

HERITAGE CORNER

Most magical man in township commemorated with story boards



Above: The dedication of the Stewart James story board installation was attended by, from left: Heritage St. Clair members Dave Taylor, Paul Smith, and Jan Smith, St. Clair Township Councillor Tracy Kingston, Heritage St. Clair Chair Dave Pattenden, St. Clair Township Deputy Mayor Steve Miller, and St. Clair River Trail Committee Chair Mary Jane Marsh. One of the story boards is shown in the background.

A new trio of story boards now installed at Courtright Riverfront Park tells the tale of a magic man from Courtright. During a weather-challenged ultra-brief dedication interval on Oct. 15, representatives of Heritage St. Clair, the group responsible for bringing the story of Stewart James to life, hosted the dedication that has been five years in the making. Heritage St. Clair started the conceptual planning for the story boards well before COVID-19 happened. The group's leader, David Pattenden, says the project was hard to realize because there weren't enough people to do the research and take care of all the details that such a project required.

The story boards reveal the life of a modest man possessed of a remarkable gift for puzzles and magic which became apparent from the age of nine. Although his gift enabled him to develop over 1,000 tricks and to write a ground-breaking book outlining those tricks, he continued to live in Courtright all of his life. He left only to serve in the Canadian army theatre and entertainment group *The Haversacks* during WWII, but his reputation attracted the attention of a roster of famous and powerful people, many of whom became his friends.

One of them, a wealthy philanthropist, media magnate, Canadian rock and roll radio pioneer, and magic enthusiast, Allan Slaight, became a good friend to James. The friendship lasted beyond the magician's death in 1996. A portion of the funding for the story board installation was donated by the Slaight Family Foundation, along with the St. Clair River Trail and St. Clair Township.

St. Clair River Trail Committee Chair Mary Jane Marsh

said that when the trail was being planned, it was hoped story boards would add interest to the trail experience.

Dave Pattenden noted more story boards are being developed for installation along the length of the St. Clair River Trail to raise awareness of the rich heritage that exists in St. Clair Township.

The lack of project volunteers and the onset of COVID-19 were cited as factors that slowed down the completion of the Stewart James installation. Deputy Mayor Steve Miller agreed community volunteers are crucial to the success of such a project and commended Heritage St. Clair members for their hard work and determination to complete the project.

Today, the name Stewart James looms large in the pantheon of honoured magicians and revered magic innovators. His book is still a valuable reference for aspiring and professional magicians alike. The tricks he devised, and the many variations they have inspired, continue to be mainstays for even the most famous magicians in the world. Though he did not have the benefit of a formal education, Stewart James is acknowledged around the world as one of the most prolific inventors in history.

Stewart James spent the last 21 years of his life delivering mail on a rural postal route while still working on magic.

New members welcome

Heritage St. Clair is always looking for new members. All are welcome to join and help explore the fascinating history of St. Clair Township. To contact Heritage St. Clair email: secretaryheritagestclair@gmail.com