

This copy is for your personal non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies of Toronto Star content for distribution to colleagues, clients or customers, or inquire about permissions/licensing, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com

ONCE UPON A CITY

Once Upon a City: From foxhunts to foxholes

By [Janice Bradbeer](#) Special to the Star

▲ Fri., Aug. 26, 2016 | ⌚ 5 min. read

Joseph Kilgour loved riding his beloved prized hunter Twilight over the rolling meadows and wooded hillsides of his 154-hectare property in the town of Leaside.

Kilgour and his wife, Alice Margaret Grand Kilgour, were part of the wealthy elite who owned sizable Don River lots on the edge of Toronto around the turn of the 20th century. Sunnybrook Farm was one of Bayview's first country estates south of Lawrence Ave., stretching from Bayview and Blythwood and across to Leslie St.

The Kilgours purchased the farmland in 1909 from the Burke family. The Toronto Daily Star described it in 1925 as "one of the best known farms in the suburbs of Toronto."

Maj. Kilgour and his older brother Robert founded Kilgour Brothers in 1874, which grew into the Canada Paper Company Ltd. It made them millionaires. But the gentleman farmer was also passionate about horses, nature and agriculture and was regarded as one of the top horsemen in North America.

Thanks to the generosity of Alice Kilgour, Sunnybrook Park is available for today's visitors to enjoy. The public park at the corner of Eglinton Ave. and Leslie St. sits pinned in the centre of a green ribbon of trails that snakes 12 kilometres, from the manicured Edwards Gardens in the north to the rustic Warden Woods in the south; Wilket Creek Park and Serena Gundy Park surround Sunnybrook.

The Kilgours regularly hosted fox hunts on their property and maintained an outstanding stable of hunters, as well as raising dairy cattle and draft horses. The ornate stone-gated entry led to the magnificent English-style country mansion, York Lodge, which adjoined the farm. In the northwest corner of the farm was one of the first indoor riding arenas in Canada.

The Kilgours had no children to inherit their property. When Joseph died of heart failure in his early 70s, while vacationing in Florida in 1925, Alice chose to honour her nature-loving husband's legacy. In 1928 she donated a 71-hectare parcel of Sunnybrook Farm to the city of Toronto. At the time, the property and buildings were said to be valued at \$350,000. Included in her gift was the riding school, where 60 thoroughbred hunters were exercised during the winter.

On Sept. 14, 1928, then Toronto mayor Sam McBride declared the park open. Parks commissioner Charles Chambers told the Star the natural beauty of the park would be developed to be of the greatest use to the citizens.

With consent of the heirs, the remaining land — Bayview Ave. marked the western boundary — was transferred in 1944 to the federal government as a hospital site for Canadian veterans. The Burke Ravine and the property's eastern section remained as parkland.

On Sept. 26, 1946, the first wounded veterans arrived at Sunnybrook Military Hospital from the Christie St. Hospital.

"It was considered very special to be going to Sunnybrook. It was the most modern of its kind," Sunnybrook spokesperson Cynthia Martin told the Star in 1988. Patients could even have a phone wheeled to their beds, she added.

Pt. Raymond Frank Scott of Toronto's Royal Regiment was the first patient through the receiving door that day. Scott, 25, had survived Dieppe and lost his right eye in Normandy. He was expected to be released from the hospital but Scott told the Star he

was concerned about finding another job to support his young family.

The first patients at Sunnybrook lived in the D-wing named Lancaster, after the bomber aircraft that flew during the Second World War.

The veterans centre was officially opened in June 1948 by Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. Today, the centre is housed in the Kilgour Wing (K-wing), which partners with Veterans Affairs Canada. About 500 veterans of the Second World War and Korean War reside there.

Sunnybrook Military Hospital redirected its focus to emergency care in 1966 and was renamed Sunnybrook Hospital. It has evolved into the 1,300-bed Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, the largest trauma centre in Canada and one of two major trauma centres in Toronto. It serves as a teaching hospital for the University of Toronto's faculty of medicine.

Behind the hospital, a spread of gardens and walkways leads visitors into the past and to an era of stately country mansions built for society's *crème de la crème*. The Estates of Sunnybrook comprise the Georgian-style McLean House, which was built on land purchased in 1928 for James Stanley McLean, then president of Canada Packers. Three years later the Vaughan Estate was constructed in a simple Elizabethan style for John James Vaughan, vice-president of the T. Eaton Co.

A portion of funds from events held at the Estates of Sunnybrook, including corporate events and weddings, generates revenue for medical research at the hospital.

On June 12, 1969, Sunnybrook Park was transferred from the city of Toronto to Metro Parks. A July 1988 Star article described Sunnybrook Park as "one of those rare places where you can leave the city behind without actually leaving it."

The Kilgours' farm remains at the centre of the country park that sits in the city. The preserved barns serve as Sunnybrook Stables' English riding school. Toronto police stabled their mounted unit there until moving to the horse pavilion at Exhibition Place in 2005. The Kilgour fields are used for sports and recreation, including rugby, cricket and soccer games.

In 1930, the Toronto Field Naturalists opened Canada's first urban wilderness trail in Sunnybrook. The Thomas H. Thomson Nature Trail was established in 1994 — a favourite walk for the former chairman of Suncor.

"You find yourself a trail and take a walk in the forest and escape the city," park foreman Mark Boddington told the Star in 1988.

A huge off-leash dog-walking area is accessed just off Leslie St.

Following the West Don River upstream will take the curious to Glendon Forest, which is owned by York University. It's one of the top spots to see birds, according to *Birds of Toronto*, part of the city's Biodiversity Booklet series.

It names Glendon Forest as an environmentally significant area, with its forest habitat dominated by sugar maple, eastern white pine, American beech and eastern hemlock trees. The wetland provides critical habitat for snapping turtles, great blue herons and red-winged blackbirds.

Hikers can also stroll around the scenic 34-hectare campus of Glendon College, part of York University — on the historic Wood family estate — before turning back toward Sunnybrook Park. Travelling south from Sunnybrook will take you to the Ontario Science Centre and beyond.

The original stone gates marking Sunnybrook Farm's entrance off Bayview Ave. were removed in the 1940s to make way for the veterans hospital. But another set remains at the south entrance to the farm on Sutherland Dr. The brick-and-stone gates mark the front of Toronto Rehab's Lyndhurst Centre and directly inside sits the original stucco gatehouse.

They are reminders of Alice Kilgour's 1928 gift of nature — a legacy she left for generations to enjoy.


Story idea?

Share your story suggestions at OnceUponACity@thestar.ca. To search more about this story or your story go to thestar.com/archives. To purchase or browse more photos go to starstore.ca/collections/once-upon-a-city, or visit us on Facebook at facebook.com/TorontoStarArchives or on Twitter: @StarHistoricPix.

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

LIFE

The bralette is back and this time blouses are optional

 Aug. 03, 2019

VANCOUVER

B.C. manhunt suspects recorded final message on phone found with bodies, family says

 Sep. 26, 2019

GTA

‘This is an unvaccinated house’: Ontario landlord files eviction notice over tenant’s vaccinated guests

Aug. 05, 2021

EXCLUSIVE

Ontario to mandate vaccines for hospital workers, give booster shots to the vulnerable, and halt further reopening

Aug. 13, 2021

More from The Star & Partners

Copyright owned or licensed by Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Reproduction or distribution of this content is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited and/or its licensors. To order copies of Toronto Star articles, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com
