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History a family affair says local genealogist

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Special

One thing you can say about Brian Gilchrist is that as a genealogist, he makes a lousy film buff.

How else to explain his claim that Willem Dafoe (*Platoon*) portrayed Jesus Christ in the Canadian film, *Jesus Of Montreal*?

Throw in his muddled confusion over his own age (he finally decided he was 38) and the small-but-devoted group of attendees at the second of Heritage Mississauga's three-part lecture series could be excused for entertaining a doubt or two at the bear-like professor's accuracy.

Luckily, though, it seemed to be only modern facts that the historian and genealogist who has been described as the Perry Mason of genealogy has a tendency to muck up.

Look at the facts. Even as a relative child in the field of ancients, Gilchrist has made quite a history for himself, starting with his reputation as the youngest certified genealogist (he started at age 10) and ending with his easy-going humor and former Toronto Star columns.

You might say it's a talent he's inherited. Gilchrist's kin are known for their history-making bent.

Take, for example, the old record-gathering McClure, a member of the numerically largest family to have ever lived in Peel and part of Gilchrist's family tree, who got in a disastrous fight with William Perkins Bull, another record-gatherer and a member of the region's wealthiest family.

"WPB burnt all of our files," said Gilchrist of the famed fight. "All the other records in the area have notations to see the McClure file, see the McClure file. And there is no damned McClure file, because it all went up in smoke."

Perhaps in an effort to make karmic amends, Gilchrist himself was instrumental in one of the areas most monumental feats of record-gathering — the Peel Archives.

"One of the things I'm very proud of is that I was one of the founders of the Peel Archives, which is now used as a model across north America for regional archives," said Gilchrist.

Beginning his lecture by talking about his motivation for studying genealogy — patriotism, family pride, mystery, eugenics and love of history all factor in — Gilchrist soon moved on to discuss the area's first settlers in the Port Credit area, circa 1815.

Even the modern bogeyman of multiculturalism reared its head as the discussion reached the late 1940s and '50s and the area's first visibly immigrant settlers.

"Now Peel is really a melting pot, of course, and I say melting pot and not mosaic," said Gilchrist. "I'm not a multiculturalist, that's just me. I think we should all be Canadian. Hyphens at home, Canadians in public, that's my advice."

Still, for all the playful humor, the presentation held at the Mississauga Civic Centre Auditorium also managed to deliver at least one good old-fashioned moral; the idea that family and roots really do matter, even in these rootless times.

"Genealogy is really the basis of all history because it's the study of the family," said Gilchrist. "Family are the basis of community, communities become regions and regions become nation states," said Gilchrist. "I think one of the greatest gifts you can give your family is your life story."

The final lecture in the series was held Oct. 18 and featured Dale Ward of the Ontario Genealogical Society. The topic was Cemetery Heritage: A Family Affair.