The Ross Thompson House and Museum

The 2019 Season

The 2019 season at the Ross-Thomson House and Store Museum saw myriad projects come to fruition as well as many new projects take off, thanks once again to the wonderful partnership and initiative of Heritage Interpreters Greta Mossman and Murray Hagen. Two summer students, Mya Chidiac and Brooke Reid, also proved to be valuable additions to the staff, fully immersing themselves in the Museum community and culture. Their time with us may have come to an end, but their contributions and good-natured spirits will long remain, and we hope that along with great memories, they have also taken away unique experiences and skills that will serve them well in the future.

Once again, working with wool provided an amazing, ongoing living experience this year at the Ross-Thomson House. Throughout the season, the yard was busy with spinning demonstrations by Master Spinner Joan Koster, an upstate NY resident who summers in Baccaro. She also held spinning classes for children, teaching them to spin wool using a drop spindle made from a potato – something that is apparently still done in many European countries by women tending sheep. Wool dyeing workshops were also run by local wool expert Cindy Hagen using natural materials such as yarrow for an orange dye, birch bark for a light brown dye, and onion skins for a golden dye. The dyeing workshops actually became a community project as many of the residents living near the Museum Complex collected and donated their onion skins to RTH to be used as dye material. Local spinners Merrie Howe and Dorothy Peacock were also regulars in the yard throughout the season. We would like to extend our gratitude to local wool experts and master knitters Cindy Hagen and Sandi Waygood who very kindly donated their time to teach Interpreter Greta the fine art of spinning wool and for generously sharing their experience and knowledge with visitors to the Ross-Thomson House. We were also very fortunate to have all fleece used at Ross-Thomson House donated by a gentleman from the Western Shore as well as from Dot the sheep, owned by local residents Cathy and Danny Holmes. Dot is a five-year old black sheep who is quite famous locally, regularly appearing in parades, at petting zoos and in Christmas mangers. It is hoped that Dot will be able to visit the Museum on a regular basis next year, when she will be the star in a children’s book to be penned by Interpreter Greta Mossman as part of next year’s list of projects for Ross-Thomson House.

For the third year in a row, Mary Thomas, a local 13-year old volunteer, demonstrated inkle weaving, which is a centuries-old type of warp-faced weaving used for narrow work such as trims, straps, belts, and in Mary’s case, bookmarks. And candle dipping demonstrations were once again very popular with tourists who could not resist trying their hand.

Staff at Ross-Thomson House want to host some chickens next year and in preparation, volunteer Rod Mossman (who dotated 240 hours of his time to the RTH this year) built a coop this past summer using wattle fencing. Wattle is a lightweight construction material made by weaving thin branches or slats between upright stakes to form a woven lattice. It has been used for centuries to make fences and hurdles for enclosing ground or handling livestock. In this instance, the wattle was made from a very local and renewable resource - the limbs of alder bushes found in the new growth along the side of the road. The entire coop was crafted in the yard at RTH and proved to be very popular not only with the tourists, but also with local hens Cinnamon and Coriander who clucked their approval of the coop during an end-of-season visit. As the wattle fencing was such a success, it will be repeated again during the 2020 season.

An innovative new feature at Ross-Thomson House this year was “Music in the Garden”. Every Monday afternoon, musicians, singers, spectators, locals and tourists gathered in the garden to play, sing and even dance. Along with local Shelburne talent, participants included summer residents, tourists and professional musicians from Georgia, Tennessee, Texas and California. Having heard of the event, one professor from Acadia University specifically planned his vacation in Shelburne so that he could attend. Resident flute makers Yola and Forbes Christie regularly played, along with a young professional flutist and budding flute maker they hosted from Québec. “Music in the Garden”, with 22 participants and spectators counted at one session, was a tremendous success and will return in an encore presentation in the 2020 season.

There was much work undertaken in the flower gardens this past season with the construction of two additional geometric raised beds authentic to the 18th century. These will hold plants that will be relocated from a Victorian-era border garden next summer. And as part of the long-term vision to slowly restore the grounds of Ross-Thomson House to the original 18th century landscape, Greta and Board Member Sherry Irvine will be planting lavender beds by the rose garden, with plans to eventually replace all the grassy areas with thyme, lemon balm and white clover.

The vegetable garden was very productive. In addition to planting carrots, kale, ground cherries and more using heritage seeds, staff successfully grew two varieties of heritage beans - painted lady and black coat. The most prolific crop in the vegetable garden was heritage peas provided by local resident Mike Hardigan, whose ancestor Donald MacKay brought the original peas from Boston in 1901. Ross-Thomson House was also featured in the blog “Eating Through History”, which included a segment on roasting dandelion root for coffee, cooking with dandelion greens, and making jelly with dandelion flowers. This too became a community project with many of the Museum’s neighbours picking and contributing dandelions. As well, local author Darcy Rhyno has pitched a story on Ross-Thomson House to Saltscapes magazine based on the “Eating Through History” blog; so the Museum may be featured in a future article.

Museum staff also harvested chive blossoms to produce herb vinegar and lemon balm to make insect repellent. And once again, mussel shells from nearby Charlotte Lane Café were collected and crushed to line the walkways around the gardens.

Another highlight at Ross-Thomson House this year was 18th century games – chess, checkers, backgammon, pick-up sticks, ring toss and dominoes – with many locals and tourists stopping by to play. Staff was quite excited to make their own checker pieces out of wood disks from an old lilac tree that needed to be cut down.

Founders’ Days, the Town’s annual heritage festival, provided the stage for a successful lemonade taste testing. Three varieties of lemonade were made – natural lemonade from fresh lemons, lemonade from concentrated juice and 18th century fairground lemonade made with citric acid, with the 18th century fairground lemonade the hands-down winner. In the 18th century, this lemonade was very popular, considered today’s equivalent treat of cotton candy. Summer student Mya Chidiac and 10-year old volunteer Phoebe McVicar did such an exceptional job pouring lemonade and interacting with visitors, that many expressed their appreciation by leaving a donation.

The busy 2019 season ended with the very successful Christmas Crawl which was the busiest yet, featuring photo ops with Acorn and Magpie, two adorable Nigerian Dwarf goats owned by local resident Katie Van Buskirk. Sherry Irvine was on hand to sell lavender and Past President Louise Lindsay spun wool while local re-enactors Dawn Harding and Marion Flemming demonstrated paddle loom weaving and served hot beverages, respectively. Over $300 was raised at the event.

In conclusion, the 2019 season at Ross-Thomson House can only be described as exciting and active, with planning for the 2020 season already underway. It should be noted, however, that there was a noticeable 20-25% drop in tourist visits this year – no doubt because the CAT ferry was not in operation.