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Bridging the past

Ancient art of dry stone construction gives Russell Twp. unique park attraction

By **TOM VAN DUSEN**

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RUSSELL -- What's believed to be Canada's first "dry stone" bridge in a public park is slowly taking shape here after spanning some early criticism.

A few residents couldn't see the point of a "bridge to nowhere" sitting in MacDougall Park, crossing a swale which is almost always dry.

But Scott Cluett, one of the arched bridge builders and member of the Russell and District Horticultural Society, which is behind the \$50,000 project, said the structure will also serve as a memorial to the society's 90th anniversary. A plaque to that effect is now being readied.

In addition, Cluett noted the 40-ft. long bridge will replace a wooden one which stood for years in about the same location in the Craig St. park maintained by the society.

The gardening and natural beautification group came up with the bridge concept after public opposition bulldozed a former proposal for a gazebo in the park.

Managing the project, Cluett is among several bridge builders -- including one from the U.K. -- working under the direction of John Shaw-Rimmington of the Dry Stone Wall Association of Canada. Like the others, he's actually paying for the privilege -- \$600 for one week, \$1,000 for two.

This will be the third dry-stone construction course Cluett has taken from Shaw-Rimmington, one of the country's leading promoters of a centuries-old technique common in Europe which doesn't use mortar to hold the stones in place. Rather, it relies on physics through careful placement, stone shapes, weight, and gravity.

A confessed "computer geek" by profession, Cluett said the stone work gets him refreshingly far away from his day job. He hopes to use his training to build other dry stone walls around Russell, including on his own property.

For the current project, he built the wooden removable form to guide the arch and is jointly making and installing iron railings, a safety requirement imposed by Russell Twp.

Placed one by one according to shape and size and filled in with smaller pieces, the stones are a combination of round granite from nearby farm fields and flatter, more chisel-friendly limestone brought in from Madoc.

LOCAL HELP

Local resident Hugh Latimer delivered a load to the site, both because he wanted to "get rid of them" and for the pleasure of knowing his field stones would be incorporated into the bridge.

"We never have too many stones," Cluett noted, admitting the project might appear "daft" to some.

As he described at an information session, Shaw-Rimmington and various teams have built several stone structures around Ontario and in other parts of Canada, everything from ornate walls to small buildings.

However, because of liability concerns, he's had difficulty getting clearance to undertake bridges in public places.

In the case of the MacDougall bridge, the township funded a geo-technical survey and engineering approval, said Coun. J.P. St. Pierre.

"Russell gets it," Shaw-Rimmington declared.

A man who speaks of stones as if they were living things and who wants no machinery on site except for the truck that drops off the raw material, Shaw-Rimmington is delighted one of his creations will be in a high-profile public location for all to enjoy.