

## **Devastated by the loss of an old friend**

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Whig column

A few weeks ago, a dear friend was murdered, burnt so badly that little was left of her. This friend was lovely and grew in beauty as our relationship developed over 37 years. She proudly sheltered me and my family, helped us welcome friends and strangers by creating a warm and hospitable environment.

She would wait for me when I left and when on my return I would greet her, I could feel her leaning forward to welcome me.

This friend was our precious and sweet home, and this week is her long drawn out funeral as we deal with her remains of charred beams, twisted sheets of metal, and blackened stinking rubble. In her burnt remains are all the things she sheltered within her rooms. She tried to save some items from the blazing fire for those humans who loved her and who over the years beautified her as part of their own lives.

I want to celebrate her life of 171 years by remembering her, for she no longer stands proudly on the rise across the river.

She was old, especially old in this new land of Canada, and before us, she was home to the same family for generations

Two young brothers, Robert and Joshua, came to Canada from Leeds, England, in 1832. They bought land in the Thousand Islands area which was so heavily wooded they could barely wend their way through to get to their land. I often think of that generation of women and men who worked so hard to survive in a strange land far from their ancestral home.

It took the brothers two years -1838-1840 - to build their stone home. They travelled to the village of Catarauqui to buy some cut limestone for the front of their house and used their multi coloured fieldstones to create a dwelling for farm families

The Leakeys chose a high spot on which to build their home, with a view of the magnificent St Lawrence across the road. They lived in their stone home, cleared the land for fields, and raised families who still live in the area. The last Leakey - Robert Wilford Joshua - a widower, raised nine children by farming, fishing and selling the furs of muskrats.

We were fortunate to buy the farm from the Leakeys in 1974, and started the enormous task of renovation. We were young and idealistic, wanting to live in the country. We were warned that the task would become a long labour of love, taking time, money and effort, but we moved ahead.

We called the farm Marshview as it overlooks a great span of wet field of grass and marsh leading to the river.

Yes the task has taken years, even with periods of frustration and lack of funds we kept going, knowing the stone home would give, not only to us but others as well, so much beauty and pleasure. We added large airy rooms so that the house would welcome our friends and family.

Since the destruction of the house, we have had so many friends who have told us what the place meant to them and how they will miss what the house offered in terms of refuge and a place for meals and gatherings for open and frank discussions.

We believe the farm, with its fields, barn, outbuildings and stone home was handed to us in trust by those first Leakeys, not to be "owned" by mere humans but to be preserved and loved. We have felt honoured to live in such a gorgeous place.

From the beginning the house spoke to me, and as each change was made to make her lovelier, she would be expansive with humble pride. She appreciated that we respectfully added our own cultural hue to her English and Canadian heritage. She did not expect to be kept locked in some historical time period, and like Canada itself, she welcomed the diversity and richness of the blending of the many cultures and traditions.

Now she is destroyed. She had no protection from hate and violence and could neither save herself or us from evil.

People ask us if faith has helped us deal with this horror, can we see any good coming from this, has it taught us patience and has it taught us to continue to believe in the compassion of most people? It is early days, but the outpouring of the kindness of strangers, the affection of friends and the concern of our family has strengthened us and kept the faith alive.

Now it is decision time. Should we leave all this and move away, or do we overcome our fears physically and emotionally, stay to deal with this face on? If we leave does this mean evil has triumphed? Does the individual who is responsible see our abandonment as a victory for him and a defeat for us?

God willing, we shall rebuild. We shall honour the Leakeys and the dear stone house, use its stones and build a place of beauty and love, a place which will again welcome friends and family