

Meaford's Beautiful Joe Park:

A Place for Joe

Written by Ken Haigh Photographed by Mike Davis

Pop quiz: Can you name the first Canadian novel to sell one million copies during the author's lifetime? No? I'll give you a few hints. It was published in 1894. The author was born in the Maritimes, and, at the time of her death, she was called "Canada's most revered author." If you guessed *Anne of Green Gables*, you would be wrong.



▲ Margaret Marshall Saunders' famous novel was inspired by true events that happened in Meaford.

◀ Beautiful Joe Park near downtown Meaford celebrates animal welfare and commemorates the heart-wrenching novel about an abused dog who becomes a hero.

Need another clue? How about this: the story is based on true events which took place in Meaford, Ontario. Give up?

The novel is *Beautiful Joe* by Margaret Marshall Saunders.



▲ Police dogs are honoured with a monument.



▲ Heart-breaking sensitivity has been crafted into the face of Beautiful Joe.

◀ A bronze statue depicting Beautiful Joe greets visitors to the park.



▲ Pavilion for personal memorials to beloved animals. "Our Best Friend," "Forever in My Heart," and "Herding Angels" are just some of the declarations on the individual plaques.

◀ The provincial plaque over the grave of the real Joe.

In the summer of 1892, Margaret Saunders, a school teacher from Halifax, Nova Scotia, was vacationing in Meaford, a small port on Georgian Bay. She was staying with the Moore family, who were soon to become *her* family, since her brother, Jack, was engaged to William

Moore's daughter, Louise. The Moores owned a gristmill on the Bighead River. Saunders didn't know it, but she was about to have an encounter that would shape her career.

Continued on page 42 ▶

Sign outside the park in Meaford. ▶



▲ People with disabilities can enter into a large memorial to special service dogs, and get close to monuments in raised beds.

Saunders had dreams of becoming a writer. She had written one book already, an unsuccessful and rather conventional romance. Local legend has it that, while she was in Meaford, she went for long walks, hoping to find inspiration for a new writing project. Her companion on these walks was the Moores' little dog, Beautiful Joe. Joe was, in point of fact, not beautiful at all. He was a mutt, mostly terrier. Mr. Moore had rescued him from an abusive owner, who had beaten the little dog repeatedly and who, in a fit of drunken rage, had mutilated the dog by chopping off his

ears and tail. As with most abused animals, Joe was a timid creature, and he would hide on a nest of old flour sacks under Mr. Moores counter whenever a stranger entered the mill. But he seemed to have taken a shine to Miss Saunders, and he accompanied her everywhere. One might even say he became her muse.

When Saunders returned to Nova Scotia, she heard of a writing contest, sponsored by the American Humane Education Society. Contestants were asked to write a novel, modelled after Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, which would encourage

kindness to animals. She decided to enter. Her novel won the contest and became an international bestseller. That novel, of course, was the story of Beautiful Joe.

Saunders lets Joe tell his own story, beginning with his cruel and unhappy early years and his subsequent rescue by Mr. Moore (called Mr. Morris in the novel). The setting is shifted to Fairport, Maine, because the contest rules stipulated that the story must have an American setting. Saunders later admitted that the family she wrote about was really her own. Over the course of the book, Joe is brought back to health,

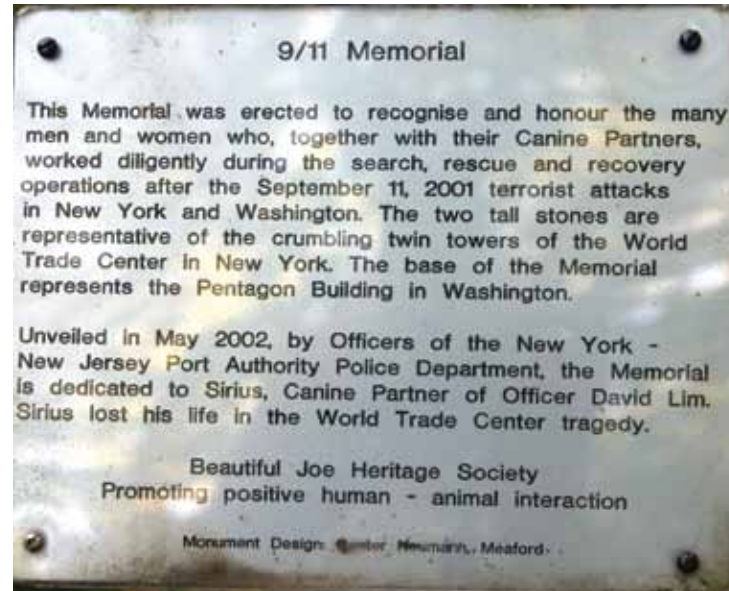
and he rewards the Morris family's kindness by warning them of a burglar in the house. His action also saves their lives, since the burglar (who was his ex-master) intended to set the house ablaze to cover his crime.

Local interest in *Beautiful Joe* was revived in 1963 when Joe's grave marker was discovered near the banks of the Bighead River just below the old Moore house. The wooded property along the river, which had once belonged to the Moore family, became Beautiful Joe Park, and a provincial plaque

Continued on page 44 ►



▲ The story behind the police dogs monument.



▲ The story behind the 9/11 memorial.

For the love of animal companions

was erected over the grave to commemorate Margaret Saunders and Beautiful Joe.

Today, the park is cared for by a group of volunteers called the Beautiful Joe Heritage Society, (BJHS) which has transformed the

park into a symbol of the bond between humans and their canine companions.

There is a bronze statue of Beautiful Joe at the entrance to the park, and scattered throughout the park are a number of monuments to

working dogs. There is a memorial to the search-and-rescue dogs that died when the Twin Towers collapsed in New York City on September 11, 2001. There are also monuments in the park to police dogs and to service

dogs that assist people with disabilities. The BJHS has created a pavilion in the park where grieving pet owners can erect personal memorials to their own beloved animals.

Evelyn Dean, chair of the BJHS, spoke about the society's current projects. A new monument to Margaret Saunders, designed by Meaford artist Gunter Neumann, was unveiled in the park on October 3, and the society has also received approval from Meaford town council for an off-leash dog park. Future improvements to Beautiful Joe Park include a footbridge, marked trails, picnic tables and wheelchair-accessible washrooms. The project she is most excited about though is *Beautiful Joe: The Play*.

"We commissioned a play," says Dean, "from playwright Michael O'Brien, to be based on the novel. It premiered at SpringWorks in Stratford in May 2012 and was voted 'Best New Play' by the audience. We are staging a full production at the Meaford Opera House in the spring of 2014, and we are hoping to take it province-wide after that. We know people will love it. There wasn't a dry eye in the house at Stratford, and I mean that in a good way. It's a heartwarming story. We hope the play will lead to greater

The memorial to search and rescue dogs who worked at the 9/11 attack sites. The cross is made of iron from the Twin Towers. ▶

things—an annual Beautiful Joe Festival, perhaps."

Margaret Saunders wrote 25 books in her career, most of them about animals, but she never repeated the success of *Beautiful Joe*. That book went on to sell millions of copies around the world, was translated into more than a dozen languages, earned her an honorary degree from Acadia University and a C.B.E. from King George V, and never went out of print. Saunders's message about animal welfare inspired millions of people. As *Beautiful Joe* says at the end of his own story, "[B]e kind to dumb animals not only because you will lose nothing by it, but because you ought to; for they were placed on earth by the same Kind Hand that made all living creatures." **NEV**

Ken Haigh, author of Under the Holy Lake: A Memoir of Eastern Bhutan, is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His last feature was "On the Trail of Tom Thomson," Spring 2013.

Beautiful Joe Heritage Society:
<http://beautifuljoe.org/>

