

## Bridge carollers tune into the past

### Waterloo Region singers enjoy the acoustics of Ontario's only surviving covered bridge

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WEST MONTROSE, Ont.—Dutch scientists placed violins by Cremonese masters such as Antonio Stradivari through CT scanners this year and found their rich sound might be explained by the density of the wood.

Tony Dowling could have saved them a lot of trouble by taking them on a stroll through this picturesque village, home to Ontario's only surviving covered bridge.



SIMON WILSON FOR THE TORONTO STAR

West Montrose residents practise for their annual moonlight Christmas carol sing Dec. 15, 2008 under the village's covered bridge, the only one left in Ontario.

For nearly 130 years, it's been a landmark and important passageway, linking one side of the Waterloo Region community to the other.

But in recent times, residents discovered their bridge also has musicality. It became apparent about 20 years ago, a few nights before Christmas, when Dowling, new to the village, crossed the bridge with his wife and began singing "Silent Night."

"I listened and thought, 'That sounds pretty good,' which is quite an accomplishment with my voice," he recalls. "There's a good reason why so many musical instruments are made out of well-seasoned wood."

Those dense hardwood acoustics will be on display tonight when villagers gather by moonlight, as they do one night every December, to sing carols under the bridge.

You could call it keeping in tune with their past.

While it may be the only covered bridge doubling as a concert venue, in some ways it's part of a long tradition. "I don't know how many covered bridges have carols sung in them ... but they were certainly used for community gatherings," said David Wright, president of the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges, which documents covered bridges around the world, including Canada.

### VANISHING ICONS

*The National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges recently discovered there may be as many as 3,000 covered bridges in China. In North America, their numbers are shrinking.*

*Here's how they add up\*:*

- Madison County, Iowa: 6
- New Brunswick: 63
- Vermont: 106

In an interview from Westminster, Vt., Wright said in their heyday, covered bridges served as playgrounds for children on rainy days, a site for community picnics and square dances, and even diving boards over swimming holes if kids kicked out the sideboards.

There's an aura of the past today when Mennonite horses and buggies cross the West Montrose covered bridge, but there's one important difference from olden times. While snow removal today is an obsession, it was just the opposite after the bridge was built in 1881.

Every winter, a farmer was hired at between \$5 and \$8 to "snow" the bridge – cover the thick oak floors with loads of the white stuff. It was the only way sleighs and cutters could get through smoothly.

Covered bridges came into use when builders discovered they could extend the lifespan of bridges by as much as 70 years by keeping their trusses and bracing systems sheltered from the elements.

When Dowling and fellow members of the Elmira Kiwanis Club first organized the carol sing, they sought permission from Ontario's transport ministry, which was then in charge of maintenance, and were told they should have no more than 46.5 people on the bridge at any time.

How would we police that?" Dowling asks jokingly. "Ma'am, before you come onto the bridge would you please go over and see the magician with the long horizontal box and the saw?"

Wright said one reason covered bridges appeal today is because they take people not just across the water, but back to what they perceive as simpler times.

"I'm not sure the 19th century was any simpler than our century," he said, "but it certainly was a different time."

• Pennsylvania: 200

• Ontario: 1 (used to be 5, mainly in eastern Ontario)

\*estimated