

Town of Ajax History - *In the Beginning*

On September 10, 1939, Canada declared war on Germany. On that day, the present site of the Town of Ajax was peaceful rolling farmland nestled on the edge of Lake Ontario in Pickering Township.

It had been to this area, 150 years prior, that the first white settlers had arrived to start their new life in a new land.

All this was to change very quickly. In 1941, this farmland became the site of Defence Industries Limited (D.I.L.), Pickering Works. Thus began a vast shell filling plant which before 1945 had: filled 40 million shells; employed over 9,000 people at peak production; boasted of its own water and sewage treatment plants; a school population of over 600; 30 miles of railroad and 30 miles of roads. The entire D.I.L. plant site included some 2,985 acres. People came from all over Canada to work at D.I.L.

This enormous burgeoning war plant community needed a name. The name was supplied by the first significant British naval victory of World War II. From December 13 to December 19, 1939, a flotilla of British warships - HMS Ajax, HMS Exeter and HMS Achilles - commanded by Commodore Henry H. Harwood - engaged and routed the powerful German pocket battleship Graf Spee at the Battle of the River Plate, near the Uruguayan port of Montevideo in South America. The name Ajax and the names of her sister ships became worldwide symbols of courage and determination. Ajax was chosen, therefore, as the name of this war-born community.

In 1945, World War II ended, but not Ajax. As the young veterans returned home, accommodation was required for thousands of additional university students. Consequently, the University of Toronto leased much of the D.I.L. plant to house the new flood of engineering students. War machines were moved out and the buildings were converted to classrooms and laboratories. The residences that had housed war workers now housed university students. All the facilities of the University of Toronto were duplicated at Ajax. By 1949, the last year of the University of Toronto, Ajax Division, some 7,000 engineering students had received their basic training here.

But what was to become of Ajax? Many people who worked or lived in Ajax during D.I.L. or university days wanted to remain here. Due largely to the vision of George W. Finley of Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Ajax became a planned modern community using the war time base for its post-war foundation. Post-war Ajax began its growth.

Industry and people came from everywhere to take advantage of the many assets of Ajax - its schools, its churches, its hospital, its steam plant, its comprehensive planning, its geography - close to Toronto but setting a separate pace - and its friendly, industrious, involved citizens.