

## St. Marys grows old swimmingly

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**ST. MARYS, ONT.** -- There's no better place to take the plunge. Here in this small southwestern town is Canada's largest - and best - outdoor swimming pool.

It is industry's legacy to St. Marys. A former quarry, it was closed in 1930 and filled with water; in 1945, it was bought by the town, et voila, a pool the envy of any place in the country. Sheer rockface on three sides and surrounded by trees, it is 250 metres by 75 metres; the depth ranges from 6 metres to 7.5 metres. You couldn't ask for a more idyllic setting for a summer swim.

Even former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau took a dive here - from the high board - in July, 1968.

And, if you're afraid to go into the water, it's still worth a look. Then you can head for the tennis courts across the road or stroll along the Riverview walking trail or fish at the nearby "Old Quarry."

St. Marys is a 20-minute drive south of Stratford and a perfect place to spend the day before the Festival's evening performance. Stonetown, it's called, for a reason: That quarry produced a great deal of limestone that was used in the construction of the town. There are some lovely old buildings to be seen on a do-it-yourself walking tour; a brochure is available at the tourist office in the train station - a fascinating place itself. Built in 1907 for the Grand Trunk Railway, it is now a VIA Rail station.

The architectural tour includes the Town Hall and the 1904 Carnegie Public Library.

"That's the original door handle," Brenda Mitchell explains to a young visitor. "That's where people have been putting their hands for 100 years." The young visitor is impressed.

"Oooh, that's a long time," she notes.

"The woodwork is original and, until 10 years ago, we had the original shelves, all made of oak. And this is the original librarian's desk," Mitchell says. It's small and plain - and well worn. A small reading room is oak panelled and still contains the original fireplace. It is named in honour of former prime minister Arthur Meighan, who lived in St. Marys and is buried here.

A couple of blocks away is a fortress-type building - of limestone, of course - that could have been a prison. But it's not. It is the former Opera House, built in 1879.

"It was a working opera house until 1919, so it did a 40-year span of being the cultural centre of St. Marys," says photographer Gordon Strathdee, who after 30 years in Toronto has returned to home country. "Everything from touring burlesque people ... to political rallies, operettas, plays. In the pre-TV and radio days, that was the cultural activity of the town.

"In 1919, it closed as a working theatre and was bought by the flour mill. They actually had milling equipment in the theatre, itself. They tore out the seating (to make room for the equipment). The flour mill closed in the 1950s and the building sat empty (for years). It came desperately close to being torn down," Strathdee says.

It was saved in the 1970s, though, and converted to apartments.

And speaking of residences, there are a number of amazing historic homes along Elgin and Jones streets, many built by George Carter, a prominent 19th-century mill owner. Some can be seen on a historic house tour that will be a feature of the Stonetown Heritage Festival to be held July 8 to 11 when there will also be dragon boat races, a car show with hundreds of classic and vintage autos, a pancake breakfast, a Victorian luncheon and a supertime barbecue. Proceeds from the barbecue will go to the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame, which is one of the town's star attractions.

It's a fascinating place, housed in a 100-year-old stone (what else?) house in pretty, green parkland at the south end of Church St., just a short drive from the quarry. The collection of artefacts and memorabilia includes autographed balls and bats, uniforms, posters, a tribute to the All-American Girls Baseball League and the Vancouver Asahi team, as well as the Wall of Honour for the other 61 inductees. A Yankees uniform is signed by Mickey Mantle; a Dodgers uniform by Duke Snyder. There are World Series baseballs signed by a number of players, including Willie Mays.

On the way back to the downtown area is the St. Marys Museum, housed in an 1853 limestone house. It is a work in progress but has some fine old furniture and dishes, as well as a collection of photos and writings of the men of St. Marys who fought overseas during World War I. And, of course, the house itself is worth seeing. Its 150th anniversary will be celebrated on Aug. 15th with special displays, family activities and a birthday cake.