

PAUL WILSON: History on the hill rolls on — goodbye CHCH, hello Television City

Paul Wilson

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Money heads for the high ground, and in Hamilton that was the place they used to call Nob Hill.

There, at Jackson and Caroline, prominent businessman Tristram Bickle built a mansion made of stone in 1850.

He could not have imagined the enterprise that would move into his house a century later. Something wondrous, where moving pictures travel invisibly through the air. Television was on no one's radar in Bickle's day.

CHCH has made its magic there since 1954. The glory days lasted for decades.

But the Internet changes everything. Newspapers know that, and so does TV. Local stations like CHCH have been hit especially hard. Ad dollars are diminished, budgets slashed.

CHCH needs less space now, and more money. So they've sold the 166-year-old house, plus the silver 1980s Spaceship 11 behind it. It's a \$7-million deal. More on that coming up, right after this Heritage Minute.

Bickle, who called his house Pinehurst, liked the location so much that he had a fine home built for his son right across the street. Today there are highrises all around, but both houses survive and are in fine repair.

Bickle Sr. died in 1875. Everything went to his son, who promptly sold his father's house to Bishop Thomas Brock Fuller. The bishop only got to enjoy the place for eight years, but his widow stayed on.

In 1892, William Southam bought Pinehurst. He owned The Spectator and his empire eventually included big-city papers across the country. While he plotted new acquisitions, he walked. Even though he had a Rolls-Royce in the drive, he walked to Dundurn Castle and beyond nearly every day. He died at home in 1932, age 88.

And by the mid-'50s, the CHCH call letters were over that fine front door. At first, The Spectator had a piece of the action, along with the companies that owned CHML and CKOC.

In the early days, TV 11 operated not just from Pinehurst, but from a collection of buildings in the neighbourhood. The newsroom, for instance, was in a grand old home at 67 Caroline South, where the Bentley Place condo tower is today.

In 1983, the station tacked a 50,000-square-foot steel-clad look-of-tomorrow addition to the back of Pinehurst to bring everything to one address. CHCH was flying.

Decades passed, ownership changed, revenues declined, familiar faces disappeared.

An outfit called Channel Zero is the owner today. Last December a subsidiary, formed for the sole purpose of employing CHCH's workers, declared bankruptcy. It then terminated about 170 employees without having to pay them severance as set out in the collective agreement. A new company was then formed to hire some of them back.

And this spring Channel Zero put the CHCH property up for sale. When the deal closes next week, a company called Television City Inc. takes over. The principals are Aaron Collina of Hamilton's Movengo Corp., and Brad Lamb, a



The new CHCH newsroom in September, 1983. At the desk, three of the station's biggest personalities - from left, Dick Beddoes, Dan McLean, Connie Smith.



CHCH, Channel 11, was owned in the early days by the companies that ran The Spectator, CHML and CKOC.



The stone mansion at Jackson and Caroline has been the CHCH headquarters since the station went on the air in 1954.



Toronto condo developer whose projects include the new 47-storey Theatre Park, next door to the Royal Alexandra on King West.

Collina says he made the offer on the CHCH property on his first walk through. The Pinehurst portion is protected under the Ontario Heritage Act and that's fine with him.

"I love that house."

As for Spaceship 11, he says, "I see something like a Google headquarters there."

Or maybe a condo, he says, built right on top of it.

But CHCH will rent half the Spaceship for the next two-and-a-half years, and a tenant is being sought for the remaining space.

Collina and company are doing other things in the core. They've purchased the London Tap House building at Main and John. On Main near Walnut, they're planning an eight-storey office tower.

Collina says he'd like to build CHCH a new space that would keep the station downtown.

Nothing firmed up yet, but don't touch that dial.

The house at 163 Jackson Street West, as it looked in 1892 when William Southam moved in. It was known then as Pinehurst.



Liz West and Mark Habscher on Square Off show at the Humble and Fred Studio in Etobicoke after the two lost their jobs at CHCH.

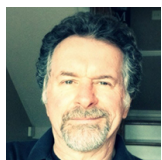


CHCH had been operating out of several buildings in the neighbourhood, but in 1983 opened a shiny silver addition that some called Spaceship 11.

Paul Wilson's column appears Tuesdays in the GO section.

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