

Milo Johnson brings Black History alive with the tale of John "Daddy" Hall



by Greg Layson

One could say that local Black historian Milo Johnson really got into his latest presentation.

The retired educator and author of six books capped Black History Month at the February 28 meeting of the Harrow Early Immigrant Research Society (HEIRS) by presenting The Black Presence in Canadian History, featuring a tribute to Harriet Tubman and the heroic story of John "Daddy" Hall, the Town Crier of Owen Sound.

Johnson started the nearly 60-minute session by honouring Tubman with a slideshow.

He then took the stage dressed as Hall, complete with a grey beard, bell, and scroll of news, appearing before the packed Harrow Community Centre by shouting "Oh, yay! Oh, yay! Oh, yay!" as a crier would some 200-years ago.

Johnson proceeded to tell the tale of Hall.

Hall's father was First Nations and his mother was African. He was born

on the Huron Reserve in Anderdon Township, participated in the War of 1812 and the Upper Canada Rebellion, and eventually became the renowned bell-ringer of Owen Sound.

Hall was captured by American soldiers while fighting for the British in the War of 1812. After his capture, Hall was taken to the U.S. and spent several years as a slave in Virginia and Kentucky before escaping to Canada. He made his way north to Newmarket where he fought in the brief 1837 Rebellion.

Eventually, he settled in Owen Sound.

Johnson said it took him about five-years to research the story of Hall.

"If you dig and dig and dig, you'll find information," he said.

Last year, Hall's story was turned into a play entitled, "The Legend of Daddy Hall."

Prior to that, it was Episode 4 in the Global TV docu-series "BLK: An Origin Story."

Johnson first told Hall's

story eight-years ago, for school kids gathered at Mackenzie Hall. That's when Dennis Smith, President of the Artists of Colour, encouraged Johnson to flesh it out "and develop it more."

So, Johnson added PowerPoint and video to the presentation and performed it another 15 times at Mackenzie Hall last year.

"People seem to like it," Johnson said. "I really get into character."

That was evident at HEIRS, where Johnson sported a hat and bowtie, and staff had to add more seating.

Johnson said it's important to tell these types of stories that aren't typically taught in schools.

"I didn't know anything about our Black history. I knew about the European explorers, it was very Eurocentric, but that was the school system back then. That's how they taught things," he said of growing up. "We are

doing a better job up here in Canada. But we need to do even more.

"I told a story today, and who has ever heard it? A few people did. But most people did not."

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~ Abhijit Naskar