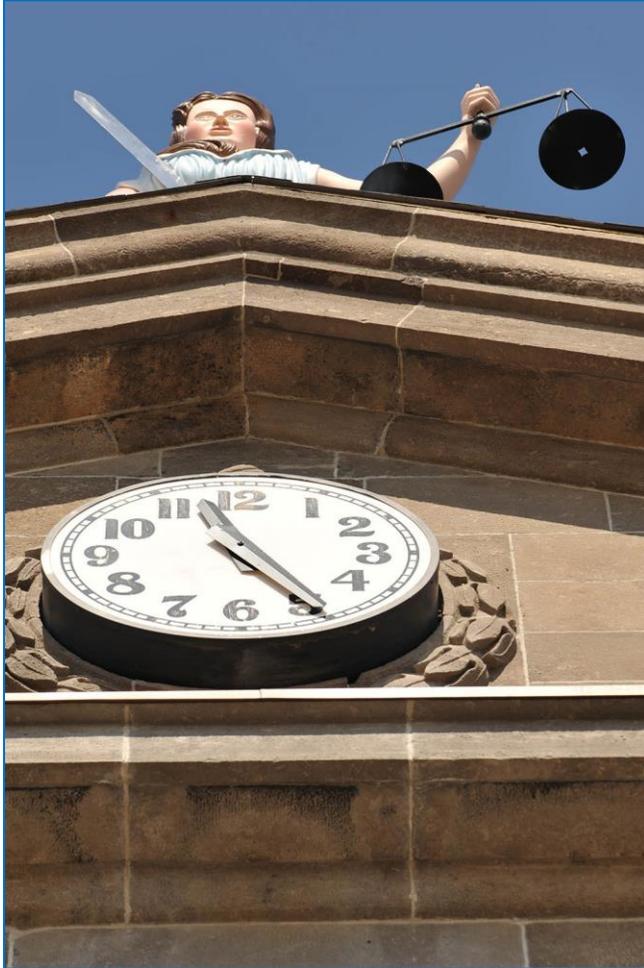


Sally finds a new home

By Francie Healy



WESTPORT – She was wrenched out of her home place, jumped on by kids, left to ponder her fate in an old garage, and attacked by a zealous reeve with a chainsaw.

But the grand old lady of Westport lives on, older and wiser now, admired by everyone who comes to visit.

She seems a little out of place in the old blacksmith's shop, which has been Westport's proud little museum for many years. Her elegance stands out like a beacon among artifacts from the days of the pioneers. But the grand old lady doesn't seem to care.

A museum, after all, has to be better than standing in the sun and the rain on top of the courthouse in Brockville for 100 years. It beats the indignities bestowed on her by pigeons, or the cutting edge of winter winds.

Museum curator Janice Chornyhous is fond of the old lady. She knows her story as well as anyone. This peppery, witty woman is only too happy to tell it.

Generations of Brockville residents know the old lady as Sally Grant, carved out of a huge cedar log by William Holmes in 1844, two years after the courthouse was built.

William put everything into his creation. Hour after hour he toiled, tenderly chiselling his lady to life.

He was a small man, quiet and unassuming. The mayor, on the other hand, was huge and given to teasing.

He'd ask William how his "baby" was coming along, and laugh at the little carver's paternal dedication to his project.

It was a big day when the ordinary log completed its metamorphosis into a beautiful maiden with flowing robes. When she was elevated by townsfolk to the highest peak of the courthouse, the mayor was still harping at poor William.

“What are you going to call her?” he hollered.

William thought for a second. A smile came over his face (or so the story goes).

“Sally Grant!” he shouted back.

The major’s face dropped. Sally Grant was his wife’s name.

“It just goes to show you, says curator Janice. “Little people can have sharp tongues.”

William got back at the mayor and also immortalized his beloved statue.

And so, Janice says, Sally Grant led an uneventful life watching over the then-town for 116 years.

But, like the townsfolk below, she aged. She had been painted to look like she was made of stone. But she was only a wooden statue, and she began, most embarrassingly, to do the unspeakable. She began to rot.

Not taking her feelings into consideration, a more modern generation was less than faithful. They decided to get rid of her in favour of a younger woman. It was 1956.

Poor old Sally was dumped unceremoniously into an abandoned garage. There she lay, forgotten, growing more and more brittle, while children played on her and dampness chilled her, for six long years.

But, says Janice, Sally’s fate was about to take a turn for the better. Westport’s reeve at the time, Orville Forrester, heard about the old lady’s predicament and set out to rescue her from an inelegant end.

He thought she would be a gracious addition to Westport’s Rideau District Museum. And so, with great pomp and fanfare, Sally Grant was warmly welcomed into a village made up of enough retirees to know only too well the great value of age.

But there was a problem. Sally was too tall for the former blacksmith’s shop. Gallant to the end, Reeve Forrester solved the dilemma. He took his chainsaw and gave the lady new dimensions. Janice says he cut three feet off the bottom of Sally Grant’s skirt.

It wasn’t the end of Sally’s injuries. She had already lost some of her limbs; her paint was chipped and peeled. When her new friends tried to piece her back together with a welded metal strip, she caught on fire.

There’s a happy ending to Sally’s story. Her days of hardship are over. Rejuvenated with a new base and a head filled with plaster through intensive work by the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa, Sally seems to smile at the many local visitors and tourists who come to see her each summer. Part of the museum’s upper floor has been removed to accommodate her.

“She’s feeling much better now,” Janice says.