

Milestones & Misadventures in Toronto's History

Wednesday, October 22 to December 10, 2025 – 10am to 12 noon

In-person at Fairfield Seniors Centre

www.learningunlimitedetobicoke.com

Presenters: Richard Jordan, Adam Bunch and Katie Daubs

Course Overview:

This series explores some of the pinnacle events and personalities from Toronto's storied past. Some are milestones of success and overcoming challenges, while others are tales of failure and misadventure.

Wednesday, October 22: Marilyn Bell and Marathon Swims Across Lake Ontario
(Speaker: Richard Jordan)

In 1954 the Toronto Telegram and the CNE sponsored Florence Chadwick, a famous California marathon swimmer, to come to Toronto and attempt to be the first person to swim across Lake Ontario. She failed, but Marilyn Bell, an unknown Toronto teenager, entered the water at the same time as Chadwick and against all odds managed to complete the feat. Toronto was enthralled with the story of this plucky teen, but she wasn't the last to conquer the cold waters of the lake. Kim Lumsdon, Cindy Nicholas and Vicki Keith are among the more than 60 others who have completed the swim. We'll talk about the whole history of CNE marathon swims dating back to the 1920s as well.

Wednesday, October 29: Timothy Eaton and His Department Store (Speaker: Richard Jordan)

Timothy Eaton was a canny Scots-Irish Methodist who believed that the Lord would reward those who worked hard. Born in Ballymena, Ireland, Eaton served an apprenticeship with a local merchant before immigrating to Canada in the 1850s. He honed his craft in small-town Ontario then, starting in 1869, his tiny shop at Queen and Yonge would expand exponentially, leaving all his Toronto competitors in the dust. This presentation tells the story of Timothy Eaton's life, what he did that made him so successful and how the subsequent generations of the Eaton family succeeded – and ultimately failed – in keeping the Eaton legacy alive in the 20th Century.

Wednesday, November 5: Toronto's Victorian Underworld: Con Artists, Kidnappers & Crooks (Speaker: Adam Bunch)

It was in the late 1800s that our city was given the nickname "Toronto the Good," but in truth it was often anything but. In this lecture, we'll head into the shadows where Victorian vice reigned and meet the notorious criminals who once terrorized our town. From con artists to kidnappers, we'll explore the days when our city was a hard-drinking outpost on the edge of the British Empire filled with brothels, pickpockets, and thieves.

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Wednesday, November 12: Sir Henry Pellatt – The Man Who Built and Lost Casa Loma (Speaker: Richard Jordan)

Sir Henry Pellatt (1859-1939) was a Toronto financier and soldier who became fabulously wealthy. He built Canada's largest private home, which he called Casa Loma. At the height of his fame, he took a 640-man regiment to England for three months of training completely at his own expense. But as quickly as he rose, his empire came tumbling down and Sir Henry died a pauper in a rented room at the Mimico home of his former chauffeur. This is a story of old Toronto told with vintage and contemporary photographs.

Wednesday, November 19: The Boyd Gang: Toronto's Notorious Bank Robbers (Speaker: Richard Jordan)

Edwin Alonzo Boyd, born and raised in Toronto, had a problem with authority. The son of a policeman, he gave up a job driving a TTC streetcar to rob banks in the early 1950s. Caught and sent to the Don Jail, he escaped with a pair of robbers and his gang became the scourge of Canada. They pulled off Toronto's largest bank robbery and lived a wild life on the run. Caught a second time, they escaped from the Don Jail again before they were finally brought to justice. And two gang members who killed a Toronto policeman paid the ultimate price, being hung back-to-back at the Don Jail.

Wednesday, November 26: Hurricane Hazel (Speaker: Richard Jordan)

October 15, 1954 was the day that Toronto faced its greatest natural disaster, a massive hurricane that caused severe flooding and killed 81 people in Southern Ontario. We will look at how a hurricane forms, what Toronto was like in 1954 and then recall tales of tragedy, heroism and survival on a day that many people are still able to vividly recall today. We'll also look at the strong measures that have been taken since Hurricane Hazel to prevent a recurrence of the disaster.

Wednesday, December 3: The Missing Millionaire (Speaker: Katie Daubs)

The story of the mysterious 1919 disappearance of Ambrose Small, the mercurial owner of the Grand Opera House in Toronto who had just closed a deal to sell his network of Ontario theatres, deposited a million-dollar cheque in his bank account, and then was never seen again. Everything about the sensational case would be called into question in the decades to come, including the motivations of his inner circle, his enemies, and the police who followed the trail across the continent, looking for answers in asylums, theatres, and the Pacific Northwest. Drawing on extensive research and her own interviews with the descendants of key figures, Katie Daubs weaves together a gripping narrative of what became the most "extraordinary unsolved mystery" of its time in a city undergoing immense social and cultural change.

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Wednesday, December 10, 2025: The Toronto Circus Riot - A True Tale of Sex, Violence, Corruption and Clowns (Speaker: Adam Bunch)

The strangest riot in our city's history broke out in the summer of 1855. It was sparked by a brawl at a King Street brothel, when some rowdy clowns picked a fight with a battle-hardened crew of firefighters on the most dangerous night of the year. That bizarre encounter would reverberate through the city. The circus performers had made a terrible mistake; those firefighters were members of the Orange Order, the powerful Protestant society that ruled Toronto for more than a century. And they wanted revenge. The circus grounds would soon become the scene of a bloody clash that shook Toronto to its core and laid bare the fault lines that once violently divided our city.

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Biographies

Richard Jordan



Richard Jordan is a former President of the Etobicoke Historical Society and served two terms as a member of the Etobicoke Historical Board in the 1980s. Richard contributed a local heritage column and feature articles for the Toronto Star from 1984 to 1991 as well as articles for a number of genealogy and history magazines. Richard's family genealogy book, *Beyond the Great Pine Ridge*, was published in 2004 and his second book, *Ernest D. Banting and Community Life in Weston 1921-1973*, was published by Amazon in 2022. Richard is well known for his speaking engagements with historical societies and seniors groups.

Adam Bunch



Berton Award.

Adam Bunch the author of *The Toronto Book of the Dead* and *The Toronto Book of Love*, the host of the Canadiana documentary series, and the creator of the Toronto Time Traveller newsletter, the Festival of Bizarre Toronto History, and the Toronto Dreams Project. His work popularizing Canadian history was recognized with the Governor General's History Award for Popular Media — the Pierre

Katie Daubs



Globe and Mail Best Book, Toronto

Katie Daubs is a content strategist and senior writer at the Toronto Star, where she has worked since 2009. She previously worked at the Ottawa Citizen after graduating from Carleton University. As a storyteller, she is passionate about Toronto, its people and its history. Her book, *The Missing Millionaire: The True Story of Ambrose Small and the City Obsessed with Finding Him*, was recognized as a

Course Co-ordinator: Neil Park

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