

Casa Loma's Fate

One of the city's great landmarks

By Trelawny Howell

For the better part of a century, Torontonians have been blessed with an absolutely irreplaceable treasure. And through most of that time we have ignored it, abused it, defiled it and turned one of Toronto's greatest landmarks into a monumental embarrassment.

If you've visited Casa Loma lately, you'll know what I mean. But generally, Toronto residents tend not to spend time at the city's third most popular tourist destination. If they were aware of what's been going on at what once was Toronto's most romantic, glamorous landmark, I suspect there would be thousands beating on Mayor David Miller's door to take his electoral broom and sweep the castle clean.

I must confess that I could be perceived as having a vested interest in the fate of Casa Loma. I am the great-grandniece of Sir Henry Pellatt, the visionary Toronto businessman and First World War legend who built his amazing residence between 1911 and 1914. The castle was just one in a long list of over-the-top accomplishments for the Kingston-born wunderkind, known at that time as one of the 25 men who were the nation's most spectacular financiers.

Henry Pellatt joined his father's stock brokerage at just 17 years of age and a year later signed on with the Queen's Own Rifles, which he later commanded and formed into a regiment of 750 men. Always a visionary, he invested heavily in electric power generation and the westward trek of thousands of newly arrived immigrants. His creation of the Toronto Electric Light Company and his involvement with the Northwest Land Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway made Pellatt a fabulously wealthy man. When he had the first-ever Canadian hydro-electric generating station built at Niagara Falls, he was knighted by King Edward VII for his innovation in 1905.

All of this fascinating history is available, you would think, to anyone willing to plunk down \$12.50 for admission to Casa Loma. But once inside, any visitor who is aware of Casa Loma's original magnificence will be astonished by its current state of affairs.

Sir Henry and his wife, Lady Mary (Dodgson) Pellatt, moved into the uncompleted castle in 1914, just prior to the start of the First World War. Less than 10 years later Sir Henry would be forced into bankruptcy, his beloved wife died of a heart attack and his castle seized by the City of Toronto for hugely inflated – and unpaid – back taxes. During the depression the city increased Sir Henry's taxes from \$400 to \$12,000 annually, effectively forcing him out of his castle. In 1924 his \$1,500,000 worth of fine paintings and furnishings was auctioned off. Sale



proceeds amounted to \$250,000. -- roughly what it cost Sir Henry annually to maintain his castle.

Today the City of Toronto owns the castle and for the past 68 years, has deeded exclusive use and the revenues of this public treasure since 1937 to the Kiwanis Club. Many people believe, as I do, that the Kiwanis Club has failed to properly utilize and to promote Casa Loma to anywhere near its potential as a community resource treasure and cultural centre. To people all over the world, Toronto is known as "the City with the Castle".

A quick tour of the Castle tells it all. A Druxy's Deli in the basement where a five-star restaurant would be more fitting, considering the castle's kitchen oven was built large enough to roast a whole ox. Display cases block the view of what was once the country's largest private wine cellar. A Gift Shop sells memorabilia to tourists. Pieces of period furniture here and

there are long overdue for cleaning or disposal. Tucked away on the third floor, tribute rooms lack recognition to Colonel Pellatt's revered Queen's Own Rifles.

There is a display room exclusively dedicated to the promotion of – guess who? – the good old Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma, the same folks who claim they rescued a white elephant from being demolished by the City and transformed it into a castle.

In fact, Casa Loma was spared from the City's even considering demolishing it because it was impossible to destroy the magnificent castle without dynamiting the neighborhood. The castle was built to house Sir Henry's 750-man regiment -- a military facility built on 45-foot-deep foundations, with four feet of steel-reinforced concrete between the floors.

Lacking are displays of the newspaper articles or other means of providing a collection of the complete historical accounts of Casa Loma and Sir Henry's great achievements. By 1901, he was the Commanding Officer rising in ranks to Major-General in 1921. In 1910 he took the 750 men of his regiment to England at his own expense, to attend army manoeuvres. Sir Henry was the honorary aide-de-camp to Earl Grey and H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught during their terms as Governors-General in Canada.

The City and Kiwanis Club do little to show Sir Henry's great visionary contributions to the city, as well as his charitable contributions as one of Canada's greatest philanthropists.

The castle could, and should, be so much more. It should be the go-to venue for elegant nights out, top international cuisine,

society weddings and functions honoring visiting dignitaries. Toronto's Casa Loma could proudly showcase the city's history, arts and culture.

The City of Toronto is committed to, and currently involved in, the expenditure of \$20 million throughout this decade, for the restoration of the castle. This while the Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma takes in about \$5 million annually, they donate surprisingly, very little of that amount to their charity. The city is losing millions in revenue, by only collecting license fees and (highly undervalued) taxes of approximately \$78,000 a year. Casa Loma and the stables, comprising two blocks of land over six acres, is assessed at \$20 million.

The City receives only 7 per cent of the castle's functions/license fees and a third of the tourist entrance fees, in its so-called partnership with the Kiwanis Club. This agreement has continued without City Council contesting it or opening the options to a democratic lease tender process. The Kiwanis' lease continues, for ongoing five-year terms with five-year options. The current lease option ends in September, 2006.

The Garden Club of Toronto has invested about \$1.5 million into restoring the gardens of Casa Loma. Also, interior design firms donated their talents to refurbish most of the interiors, walls, and window coverings inside.

What are the City's plans for Casa Loma? Will they continue to let the Kiwanis Club operate it? The city granted Casa Loma \$55,000 last year.

What will be the fate of Canada's unique Castle?

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