

You can enjoy a drink at MoD's Temperance and Temptation exhibit



By Brian Lockhart

If you like your martini shaken, not stirred, and enjoy a splash of whiskey in your coffee from time to time, you would have received an earful of shame from the temperance ladies at the opening of the Temperance and Temptation Tour at the Museum of Dufferin last Saturday, July 28.

The exhibit is the first new showing at the Museum as it gets ready to once again open its doors to the public after being closed several months for renovations.

The temperance ladies at the exhibit were actors, of course, but they put on a good show of what people who like to tipple might have heard near the beginning of the 20th century.

The exhibit is the result of a lot of research of what went on in the bootlegging business in Dufferin County during a time when running a still in the backwoods was a popular business enterprise.

‘Central Counties Tourism is our biggest sponsor for this exhibit,’ explained Museum of Dufferin curator, Sarah Robinson. ‘They came to us and said they wanted to create this tour and experience for Headwaters. It made lot of sense to start at our museum for a launch pad to give the history of temperance and the prohibition era in Dufferin County.’

‘Our exhibit focuses around the years from 1904 to 1920. In 1916 the Ontario Temperance act came out and before that there was the Scott Act and the Dunkin Act. Canada as a whole was never under what we know as prohibition. We voted locally and that was known as the ‘local option.’ They made the laws by township or town and you could vote on it. You could be dry in Orangeville, but in Grand Valley for example, it was the last to go dry.’

(In those days, with Dufferin all dry, those wanting a legal drink could do it by going across the line to the Loretto Tavern in Simcoe.)

The era represented a time in Canadian history when the country had what might be considered a serious alcohol problem. The Upper Canada census of 1851 recorded 1,999 taverns – one for every 478 people at the time, and by the early 20th century, some groups considered alcohol to be the root of a lot of problems in society and decided it was time for change.

The exhibit features the Alexandra House hotel, a rather notorious drinking establishment located on Broadway in Orangeville at a time when the main street had four hotels – all with a tavern. The hotel was demolished in 1989 when it fell into disrepair.

While some places did indeed go dry, it also gave rise to the illegal production of alcohol in backwoods stills and the exhibit features some stories of rather colourful local characters who decided keeping the supply chain open was a good business enterprise.

The museum is opening with a new brand and a new name. Formerly the Dufferin County Museum and Archives, it will now be known as the Museum of Dufferin (MOD).

The museum opened to the public on Wednesday, with the official re-opening taking place next Sunday, August 5.