

LEACOCK'S JOURNAL REVEALS AUTHOR AS GREEN THUMB

MUSEUM STAFF WILL PLANT VEGETABLES AND PERENNIALS BASED ON JOURNAL ENTRIES

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Stephen Leacock had a way with words.

A master satirist who immortalized Orillia and its people in the now classic *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, the late author could certainly spin a yarn.

Less remembered today is the deep affection Leacock held for the abundant - and bountiful - vegetable gardens he cultivated on his property at Old Brewery Bay, now a museum and National Historic Site.

"He was part of a living, breathing thing"
— Mary Jean Crawford

A handwritten journal that came into the museum's possession in recent years is providing new insight into the writer's attachment to the land, his success as a green thumb and the world around him as it was then.

"This is someone's life," marvelled Mary Jean Crawford, recently hired to oversee the property's extensive gardens. "He is just spending time reliving these moments of his life and what is the most important thing he could think of to record."

Donated to the museum by a family from Nobleton in 2016, the journal documents the full spectrum of Leacock's horticultural experiences, from his planting regime and product yields to quantities of vegetables sold at

market and local weather conditions.

The covers of the hardback book are a deep shade of blue and mottled from time; its reddish binding is separated at the seam, requiring delicate handling.

Pasted to the front is a once-white rectangle of paper featuring a title spelled out in block lettering: *House Garden & Fish Book*.

"He touched this, he held this, he opened it, he wrote in it," Crawford said with more than a little awe while perusing its pages with a visiting reporter.

The first entry is dated March 28, 1929.

On that day, Leacock, an avid angler, wrote: "Fished Oro, one trout. Began hotbeds."

Brief and to the point, the note sets the tone for what is to come as he recorded life at the lakeside retreat.

In another entry, penned with justifiable pride on Sept. 8, 1932, we learn of his "largest melon" a hefty specimen weighing some 12 pounds.

A day later, Leacock landed a dozen trout.

"He kept the moment, and he was aware of everything that was happening around him," Crawford said. "That's what he wrote about and that's what made him such a big person."

Interspersed between details about planting and harvesting, along with notes on angling, are included snippets of day-to-day life.

These run the gamut from the mundane - "cucumbers only beginning, tomatoes turning, not yet ripe" - to the profound - "1934, Friday, January 19, Mother died."

A border is drawn around the latter entry, as if to emphasize the importance of this solemn news.

Elsewhere, a passage that tells of tomatoes dying "from lack of love" causes Crawford to gasp at the heartfelt sentiment.

"It makes me want to cry," she said.

Friends and family appear frequently, too, along with accounts of travel to and from Montreal, where Leacock taught at McGill



University.

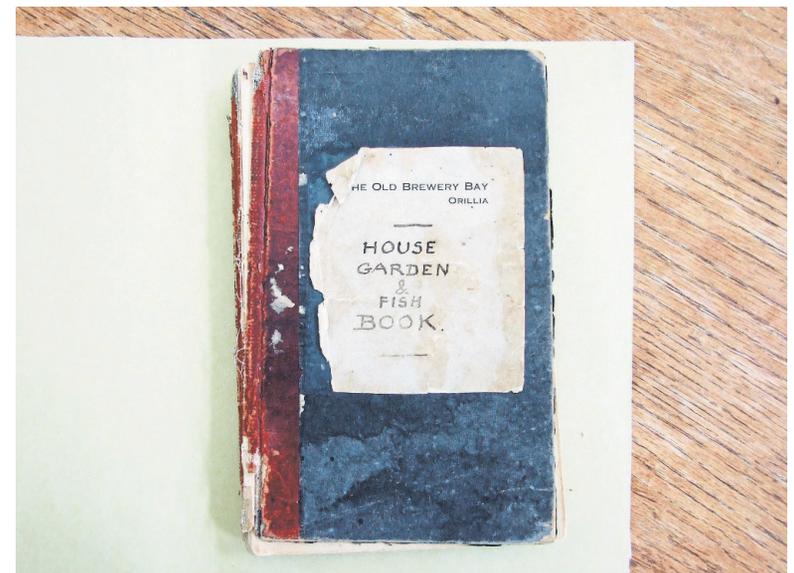
"It's not just, 'These are the plants and this is what's going on with them,'" said Tom Rose, the museum's collections and program supervisor. "It's more sort of like a diary."

Born Dec. 30, 1869 at Swanmore, County of Hampshire, England, Leacock and his family immigrated to Canada in 1876, settling on a farm near the hamlet of Egypt, south of Sibbald Point on Lake Simcoe.

After attending Upper Canada College, he earned a degree in modern languages at the University of Toronto and later received a PhD in political economy and political science at the University of Chicago.

Leacock joined the department of economics and political science at McGill University and in 1906 published *Elements of Political Science*, a textbook that would prove his most profitable work.

While dozens of books would follow, it was his humour writing for which he is best remembered, in particular *Sunshine Sketches*, released in 1912.



Frank Matys/Metroland

Above: Its cover is worn and its binding separated, yet the pages of Stephen Leacock's personal gardening and fishing journal remain carefully preserved; Top: Mary Jean Crawford was recently hired to oversee the gardens at the Leacock Museum and relishes the opportunity to plant some of the vegetables and perennials Leacock wrote about in his journal.

Success in publishing allowed him to develop his waterfront home at Old Brewery Bay in Orillia where, in 1928 he built the Wright and Noxon-designed Lea-

cock House.

It was here that his love of gardening would take root and pro-

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SUCCESS ALLOWED LEACOCK TO BUILD AT OLD BREWERY BAY

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duce the bushels of peas, lettuce, radishes, beans, potatoes and other vegetables that are carefully tallied in the journal's pages.

Within these same pages, apples picked from his orchard are deemed "A1 first class."

Flower plantings that brought the property alive with colour are noted as well, among them peonies, delphinium and cabbage roses.

For Jenny Martynshyn, the museum's co-ordinator, the journal reveals "more of a human side to Leacock.

"Instead of being just the professor, the intellectual, it showed that he got his hands dirty," she said.

Memorably, the year the museum received the journal was the same year staff

planted cucumbers for the first time since Leacock occupied the property.

"They went nuts," Martynshyn recalled. "I was begging people to take them."

Leacock's extensive note taking will prove useful when the museum pursues a plan to recreate portions of his gardens at the property, Martynshyn said.

"We know what will succeed here because he told us," she added.

While the precise location of his plantings appears lost to time, officials confirmed the property once featured a greenhouse, a farming complex with six buildings and a fruit orchard.

Turkeys were raised here as well, as noted in one of the more grim entries that revealed seven chicks

had died in four days.

"Chicks are hard to keep," said Crawford.

Using the journal as her guide in the future, she will plant varieties of veggies that Leacock grew, enjoyed at his own table and cared for enough to write about.

Crawford suggested local food banks as likely beneficiaries of the resulting produce.

"(Leacock's) life was about being here, loving being here, loving the people here and interacting with these gardens," Crawford added. "He was part of a living, breathing thing."

The journal concludes in 1943, the year before Leacock's death from throat cancer.

He was buried across the lake from Old Brewery Bay in a family plot at St. George's Church, Sibbald Point.



Frank Matys/Metroland

Tom Rose, collections and program supervisor at the Leacock Museum and National Historic Site, displays a gardening and fishing journal, handwritten by Stephen Leacock during his years in Orillia. The city will use the journal as a guide to reproduce portions of the late author's vegetable and perennial gardens.

Tickets on sale for these Canadian legends!

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