

Mother Earth has irons in many environmental fires: Defender of the land

Written by Roger Varley, Thornhill Liberal, January 21, 2003

You win some, you lose some, especially when you are involved in more than one conflict.

When Valerie Burke wins, she believes the community has also won, whether it's in terms of protecting the environment or preserving heritage.

A recent win came last year when Markham council started working on a deal to buy a small parcel of land in Thornhill and add it to the Pomona Mills Park, something for which the Pomona Mills Park Conservationists had been lobbying.

A recent loss came when the Ontario Municipal Board ruled last year a house on Thornhill's Church Lane could be renovated and expanded. The Society for the Preservation of Historic Thornhill had said the house, built around 1955 by Sir Robert Watson-Watt, the inventor of radar, deserved protection.

Mrs. Burke is a member of both the Pomona and Historic Thornhill activist groups, as well as organizations trying to protect the Oak Ridges Moraine. In fact, her concern for the preservation of nature extends across the GTA, from the Save The Rouge group in Markham and Pickering, to fighting for the Mimico Marsh in Peel.

"I've got a few irons in the fire," she said over a cup of tea in the kitchen of her 150-year-old home. "Right now, it's the calm before the storm."

"I'm not a biologist, but I have an intense love of nature," she said. "It upsets me so much to see all this development, small streams piped and woodlots cut down.

"When they developed the area north of Bayview Secondary School, people were seeing coyotes and ring-necked pheasants in the gardens. Ring-necked pheasants don't belong in someone's back yard."

This led her into the subject of gardens and pesticides.

"I hope York Region will put in a sweeping ban on public and private use of pesticides," she said. "They're designed to kill living organisms, just to have a perfect lawn. It doesn't make sense."

Mrs. Burke said caring for public and private gardens should reflect Canada's approach to multiculturalism.

"Why can't we accept lawns that are diverse," she asked. "I think whatever comes up on my lawn is interesting."

At the moment, her lawn is mostly covered with a sheet of ice, a skating rink she and her husband have made. But this isn't your ordinary rectangular ice surface. Its contours are determined by the surrounding vegetation and a couple of large trees standing in the ice pad give the sense of skating along a forest path. Squirrels and birds are constantly around the ice.

She said her home -- once a millworker's cottage -- likely pushed her into an activist role.

"Living in this house is like a dream come true," she said. "It's a little piece of our heritage. We can protect this, but we can also protect the heritage outside. If you're able to get involved, you should try to make your community a better place to live.

"Maybe I sound like a flower child," she added.

Mrs. Burke admits she occasionally faces criticism for her activism.

"I don't think I've had any disparaging words from people in the community," she said, "but it has been discouraging when you get to council and they don't seem to want to understand pesticides are poison."

She said some Markham council members are understanding "but Richmond Hill is worse. They don't want to hear from anyone who doesn't live in Richmond Hill".

"Some people say, 'Why don't you do something for people?'," she noted. "Well, I have a wide circle of compassion. We should try to make the world a better place and that includes everything."

Which is why, apart from fighting for the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Rouge River system and against pesticides, she's also heavily involved in Historic Thornhill's Main Street revitalization campaign.

She said Yonge Street has been ravaged by commercialization.



Photo: Steve Somerville

Valerie Burke
Defender of the Land