



STORY BY JANET DAVIES

THE LITTLE CAFETERIA THAT COULD

A DILAPIDATED CAFETERIA ON THE MAIN STREET IN THE VILLAGE OF BLOOMFIELD SERVES UP COMMUNITY ARTS PROGRAMS WITH A SIDE ORDER OF CREATIVITY AND VOLUNTEERISM.



Once upon a time, there was a canning company called Baxter, on a street called Stanley in a village called Bloomfield. J. Edwin Baxter's modest operation began in the 1930s and quickly grew to a bustling factory, where men and women worked hard every day and needed a good lunch. In 1946, Mr. Baxter built a sturdy little single storey cafeteria across the street for his employees. The *Picton Gazette* commended him for his contribution, predicting the wider community would make use of the building, as Bloomfield's Victorian village hall would soon become "inadequate for this thriving little town."

Folks are fond of their village halls and generally choose them first for socials, weddings and protest meetings, but the company canteen hosted events from time to time, and in 1964, it saved the day when the canning factory burned down. The cafeteria became command central for Baxter Canning until the new factory, a big featureless slab of a building, was constructed. Still dominating a long stretch of Stanley Street, the impenetrable factory walls recall a Bond villain's lair, and in the 1990s it had a moment of notoriety when a scoundrel secreted contraband helicopters inside. But that's a story for another day.

As the 1960s rolled into the 70s, when the Baxter workers were more likely to head to a coffee shop or pizza place at midday, the cafeteria closed down and became a warehouse outlet selling dented and unlabelled Baxter cans at a discount. Later it was used as a bunkhouse for migrant workers. When the canning factory closed in 1994, the village of Bloomfield bought the annex and put up a plaque naming it after J. Edwin's son, Don Baxter, but the townsfolk used it only sporadically.

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The old building languished until the municipality declared it surplus, and put it up for sale. But who would want a dreary dilapidated building with a repair list as long as your arm? As it turned out, several people did. After months of discussions, delays, proposals and lobbying, County council sold it, not to the highest bidder, but to a determined band of locals with a dream. They dreamed of creating a community arts centre.

Local planning consultant and toymaker, Larry Spencer, takes up the story. “Not many people know that Lockie started it all,” he says, referring to Lockie Owens, owner of a Mexican imports shop, Casa Lucia, on Main Street. “He wanted to start a children’s theatre workshop and approached Council about fixing up the old place.”

Nothing is ever easy. His request was subsumed by municipal machinations and plans to sell off surplus buildings. But friends and colleagues rallied round and soon scores of County artists, arts organizations and Bloomfield businesses were supporting not just using the building, but buying it outright for a permanent centre for arts education and expression. They sent almost 40 letters of support, and Larry Spencer credits brusque, long-time councillor Keith MacDonald, now retired, with cutting through the, umm, bureaucracy. “Bless his soul,” said Spencer. “Keith MacDonald told the municipality that they should stop trying to get rid of the place and *talk to the people*.” In 2011, the Baxter Centre for Creativity Inc. was incorporated and by June of that year, the property belonged to the arts group.

Now what? They had fundraised for the purchase price, with Monika Fida, widow of legendary local chef Willi Fida and owner of Angeline’s Inn, stepping in to top them up. Now they stood on Stanley Street looking at a slumping roof, cracked paving and peeling paint. There were broken windows, and the furnace was fritzed. And then there was the mystery of the septic tank. Nobody knew where it was.

The easy part was over, now hard labour began. They put away pens and proposals and picked up hammers and shovels.

“A team of 10 did all the renovations,” recalls Larry Spencer. It was an exuberant mix of skilled DIYers and amateur labourers. Doctors, tradesmen, antique dealers, artists and shopkeepers scrambled up, down and around the building tackling the long list of repairs. Securing the roof was job number one and although Monika Fida doesn’t climb ladders, she helped fix the roof with another loan. A small Trillium Foundation grant, another from the County Community Foundation and generous

donations from private donors helped drive the projects.

“I must tell you the heating story,” says Larry. “With no furnace, the place was being heated by noisy, ugly, crappy machines meant for heating chicken barns. We asked several contractors to design a system and give us quotes so we could start fundraising for a proper heating system. Six contractors said yes. Zero contractors turned up.” Local guys came to the rescue. “Paul Rutter of Rutter Bros. right down the road here in Bloomfield, said he’d do it. He’d get it done and we could pay him when we had the money.”

The intrepid team of 10 is fondly referred to as The Trolls, thanks to wood-turner, Paul Ross. A visitor to the renovations heard noises in the dungeon-like basement and tremulously inquired if anyone was there. Paul shouted cheerfully up through the grate, “Nobody here but us trolls!”

The Trolls replaced the roof and windows, storms and screens were refurbished, floors repaired, the primitive washroom replaced and the kitchen completely renovated. The new heating system was installed making the Baxter Arts Centre a year-round haven for crafty kids, thespians, weavers, musicians and a whole whack of painters.

Event programming began in the fall of 2012, two years after Lockie first asked to use the building, and 49 years after the canning factory guys and girls first sat down to lunch. While the canning crew found rest and assuaged their hunger in the old cafeteria, today’s Baxter crew serves up a different kind of nourishment. Programs and workshops feed a hunger for arts education and expression and for community engagement.

Artist Kato Wake’s painting classes are in such demand that she runs three classes almost back to back on Mondays. As spring struggled to shuck off winter, a local theatre group was singing and swinging their cutlasses, rehearsing for *Pirates of Penzance*. The much-loved Quarter Moon, Open Mic Night moved from the town hall to the arts centre to accommodate a swelling summer crowd. And kids just love the Baxter. They can get really messy and expressive at workshops run by County artists. Silent Movie Nights get a dramatically good turn-out, and there’s a nice touch of symmetry when popular Swing Dance sessions crank it up. Big Band music pours out onto Stanley Street again, and people not even born in 1946 get all jivey in their shorts and Nikes.

The *Picton Gazette* got it right back then, when they foresaw the little Baxter building would become a true community space. 🌿



from top: Aliya Bowman and Hazel Woodyard North and their wearable art. Six of the 10 volunteer “trolls” who did the renovations. Canning factory staff at lunch, late 1940s. Alex Fida lends a hand.