



ARCHITECTURAL
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A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a person wearing a white hooded garment, possibly a robe or a protective suit. The person's face is obscured by deep shadow, and their hands are clasped in front of them. The background is a bright, hazy sky.

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A Place to Gather: Blyth Memorial Community Hall

By Peter Smith

ALMOST 100 YEARS AGO a group of people in the Village of Blyth, Ontario came together around an idea. They wanted to find a way to commemorate the fallen of the First World War. Some wanted to build a monument, others a park, but a group that included members of the local Women's Institute (WI) pushed for a Memorial Hall instead – a place where people could gather, commune and create, a place of culture, a culture that was so valiantly fought for. A piece of land was purchased for 300 dollars leaving the WI with only one dollar in their bank account.

The detractors asked: now what? How will a Hall ever get built? And when it was built, they said it would never be paid for. It took five years to raise the \$25,000 that it cost to build. It was built out of respect for those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. It was built because of determination, belief, and the great heart of this rural community.

The architect was W. Murray of London, Ontario; the work was completed by local contractors. Fifteen hundred people attended the opening on June 5, 1921. They

gathered on the street and on the hall lawns. They filled the auditorium, the basement and the meeting room. The theatre on the second floor had 500 seats. The local fire hall was given space at the back of the building located beneath the stage.

For the next 60 years the hall was a place of creativity in theatre, music, and dance. It was a place to collect for meals, remembrance, for political rally, for weddings and for funerals. It was a hub, the heart of the community. By 1946, with the fire hall moving to a bigger location, an addition was built on the south side of the building that allowed space for the village library and public washrooms. A kitchen was created in the old fire hall and the meeting room floor was lowered.

But by the early seventies, the hall had fallen into disrepair and some wanted it demolished. Some suggested posts be run from the lower hall through the floor of the theatre to support the roof. Another group of visionaries came forward with an idea. They wondered if a Centre for the Arts was possible inside Memorial Hall. Some said it was impossible. Some gave them six

months. A theatre was not only born but it flourished.

Soon after the establishment of the Blyth Festival and its Canadian theatre mandate, the Blyth Art Gallery was formed, followed by the Blyth Festival Singers. People arrived from near and far in the thousands every summer to catch what was going on in Blyth. They moved the opening time of the shows at the theatre to 8:30 pm in order to accommodate the farmers who had crops to get off the land. In 1979, the hall acquired air-conditioning and an addition on the north side that allowed for dressing rooms and office space. With a new fire escape the upper balcony in the theatre was reopened.

In 1990, with the roof once again in need of repair, another renovation got underway costing over a million dollars. Architect Christopher Borgal and Associates designed a link that connected the hall with the Festival Administration building to the south. It contained a new lobby, new washrooms and handicapped access. The Bainton Art Gallery was built along the link and a new box office was created. The courtyard that surrounded Memorial Hall was given a facelift and provided a grand entranceway to the living cenotaph.

Over the last 40 years, people have travelled to Memorial Hall to create and to bear witness to some of the finest Canadian art – from professional showings in the Bainton Gallery to plays that have been translated into a dozen languages, plays that have toured the country and the world.

In 2013, with the Memorial Hall once again in need of repair, the

community came together around another idea. They suggested restoring the Hall to her former glory and at the same time building a unique cultural hub in the village. Some felt it was too ambitious while some suggested it would never happen. Despite their doubts, the community came together and Campaign 14/19 was born to lead a rural revitalization.

Jason Morgan from Alan Avis Architects in Goderich was selected following a province-wide search and the renovation got underway on September 5, 2016. Over the next eight months, the hall was transformed from a twentieth-century building to a twenty-first-century state-of-the-art facility. The cost was \$4.2 million and included a redesign of the courtyard by Stantec Designs, a bell tower restored to its original aesthetic, new lighting and event signage. The theatre and orchestra floors were replaced and the booth was upgraded to industry standard for professional theatre, music, and film. A new grid, house lighting and sound systems were installed. The lobby in the link was expanded significantly, stairs were moved, and the art gallery was given baffling for better sound. The lower hall has a commercial kitchen, increased natural light, along with electrical upgrades. A new roof and new HVAC gave the building greater efficiency.

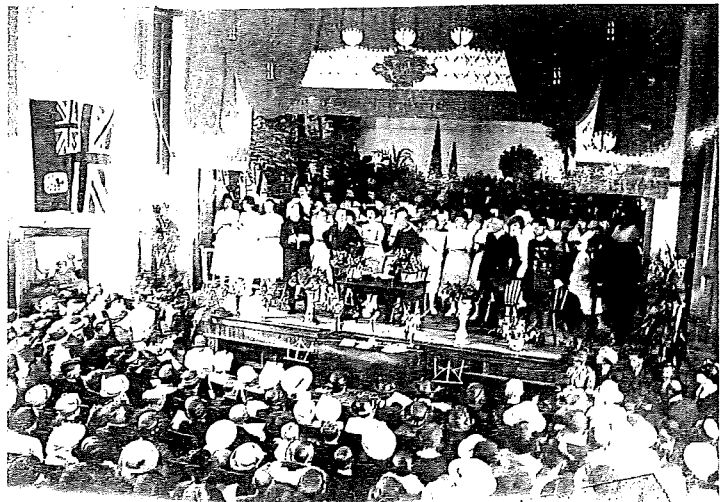
On May 19, 2017, the Blyth Memorial Hall was reopened. People, young and old, gathered from across the region, from across the Province, to get a first look at their revitalized community hall. The Blyth Legion placed a new wreath by the front entranceway and hoisted a new Canadian flag. The Deputy Premier, Deb Matthews was on hand and spoke of her deep and abiding respect of the hall and the Festival. Many others offered great words. In the quiet of the night following that grand reopening, the Blyth Memorial Community Hall stood a little taller, a symbol of the fallen of all of the wars, a tribute to community and the dedication and hard work of those who cared to act – an emblem of what is possible when people gather around a good idea.

About the author

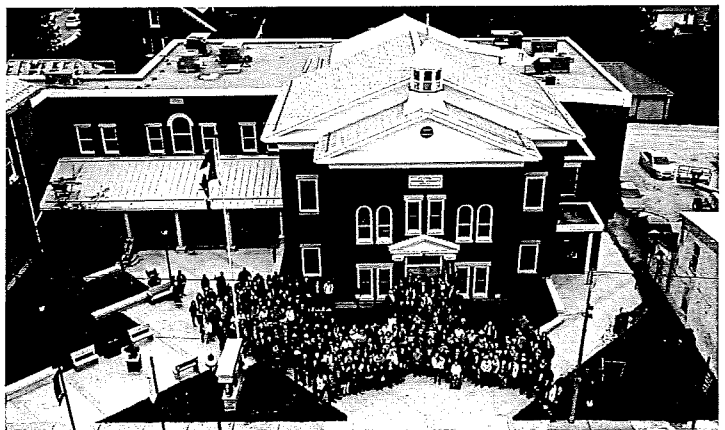
Award-winning writer Peter Smith has been involved in the arts for over 30 years as an actor, producer, director, story editor and educator. His work in theatre, film and television has taken him coast-to-coast-to-coast in Canada. As the Project Director, Peter is currently leading the creation of the Canadian Centre for Rural Creativity, an arts, education and innovation hub located in rural southwestern Ontario.



▲ Instead of building a monument, people in the Village of Blyth built a living memorial to commemorate soldiers lost in the First World War. Fifteen hundred people attended the official opening of Blyth Memorial Community Hall on June 5, 1921. **Photo** Courtesy Brock Vodden



▲ Opening night when it was standing room only. **Photo** Courtesy Brock Vodden



▲ After extensive renovations, the Blyth Memorial Community Hall was reopened on May 19, 2017. **Photo** Rob Boyce, 2017