

CHEDOKE'S INUIT REVISIT REVIEWED

By Robert Williamson

Some of the most outstanding pages of Hamilton's medical history can be found in the centennial history entitled, "**CHEDOKE, More Than A Sanatorium.**" Being the book's Editor enables me to provide a better interpretation of why fifteen Inuit elders, recently revisited Hamilton in July this year. Now in their late 70s, they were taken as children from their Canadian Arctic homes to be treated and saved from a deadly epidemic of tuberculosis decades ago.

Were they seeking closure from an unsettling year of their childhood lives, making them unique survivors in their Inuit culture? Perhaps, but it was a learning experience for everyone. We learned that the word Eskimo, of Cree origin, means "eaters of raw meat" and is considered a derogatory title by the Inuit culture. Dr. Ewart, Medical Superintendent at Hamilton's Sanatorium, 1947-1970, made it clear that as a nation we were moving north to exploit available resources and were obligated to give the indigenous people access to all of our advantages to treat and control disease. None of the treatments could have been performed in the isolated North where there was no full service hospitals, staffed with surgeons and around-the-clock qualified nurses. It was simply not possible. The Hamilton Health Association Bulletin of March 1961 reported, "In the past eight years a third (1,274) of the Inuit population of the Eastern Arctic has passed through the Mountain Sanatorium, saving the race from extinction."



Photo courtesy Richard Zazulak

With the discovery of the miracle antibiotic drug, Streptomycin, only 37 Inuit patients died at Hamilton's Sanatorium. They are buried in Woodland Cemetery and remembered by a 2.7 tonne granite monument, shown here, incorporating element from Inuit soapstone carvings.

Kindergarten teacher, Sylvia James, a TB survivor herself, spent twenty-five years teaching Inuit children at the San. She said, "They were wonderful children, her pride and joy". She was astonished at how quickly they adapted to their totally foreign surroundings. Before their long trek south, they were unaccustomed to many things that other children took for granted, such as indoor plumbing, running water, flying in elevators, store-bought clothes and shoes. Their diet was completely foreign: cookies, fresh fruit, beef, pork, chicken, whole milk and eggs. Of course they loved candy and bubble gum, which replaced whale blubber to chew on. They truly enjoyed new toys, finger painting and singing.

But wonder of wonders was the novelty of television and movies, especially cowboy movies like the "Lone Ranger". They always cheered for the cowboys. Eatons Department Store supplied the children with cowboy hats, toy guns and holsters. Even some of the parents wanted to wear them.



Inuit children loved to wear cowboy hats. They would even wear them to bed.

Photo Courtesy Sanatorium Archives.

Despite all their new surroundings some children who had to leave their healthy parents behind, were homesick. Consequently, some people have unfortunately tried to equate the government's tuberculosis medical measures to the Government Residential School System introduced by John A. Macdonald's politics eighty years earlier - a misinformed concept.

Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson of the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society appears monthly to preserve Hamilton's Local Heritage.