

JANE'S WALK 2011 - HOGGS HOLLOW

Presentation by Peter Heinz, Don Watershed Regeneration Council



ICE AGE

York Mills Valley was not always here. It's new and here's why. Take two CN Towers. Pile them on top of each other. That mighty tall structure reaches one km high. For those of you who don't like heights, one km is the distance from Lawrence Avenue to Loblaws at Yonge Blvd. Now fill that height with solid ice. Imagine the weight crushing the ground below, compressing the ground the way you can a sponge. And because ice is plastic in nature, it bulges out from underneath and actually flows, crushing mountains into boulders, boulders into rocks, rocks to gravel, and gravel to sand. It's under this massive weight that valleys are formed. Once the ice begins to melt, rivers follow those valleys. A series of glaciers scoured this land over the past 100,000 years. The most recent, the Laurentide Ice Glacier, finally melted from here 10,000 years ago to reveal the deep valley beneath our feet. While it is new, it didn't look exactly like this.

VALLEY TOPOGRAPHY

Pretend you are a farmer hauling your load of grain to one of the mills in the valley. You head up Yonge Street from Lawrence with your cart loaded with grain or logs pulled by oxen or your team of horses. So-called Yonge Street is really only a narrow muddy rutted trail, but when you reach Loblaws, you encounter a sudden drop straight into the marshy land below. You have reached one of the few places that the York Rangers, when they built Yonge Street for Governor Simcoe, had to detour. Instead, you must head east down the steep incline where Donwoods Road is today, along the base of the valley following Donino. From the north, you would come down Old Yonge Street. McClashan Road descended the slope from the west. Your heavily-laden carts might even need logs attached behind to prevent the cart from overtaking and crushing your oxen or horses. Yonge Street was eventually straightened around 1833, but was still very steep.

Street cars ran on tracks through the Hollow in the late 1800s, but even a hundred years later, car traffic still avoided Hoggs Hollow. Yonge Blvd was laid out in 1922 to the west. Designated as Highway 11a, it reconnected with Yonge Street after crossing the Don Valley over the high-level concrete bridge built in 1928. That same Yonge Boulevard Bridge is one of the four now used by the 401. Until 1973, Wilson Avenue stopped at Mason Blvd. Traffic from the north and west flowed down Yonge Blvd, then designated Provincial Highway 11A.

Hoggs Hollow even had boat traffic, sort of. During the last part of the fur trade, boats of the Northwest Company travelled upstream from Lake Ontario, were lifted out here in Hoggs Hollow and put on wheels to be taken via Yonge Street to Holland Landing where they were relaunched enroute to lakes Huron and Superior.

MICROCLIMATE

Hoggs Hollow has its own micro weather system. Hot air rises, cool air replaces it and in doing so, flows to a lower level. Rivers and valleys also slope to lower levels and cooler air flows toward the lake. When the air is calm up above, there could be a bit of a draft down here. So we have cooler temperatures here, perhaps 3-5 C degrees cooler than 100 feet above on the rims of the valley. Because cooler air holds moisture, it is always a bit damper here as well. There is more moss growing on the tree trunks that you normally see on the tablelands above.

WILDLIFE HIGHWAY

York Mills Valley acts as a highway as well - a corridor for wildlife. Animals and birds need protection as they move about and wooded valleys such as this are perfect. Within the Don watershed, there live 14 kinds of animals and 73 varieties of birds nest here. However, over 200 different bird species pass along ravines of the Don as they migrate in spring and fall. Long green strips of forested land offer excellent protection, both for living, but more importantly for travelling.

FLOOD PLAIN

Having your mill destroyed was never a surprise. Flooding happens. In September 1878, houses and mills were swept away from here during a particularly heavy flood.

So what happened during Hurricane Hazel in 1954? No lives were lost here unlike on the Humber River with its 81 deaths. Three days of rain set a scenario for disaster. Then, a storm brought on during the hurricane dumped another 210 mm of rain within 12 hours on an already saturated ground. (That's about a quarter of what we can expect annually). Flooding was inevitable: steep slopes along rivers and soil saturated by previous rainfall funnelled 90% of the rain directly into rivers and streams through runoff and storm sewers. The raging West Don collapsed the 1904 Yonge Street Bridge and took out the Mill Street Bridge here in Hoggs Hollow as well as severely damaging homes on the floodplain between Yonge Street and the Rosedale Golf Course. Just south of York Mills Road, one newly built house was swept away by falling trees and raging water. Fortunately, there were no casualties. Traffic was detoured until a metal Bailey Bridge could be installed. A new concrete bridge was eventually built to the north. The hurricane's flood altered the course of the West Don, taking out a jog.

Beavers along the Don have learned to adapt in order to survive. They do not build dams as we are taught to expect, but have become bank beavers. They adapt in order to survive and the same applies to people. After Hazel, conservation authorities were formed, and homes and industry removed from floodplains. Purchasing homes in Hoggs Hollow was too expensive to even consider. Instead, the York Mills Valley became a Special Policy Area with respect to flooding. To help protect this community, the G. Ross Lord Control Dam was built upstream in 1973 at Dufferin and Finch, a

new higher Yonge Street Bridge was installed and the cement channel completed in 1968 in three phases just south of York Mills Road.

WATER QUALITY

We are standing almost in the centre of Toronto. Would you believe that within the next six months, creation of a five-acre pond will be finished within 20 minute walk of here? In 2010, the city began construction of a large stormwater pond in Earl Bales Park and the north end of the Don Valley Golf Course, to improve water quality in the West Don River and reduce stream erosion. Golf courses can no longer draw water directly from rivers, so stormwater collected here will provide a water supply for irrigating the golf course and snow making on the Earl Bales ski hill. But did you know this was the site of possibly the first bottled water plant in Canada? Springs flowed out of the hill to the west then and now.

RESTORATION OF YORK MILLS VALLEY

In the spring of 2010, the Don Council released an updated plan implementing changes in technology and a better understanding of climate change. Called *Beyond Forty Steps*, this is a blueprint for the next 15 years. For Hoggs Hollow, plans were revealed in April 2010 to dredge and repair the existing concrete channel, and create more parkland over the next few years. York Mills Park will transform into a people-friendly greenspace with more parkland, enhanced trails and extensive plantings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is no more appropriate river in Canada in which to observe the historical relationship between humans and nature, or the connection between urbanization and watershed degradation. The good news is that the Don River watershed is also a wonderful example of a watershed which is being restored through the efforts of many caring partners, including residents, community groups, agencies such as Toronto & Region Conservation and City of Toronto. There are many ways this is being achieved and many of them depend on you.

