

York University's 25th Anniversary: From our Dark Ages to the present



Marking its 25th anniversary, York University has come a long way from the hole in the ground, pictured right. In this, the first of a series, *Excalibur's Elliott Shiff* recounts the early years of York's growth.

Twenty-five years ago York University was one modest building situated on the University of Toronto campus. The total student enrolment was 73. Today, close to 41,000 students attend York, which is now Canada's third largest post-secondary institution.

York's founding father and first President, Murray Ross, originally envisioned three distinct campuses—a commuter campus located in the north end of the city, a residential community at Glendon, and an adult education campus to be situated in downtown Toronto. Two campuses were opened: Glendon in 1961 and the Keele St. campus in 1964.

Bill Farr, Vice-President of Finance and Administration at York, has spent more than half of his life at the University in a number of capacities. Reflecting on the challenge facing Murray Ross in his first years as President, Farr recalls, "Murray Ross was a clever person. He built his academic reputation with a book on community organization; how one can go into a community and build a consensus on how the community can help itself. And then to ensure its success you make sure that the community sees it as their project, not your project." According to Farr, Ross was seeking a specific type of person when he hired the original deans. "He hired founding deans and faculty who were young and strong and wanted to make their own careers, and identify their careers with what they were doing." The result of this, Farr says, is that "Ross got tremendous effort but not a lot of cohesion. People were doing their own projects and doing their own things so there wasn't a very strong central administration." In the early days of the University this approach allowed for a diverse development of programs but it also led to a great source of confusion when enrolment dropped dramatically in the early '70s and shortly afterwards skyrocketed.

Perhaps the most striking element of York in its early days was the physical aspect of the campus. John Armour came to Glendon in 1961 as the Director of Physical Plant. He was in charge of the first building that went up on the Glendon campus, and was responsible for the hiring of staff to maintain it. In the early days of York University, Armour was a staff of one. Today over 300 people work to maintain York's day-to-day operations.

Armour moved to the main campus in 1964 and was entrusted with the physical operations of the university. His staff was relatively small, so in order to maintain the campus, certain provisions were made. Stong House, situated up on the northeast corner of the campus, was rented out to a farmer who used the area for sheep grazing thereby saving Armour the trouble of having to hire someone to cut the grass. In addition the farmer also used the farm for cutting hay. However as the university began to develop and the construction of Fraser Drive commenced, the farmer left.

Joan Stewart, a Psychology professor, came to the York campus in 1965. "It was great here, but



Mysterious pit that later became the beloved Ross Building.

the physical characteristics were terrible," Stewart says, adding, "the only buildings up were Founders, the field house and one of the Science buildings." The campus was muddy year-round and this was compounded greatly by the construction of the Steadman Lecture Halls. It was not as if one could go off campus either as the University was literally located in the middle of nowhere. Stewart motions toward Keele Street, explaining, "You've got to realize that there was absolutely nothing here. The whole development across the road, the whole strip going down to Sheppard did not exist. There was only one restaurant, a little greasy spoon called The Colony, which I still go to. Now it's enlarged. Back then it's the only thing there was."

Along with the desolation of the campus, transportation was also a big problem. "We really live in luxury now," Stewart says. "I'm not sure a bus came into the campus. In fact I don't think it did. And so people were really stuck here if they didn't have a car."

Another faculty member who came to York in its early days was Deborah Hobson who arrived in the fall of 1966 as a part-time instructor in the Humanities and Classics. "The campus had just opened that year," Hobson says, "and the one thing I remember is that when walking around one always had mud dripping down the back of one's leg." Aside from the swampy nature of the campus Hobson recalls how the area surrounding the campus was built up in a rapid manner. "I used to come work across Steeles. One week there would be a cow pasture and the next week suddenly it would be a sub-division."

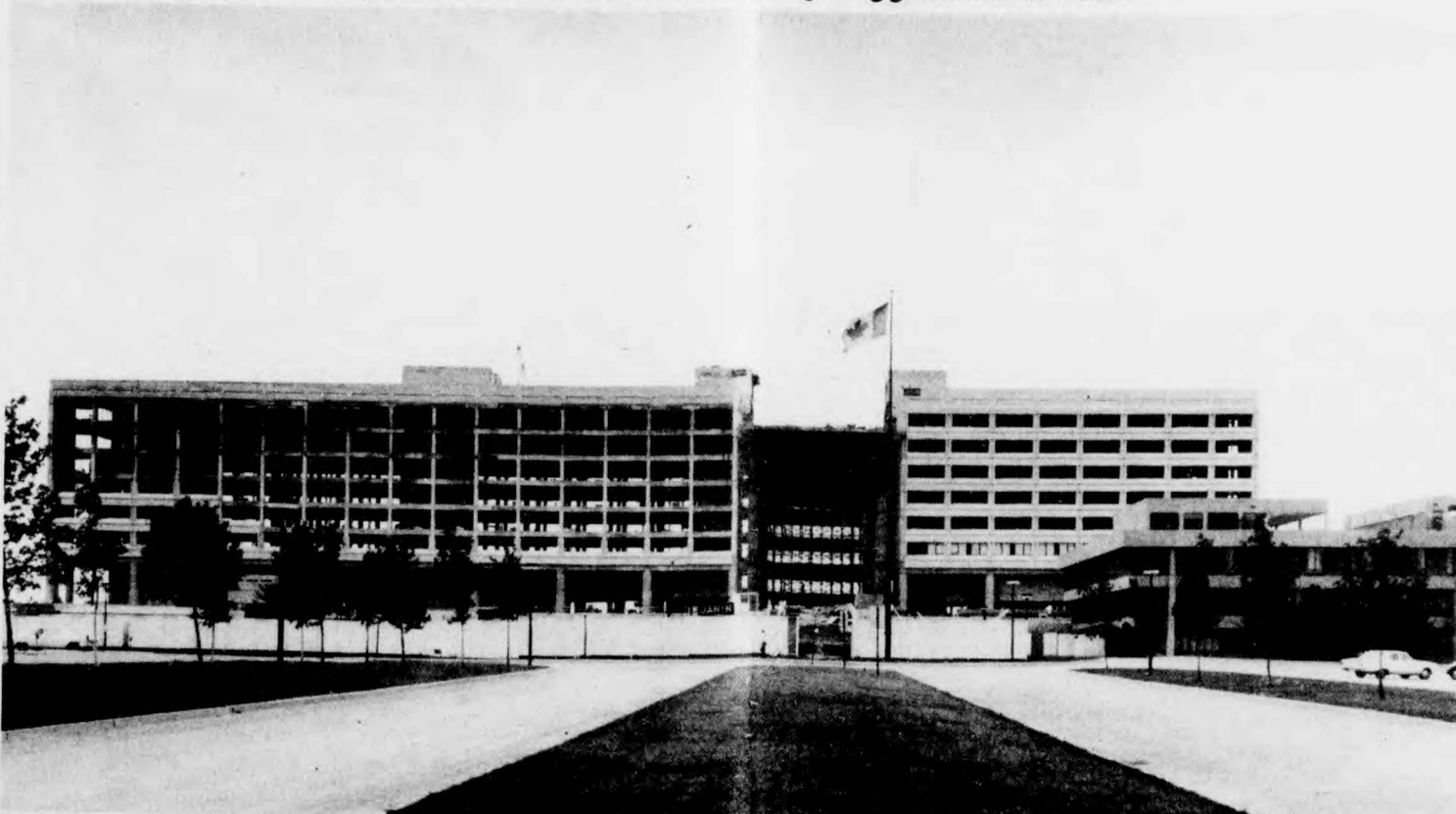
Campus housing was a real challenge in the first full year at the Downsview campus. While the buildings for residence were completed in time for the first year of operation the beds had not arrived so for the first few weeks of the school year, in the fall of 1966 residence students were boarded in the Royal York Hotel.

As well as the more typical residence schemes there were also two additional college related hous-

ing alternatives offered. Both Vanier and Calumet had their own farms. Vanier ran a farm called Rivendell which was located near Lake Simcoe, about 55 miles from campus. The farm was started as a student council project and run by a student group. Students in charge advertised for six people to live on the farm. While the student council covered the cost of emergencies, the rent of \$255 a month was covered by the students. The distance of the farm from the campus quickly made it an unfeasible operation.

Calumet College also had a farm. Located near Stouffville, Black Dog Farm was 38 miles from campus and chosen specifically as an alternative to residence. Occupancy floated between five and eight while the College picked up \$100 of the \$275 per month rent. However, Black Dog Farm was

Contrary to popular myth, York's design was not based on a Southern California campus; however, primitive experiments in air conditioning suggest otherwise.



York University was a sea of mud in its early days.

Right, a view from the flagpole. Far right, the Ross Building rises out of York's first blanket of snow. The cliff and bridge vanished shortly after this photo was taken.



also short-lived as its distance from York combined with weather problems and the inability of the students to care for the farm led to its early demise. Also contributing was a fire that destroyed the garage which was to be converted for housing services the next year.

The 1960s saw students become actively involved in university life, and the idea of the institution as a paternal figure was disappearing. For the first time students in the various York colleges and faculties were given increased control over their college budgets, college programmes, college and residence rules as well as in non-academic matters. In terms of housing Stewart speaks of the transition of values of that time. "1965 was a very interesting year for that era, because we were just ending the old times when men and women lived separately and there were visiting hours in the different dorms, and there were all sorts of rules. Most of the difficulty that year revolved around the breaking of those rules which were becoming more and more inane."

Sociology Professor Clifford Jansen arrived at York in 1968 in the middle of this transition period. "When I first came to York they had the Sociology department in the Winters residence. In those days they had separate residences, not floors, for males and females," Jansen says, adding, "In those days the university was seen as taking over from the parents. You had to look after the moral conduct of the students," Jansen laughs, continuing, "You get anybody on the campus trying to do that today and they'll just throw him out."

Students were increasingly coming under the scrutiny of their elders as this change in values was taking place. At York it was amplified even further due to the fact that most of the faculty were still at Glendon and very few of them liked coming over to the Downsview campus. "It was not a beautiful place, I can assure you, and they liked Glendon," Stewart explains. "A lot of the faculty did not like the thought of the move over here." As a result, according to Stewart, they were very picky about what went on, on campus. "For example, two people got drunk and it was translated into just an enormous brawl. So the students did get an awful lot of people looking at them."

York, like other campuses across North America at the time, was a centre for all kinds of experimentation. Stewart recalls the mood of the times when "they were at the beginning of the new era of drugs and psychedelics and all that sort of stuff." Stewart remembers one student in particular "who used to take morning glory seeds which were supposed to give you a psychedelic experience. So this fellow would take these seeds," Stewart continues, "and he'd get real sick, really sick, and he would think he was having an experience. That's the sort of thing people were looking for."

In addition to the various forms of experimentation of the time, students were also very active socially. Jansen reflects on his first few years at York, which he terms "a very radical period." Jansen says, "We had Students for a Democratic Society, who were much concerned about what was going on in society rather than what they were studying." Students for a Democratic Society disappeared when times got tough economically in the early '70s. Jansen remembers one student in particular who had been very vociferous in class returning a few years later to ask Jansen for a recommendation for a job he was applying for in the Civil Service.

During the early years of York, North Americans were living in a period of economic prosperity. There was a considerably different mood on campus at that time. Today one hears of underfunding, crowded classrooms and Basic Income Units. "At the time York was created they had oodles of money," Jansen says. "They didn't know what to do with money in the late '60s. I remember we were hiring people for jobs then and we'd take them out to the most fabulous restaurants and everything was paid for by the University."

In addition to the relatively easy cash flow Jansen also remembers being appalled at the disorganized state of the central administration. Jansen and fellow sociology professor Paul Anisef were constantly doing studies on different aspects of the University. "Just doing all these studies I found that whoever was the administration around here didn't know a damn thing that was going on

at York." Jansen add, "I don't know what they were being paid to do and this kind of study I started to do should have been their job. As an institution you should know who your clients are, but I would go to them for basic things like to the Registrar's Office and ask questions like 'how many students do you have registered in first-year classes?' and they wouldn't know." According to Jansen, it took until the end of the '70s before people started keeping proper records at York.

The person chiefly responsible for organizing and maintaining some sort of cohesive institutional analysis at York was Sheldon Levy. Levy is a true product of York, having started as an undergraduate in Science in 1967. Like Bill Farr, he has spent more than half of his life affiliated with the University. While pursuing his Masters in Math, Levy was hired as a summer student to do computing work. The following year Levy was appointed to do the analytic work for a task force that dealt with the search for a new President following the '71-'72 academic year.



In the days before any central institutional analysis at York, Levy says, the University could never get down to policy decisions because they were always fighting about the data. "I used to watch it from the sidelines," Levy says, "and you'd never get beyond step one looking at a problem because one person would say they had this many students while the other person said they had that many students."

Levy distinctly remembers when he first took on the job full-time, going into the area where the data on the University was stored. "I found a room about two-thirds the size of an administrative office, filled to the ceiling with printouts. I just looked at it, and could not believe it." Levy laughs, continuing, "I didn't know what the hell to do with these things. I even tried to figure it out. I could have spent the rest of my life doing that so I decided to throw them all away."

Following his decision Levy called Physical Plant and told them to bring three boxes for the pile of data he collected. "When they looked at the pile they had to go back and get three trucks. I returned to my office and received a frantic phonecall. They said they had a problem, so I rushed over. One of the people who had spent his whole life doing this was sitting on top of the pile crying. All of his work was going down the drain and I found it really hard to take."

Included among the mess were "miles of faculty workload printouts, which I couldn't figure out even if I had a Bible on it." There were also 300-odd tapes which were supposed to have York data on them. They were all in the garbage because they hadn't been used in so long that they could not even be read anymore. Looking back on the situation, Levy said, "It was a growing up of the University to get its act together."