

May 25, 2025 - Grace Morgan Annual Dinner Speaker

Ron Brown - *Unusual Things To See In Ontario*

A Niagara Falls house with an upside-down front door. Ontario's narrowest house- just six feet wide, Toronto. North America's only church made of mud (Shanty Bay near Barrie). North America's smallest jail -built 1898, 15.7 x 19.7 feet, no longer in operation, Tweed, central-east Ontario. Screaming Heads," a group of eighty, twenty-foot-tall concrete and steel sculptures with giant "eyes" and "mouths" open in a silent scream, near Parry Sound, evocative of Norwegian artist Edward Munch's famous painting "The Scream."

These were among the more than fifty unique features of Ontario that Ron, the author of more than twenty books since 1978 about the province's lore, beguiled us with. "Nobody knows Ontario like Ron Brown," the CBC has said. His presentation was based on his recent book *The Top 170 Unusual Things To See In Ontario*. He gave us a special way of looking at Ontario's heritage.

Following his inclusion of Wroxeter, a village in Huron County in western Ontario, in his 2021 book on Ontario ghost towns, because 15 of its 18 main street stores had become boarded up, the community sprang into action and revitalized itself. "Its entry sign now says, 'Welcome to Wroxeter, Former Ghost Town,'" Ron said with pleasure about the transformation he sparked.

Ron wore a broad-brimmed hiker's hat while addressing us about his explorations. "Something is 'unusual' because I say it is," he said, smiling, "and I get suggestions in letters and emails. What makes something unusual to me is the biggest, smallest, first, last, or only one."

He compared sites in Ontario to world-famous places: Huge boulders the size of houses near Larder Lake in northern Ontario's Temiskaming area may have served a calendar-type purpose for early Indigenous nomads similar to that of Stonehenge Circle in England. Paris, France has Notre Dame Cathedral, Ontario's look-alike version is Windsor's Church of Our Lady of Assumption. Italy has the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Ontario has a rare wooden "sheave tower" (groove-wheeled system lodged in a high tower to generate power from a river) in Blair Village, now part of Cambridge. Also, near Cambridge are 200 (!!) naturally formed potholes, created during the Glacial Age.

Other points of interest: historic trees, a two-storey outhouse of yore with a balcony on the upper floor, a vintage train car converted into a classroom, "Birdhouse City" -actual name Picton- in Prince Edward County which has 100 individually imaginatively handcrafted birdhouses, and Goderich's octagon main square from which eight streets radiate from the centre.

Ron also showed a stunning sculpture installed in 2014 in honour of Indigenous Shawnee Chief Tecumseh who was killed when he and his followers supported the British against invading Americans in the Thames River Valley near London, Ontario in the War of 1812. The massive sculpture has arching steel bands that link to resemble a turtle as First Nations Peoples call the Earth "Turtle Island." Outlines of animals sacred in Indigenous culture are etched on.

Susan Goldenberg