fled to the United States to avoid prosecution. The injured engineer, Earith, had to be carried into the courtroom on a stretcher but testified, nevertheless.

He said the new, heavy, powerful locomotive gave him trouble as they left the Stratford rail yard for a trial run to Fort Erie. The train was travelling down an incline at full speed when the

collision occurred. Earith had forgotten another train would be on the track, and the conductor did not remind him. When he saw the on-coming passenger train, Earith applied the brakes, reversed the engine, and gave several whistle blasts before yelling for the crew to jump clear. The jury unanimously determined that Earith and Meacham were responsible for the wreck. It was found that they recklessly ignored orders and ran the line hoping the passenger train had already passed.

East Street Station no longer serves as a train stop. Rail service used to bring passengers and goods back and forth from Toronto twice a day. Passenger train service to Goderich ended in the 1971.

As this tour was created, the old East Street Station houses a media company, Faux Pop Media, that produces films. Perhaps the firm will create a movie dramatizing the town's worst ever rail disaster?

For more information about Goderich's rail history listen to the audio tour "Menesetung Bridge and Tiger Dunlop's Tomb". Note that the Huron County Museum on North Street features a full-size steam locomotive.