

BACK TO THE FUTURE

By Robert Williamson

The new Ward 7 Councillor, Donna Skelly, caught my attention with her statement, "*bring performance art to Mountain brow green spaces*" (Hamilton Spectator March 31). Could we, like the Michael J. Fox movie theme, reinvent our past by going back to the future?

For example, what were the attractions that caused two Incline Railways to be built to the top of the escarpment over 100 years ago? Most people don't realize it, but the Hamilton Mountain was one of Hamilton's summer resort locales. You can still find some original summer cottages along Mountain Park Avenue. However, many have been replaced by expensive homes and apartment buildings.

At the head of the Wentworth Street Incline a large picnic ground stood beside the famous 800-seat Summers Theatre. The escarpment side of the playhouse could be opened to a large patio overlooking the city and the lake. Every summer evening except Sunday when music concerts were on the venue, the air was filled with applause and uproarious laughter for popular live performances. When the theatre burned down in 1914, city council would not allow George Summers to rebuild an even larger theatre and entertainment complex on the site. It was perhaps the beginning of restrictive use of green space on the escarpment edge.



Summers Theatre patio Kompass collection

The magnificent setting of the Summers Theatre on the edge of the escarpment overlooking the city and the lake from its open patio was incomparable ca. 1910. Enhanced by R. Williamson.

In 1907 the success of the Summers' theatre and park encouraged the development of the Mountain View Park at the site of the James Street Incline and Mountain View Hotel (now Southam Park). The hotel offered fine dining and a grand enclosed observation rotunda on its sixth storey roof. Attached to the west side of the hotel was a large covered floor offering roller-skating to organ music, dancing to band music and high class vaudeville acts. In addition to the picnic and sports facilities in the park, there was a horse riding stable, a merry-go-round, Punch and Judy marionettes, a high wire act and entertainment by Royal English Gypsies. What started out as an ice cream parlour on the escarpment edge, became a lunch counter and eventually the famous Lookout Inn, a Chinese restaurant with a magnificent view of the city, the last of its kind.

A third mountain park known as Mountain Drive Park was established in 1905 at Upper Gage Avenue. It had a dance pavilion and a lunch counter called the City View but very little else developed because an intended incline railway for the east end of the mountain was never constructed.

Our magnificent escarpment had incline railways and summer resort entertainment in the past. Maybe by going back to our future we will see gondolas and performing arts?

(448 words)

Mountain Memories, written by **Robert Williamson** for the *Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society*, appears monthly. For more information about the society's activities see the *Society's Website* (Hamiltonheritage.ca).