



## Featured local story

# The fixer: Jim Smith can repair just about anything

Tim Taylor  
The Lake Report

At 75, Jim Smith has had lots of time to fix many of the town's historic icons.

When the town clock stopped working properly, Smith fixed it.

When the Court House bell kept interrupting the Shaw plays, Smith fixed it.

When the St. Mark's bells needed repair, Smith fixed them.

He officially retired from his position as maintenance mechanic at the town hospital in 1994, at the age of 50. But that just gave him more time to fix things.

"Best job I could have ever had in my life," says Smith. "I fixed things. I know electrical, I know plumbing, I know carpentry. So fixing things is my cup of tea."

Smith came by his handiness naturally and by kneeling at his father's side, as the elder Smith, a local carpenter, plied his trade. "Officially, dad was a carpenter. Unofficially, he worked for everyone who needed something fixed."

He acknowledges that school was never his thing. "I was 17 in Grade 8, so they moved me up to the high school," he says. "That didn't last long."

But it was long enough for Smith to meet Heidi, his wife of 53 years. "We have three wonderful kids, scattered around the region, four grandchildren and our first great-grandchild is expected later this summer."

Smith's Niagara roots are just about as deep as you

can find today. He can trace his local connection back to the 1850s, to his great-great-grandfather, who is buried in the cemetery at St. Mark's. "I just buried my mother there. She lived to be 101."

After he left high school, Smith bounced around in a couple of short-term positions, but they didn't use his natural skills. "They weren't career things."

Then he heard about the hospital job. It became his career.

When he retired, he immediately took up a part-time job, as caretaker of the Niagara Apothecary, at the corner of Queen and King streets.

Built in 1820, as a pharmacy, the Apothecary is now owned by the Ontario Heritage Trust and operated as a museum by the Ontario College of Pharmacists.

But that job certainly doesn't keep him busy.

In the mid-nineties, Smith noticed that the Memorial Clock Tower on Queen Street didn't keep time. He petitioned the town to make him the official voluntary clock keeper. They agreed.

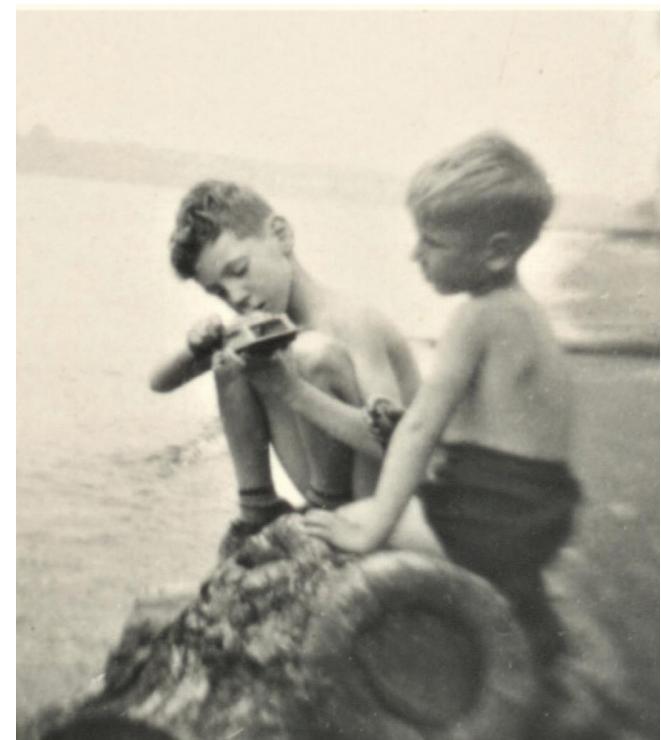
"The clock was cuckoo. I had no idea what the mechanism would look like," he says. "I changed the system to a completely modern system. It keeps perfect time."

After more than 20 years as clock keeper, Smith recently advertised and found a successor. "It was just too hard to climb up there."

It's the same sort of tale for the historic bell in the Court House belfry. Installed in 1835, the bell



Left: Jim Smith, today, in his cozy backyard workshop, readying himself for his next project. TIM TAYLOR Right: Jim Smith and his elder brother, Terry, at Lion's Beach in the late 1940s. SUPPLIED



chime wreaked havoc on the Shaw Festival plays during performances in the Court House theatre. Leave it to Smith to cobble together a system that would pause the bells when the actors were on stage.

And long before the major refurbishment and addition of nine bells to the St. Mark's Church chimes, Smith puttered away keeping the smaller system alive. He'd grown up admiring the church bells as much for the intricate playing mechanism as the beautiful sound.

"I used anything I could to make them work," he remembers. "I didn't read music, so I took the music home and worked out how to play it."

"And when they installed the automatic system in 2006, we programmed the computer to play automatically. It's really wonderful."

Smith has vivid recollections of his early life in town during the 1940s and '50s. "We spent all our summer days at the beach. Most us called it Lion's Beach, because the Lion's Club ran the refreshment stand. But it really was the Queen's Royal Beach — just down from today's gazebo."

Smith couldn't swim so he couldn't get out to the

big swimming raft off the beach. "But when the Cayuga (the last of the passenger steamers to sail between Toronto and Niagara) went up or down stream there were huge waves. We used to love to dive into those."

Every May, on the first trip of the year, the captain of the Cayuga would take the kids on a joy ride up to Queenston and back. "We got a free trip up to Queenston. We had the run of the ship."

Many years later, with lots of time on his hands, Smith took six winter months to build a five-foot exact replica of the Cayuga, from memory and what pictures he could find.

In keeping with his community-mindedness, Smith donated the model to the Niagara Historical Society and Museum, where it remains on display today.

In 2005, Smith received an Award for Historical Contribution, as part of a "Saluting Niagara on the Lake Volunteers" initiative.

The award not only acknowledged Smith's volunteer efforts to maintain many of the town's treasures, it recognized the hundreds of photo columns he had contributed to the local newspaper. In all, Smith submitted almost 150

stories and pictures about the people, places, buildings and history of the town.

Smith still contributes his weekly Exploring Photos feature to The Lake Report (see page 17).

He took to photography at a very early age. "My dad got a big bellows camera to shoot the Scout Jamboree of 1955. I watched him develop his own pictures."

"When I was 13 my mother gave me a little brownie camera. I still have it. I love taking pictures."

He estimates he now has over 500,000 prints, originals and duplicates, both his own and thousands given to him by others. He has all the hard copies, but the pictures are also filed digitally, taking up almost 2 terabytes of computer storage.

He admits to wandering through the well-organized computer files, almost daily. "I just love looking at them. The memories when we were kids. Flying kites at Fort Mississauga."

"My mother used to say I had a terrible memory. But I can remember all my pictures."

One mental picture stands out. In the 1950s, the second green at Niagara's historic lakeside golf course, was inside the ramparts of Fort

Mississauga — a blind shot from the fairway.

So, Smith and his band of friends, waited patiently in a small hidden tunnel inside the fort for a golf ball to come over the embankment and land on the green. They quickly rushed out before the golfer appeared, dropped the ball into the cup and retreated to cover.

One very happy golfer, with an eagle!

But if Smith is content about the town's past, he seems somehow disappointed with where it is now.

"I'm afraid we are a non-town," he muses. "Queen Street used to be part of the community not just a facade. It was a people's town. You knew everyone, all the families."

"As a kid, you didn't do anything wrong because you knew someone would tell your mother."

Can the town be fixed? "That's a tough one. The town has already flipped. There's little of that era left."

But Smith quickly throws off his chagrin, returning happily to his vibrant memories.

With any luck, Jim Smith, armed with both the past and his innate skills, will find a way to fix his town, too.

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