

Living it up pioneer style



Black Creek fest draws thousands

It's been said in these introspective times that english-speaking Canadians are cut off from their past, a people with no culture.

This may or may not be the case. But the 8,536 Canadians who visited the 21st annual pioneer festival at Black Creek Pioneer Village last Saturday, would say "nay" to the notion.

Weekends are always a treat at the village, but on this day the "villagers", with the help of guest participating groups, really outdid themselves. On hand were the members of three Ontario chapters of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, the Upper Canada Rifles, the "Town Line" folksingers and a large delegation of the last Canadians who still lead a pioneer life: The Mennonites.

Had it not been for the 1977 dress of most of the populace, one could almost be convinced that this was a town fair of long ago and far away from the suburban Toronto whose highrise apartments were strangely

disorienting when viewed from inside the village.

The smell of homegrown and homebaked food, the strains of early Canadian folk music and the virtual absence of twentieth century technology blended to give an accurate taste of pre-confederation life in rural Ontario.

Most of the buildings on the site are original or have been transported from other points in Ontario. They stand impeccably reconstructed, with interiors which are picture-perfect but which nevertheless have that authentic, lived-in look.

While leather-clad members of the Upper Canada Rifles ran "Seneca Run" relays (involving planting an axe and a knife in two poles and shooting a can off a third one, all at a run) two teams of youngsters vied for top honours in an outdoor spelling bee, marshalled by a bonneted school teacher who incongruously, used a microphone to make herself heard above the din of passing wagons.

There was a harvest cornucopia of

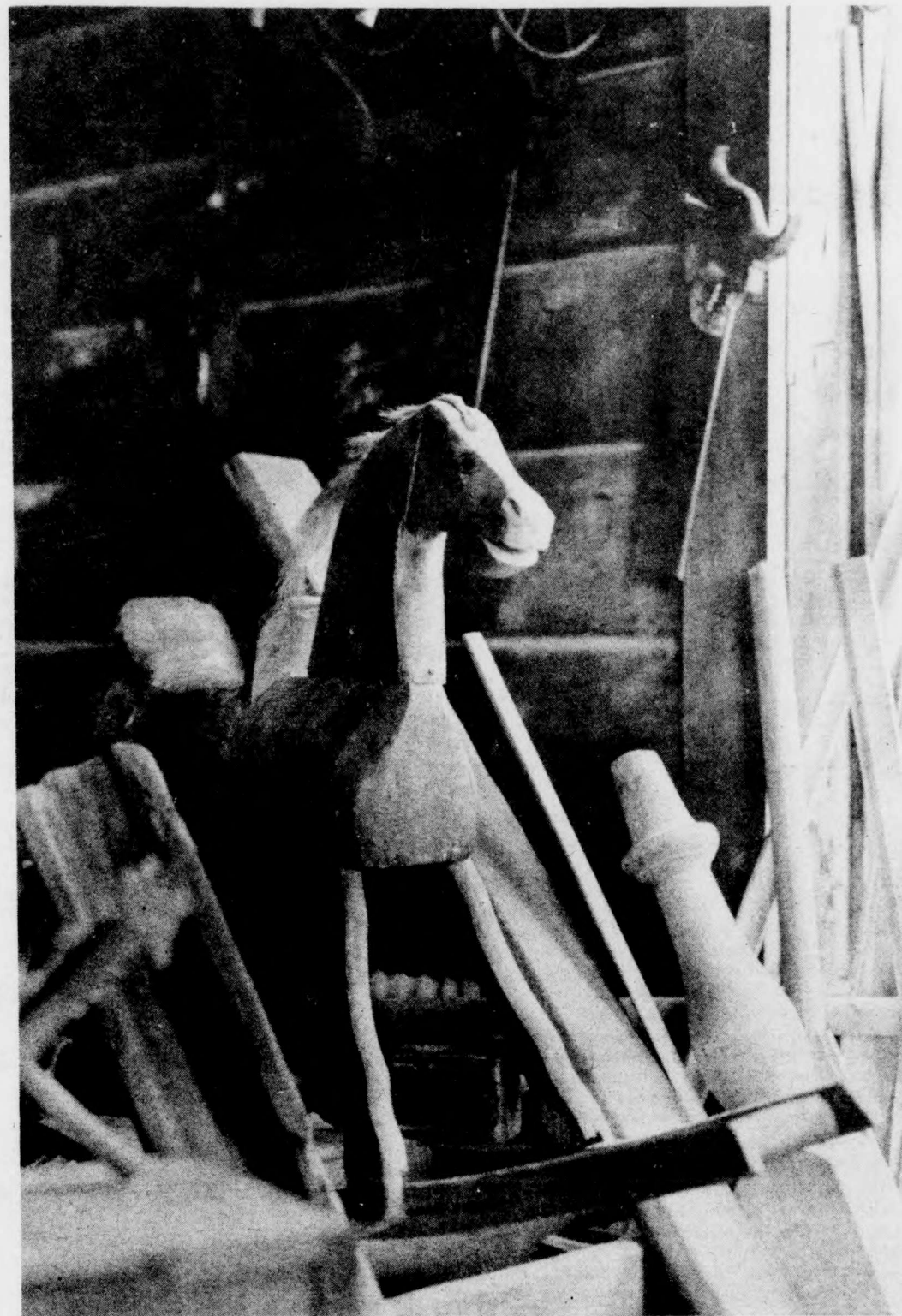
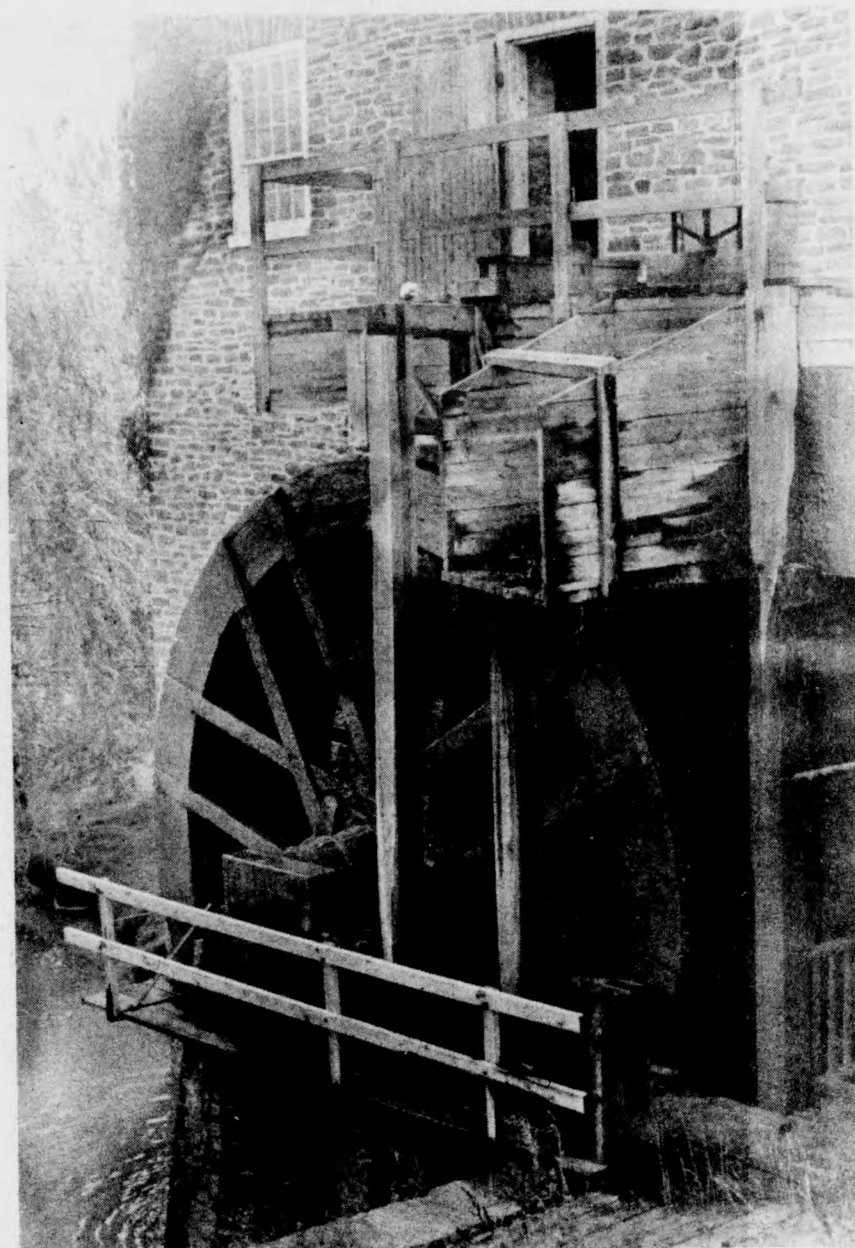
fudge, barbecued corn, apple fritters and other tasty delights to be sampled. The craftsmanship of the pre-assembly line era was demonstrated by the Mennonites, the folklore groups and the villagers.

Some of the products made before visitors' eyes were butter, soap, sausages, rugs, brooms, candles, harnesses, toys, clocks and flour - made in Roblin's mill on the power of gravity alone.

An auction of exquisite quilts made by the Mennonites was one of the afternoon's highlights. The lively auctioneers egged on prospective buyers with a zeal that most would never expect from the sober "plain folk" (who incidentally put all their proceeds into their world relief fund).

The festival is gone for another year but there's still lots happening at the village on weekends during the fall and winter. It's cheap, (75c for students) educational and engrossing.

Besides, exploring Canada's past can be fun.



Photos and text by Ted Mumford



Some scenes from the 21st annual Pioneer festival, clockwise from the upper left hand corner: a Mennonite woman pauses during a quilting bee; Roblin's Mill; one product of the village toy factory; a member of the Upper Canada Rifles; one of the villagers at work in the harness shop; the Townline singers performing from a second storey veranda on Main Street; and finally, girl meets goat.

The pre-1867 village that's 17 years old

Given that there isn't that much to do in Downsview, and the fact that Black Creek Pioneer Village is closer to the Ross Building than some of the campus bus stops, it's surprising how few York students visit this recreation of a pre-confederation village.

Perhaps some think it is a tourist trap (it's anything but). Still others may never investigate because it doesn't look too intriguing from the outside. But as the other story and the pictures on these pages will hopefully show, it's a fine diversion for a weekend afternoon.

The Metro Toronto and Region Conservation Authority opened the village to the public in 1960. At that time it consisted mainly of original buildings: a Pennsylvania German log barn north of Steeles Avenue, built by Johannes Schmidt in 1809, and the five remaining buildings constructed on Daniel Stong's farm between 1816 and 1832.

The Stongs and Schmidts were among the Pennsylvania Germans who left that state after the declaration of independence to settle in south-central Ontario.

(The Stong family, after whom the York college is named, farmed the land until the 1950's, which explains why trees are a scarce commodity on campus. Sylvester's lounge in Stong College was named after Daniel Stong's father.)

Using the existing buildings as a nucleus for a restored village, the conservation authority searched out historic buildings and moved them to the village, or recreated them as authentically as possible. The village's cider mill originally stood near Keele and Finch, the inn was moved from Kingston Road, and the church from Steeles and Dufferin. Other structures were found in Bolton, Nobleton, Woodbridge and many other area towns.

The village is no mere model. Roblin's Mill, reconstructed with Humber river stone and the working parts of a mill in Ameliasburg, produces flour exactly as it was done over a hundred years ago. The print shop sells drawings produced on antique presses, including one of the same model William Lyon Mackenzie used to print *The*

Colonial Advocate. The other tradesman's shops likewise refrain from utilising any new-fangled innovations.

Besides all the buildings one would expect to find in a pioneer settlement (save a sufficient number of houses for all the imagined inhabitants), there is an artifact museum in the old Schmidt barn. The conservation authority's fundraising arm is currently working on a new "visitors' centre", which would house a more expansive museum, a library, gift shop, cafeteria and two theatres.

Throughout the year there are special weekend events at the village. Weekends this month feature fruit preserving, flailing, and wool dyeing, and in October apple paring and drying, candle dipping and printing.

For those who aren't inclined towards home crafts, there is still lots to see; for a cheap and unusual outing, Pioneer Village can't be beat. (For a taped message on coming events, call 661-6610.)