

Creek in my sewer pipe

No hand-biting monsters but lots of mud and the odd snail shell

By Saul Chernos

I've never thought of myself as the owner of a piece of riverfront property, but it turns out I am.

For 20 years I've been mystified by the water flowing underneath my house in Corktown and the way it bubbles up through my basement drain during storms on its way to heaven knows where.

Usually the water sits quietly, in a kind of meditative way. But sometimes during a heavy downburst it makes a strong gurgling sound as the rising water pushes a few leaves up out of the pipe onto my basement floor.

My river has never flooded, but occasionally I've stuck a gloved hand into the darkness to see what's there.

No hand-biting monsters, but lots of mud, a few rotted twigs and the odd snail shell.

Well, thanks to a recent Lost Rivers Walk in my neighbourhood, I realize I've been reaching into Taddle Creek. Or, rather, what's left of it.

I'm living over one of the ancient creeks that criss-crossed the city until we paved paradise. Want a picture of what those watersheds looked like? Visit the ravines near Moore Park or the Rouge River.

While still visible in spots, dozens of creeks and tributaries flowing northwest-to-southeast have mostly been infilled by development and swallowed up in the vast network of municipal sewers built over the past century and a half.

A few weeks back I invited Lost Rivers' Helen Mills over to peer down my pipe. She says the evidence below, coupled with mapping of the old creeks, suggests it passed, if not directly underneath, then certainly no more than a few yards away.

She tells me my water level is high compared to that in many other basement drains, and we discuss how the bits of Mother Nature that pass through with the water add resonance to the message it carries. Indeed, my household river has become a fixture in my consciousness, an ever-present reminder that there is an upstream and a downstream.

Taddle Creek begins with a raindrop and is visible near its source in a rather large pond in Wychwood Park. Fed in part by several small springs, it quickly ducks underground, alternately guided and dispersed by Toronto's frenetic sewers in its 6-kilometre journey southeast to the harbour just west of the mouth of the Don.

While it's romantic to live over a waterway, one has to remember it's a filthy one. So fail to stoop-and-scoop on Davenport Road, spray pesticides in the Annex or toss cigarette butts or chewing gum outside the Eaton Centre and you're messing with my river.

Michael D'Andrea, director of water infrastructure management at City Hall, adds oil and grease residues and auto exhaust particles to my list of contaminants. The fact that the pipes combine stormwater runoff with raw sewage makes matters worse. During heavy rainfalls, this ugly mixture overflows into our larger water bodies.

Seven years ago, the city introduced the Wet Weather Flow Master Plan in a bid to bring this spillage to an end and mitigate the kind of pollution that saw the International Joint Commission list Toronto's waterfront as one of 43 areas of concern in the Great Lakes basin in 1987.

D'Andrea says separating storm and sanitary sewers wouldn't adequately address the problem, because both are polluted and need treatment at the end of the pipe. Instead, the Master Plan takes a watershed-based approach, with a basket of measures ranging from sewer fixes across the city to engineered storage tunnels and stormwater ponds closer to Lake Ontario.

The Master Plan also phases in mandatory rooftop downspout disconnection, and the city recently introduced green building and green roof policies.

Meanwhile, D'Andrea urges us to do our part as citizens. Rooftop gardens, rainwater harvesting and permeable driveway materials can help rainwater infiltrate the ground close to where it falls, rather than letting it flow onto roads and sidewalks where it picks up pollutants.

For all the perils our lost rivers face as they meander through our neighbourhoods, there's hope.

Taddle Creek passes underneath Philosopher's Walk, behind the Royal Ontario Museum. Look for markers there, or find your own favourite lost river and contemplate ways to restore some dignity to our once majestic landscape.

news@nowtoronto.com

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NOW | October 7-14, 2010 | VOL 30 NO 6