



# State of the Clans 2025

*Despite the challenges facing contemporary clans, hope and help are on the way.  
Chris Muise tells us more...*

The township of Fergus, Ontario has a rich history of Scottish heritage, and for the last 80 years of that history, citizens turned to the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games to celebrate that heritage with gusto.

“The Fergus Scottish Festival is a humongous event in our community,” says Elizabeth Bender, executive director of the annual gathering. “It really is a flagstone event for all of Centre Wellington, which is our larger municipality. Fergus is a Scottish town, and the mission of the Fergus Scottish Festival is to honour the athletic, musical, and storytelling heritage of Upper Canada and Scottish communities just like ours.”

Founded by area resident Alex Robertson in 1946, the festival began as a humble one-day event, but over eight decades has grown to a three-day happening that hosts upwards of 25,000 attendees.

Having missed the chance to celebrate their 75th annual event due to the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, Bender promises that they are pulling out all the stops for this year's August affair.

“We even have an 80th anniversary tartan that has been designed for us,” she beams.

Even with all the great music, good food and drink, feats of athleticism, and Scottish swag that will be on-site to entice, Bender expects one of the most popular spots to be the heritage village.

“Our heritage village is where we host all of our clans who attend the festival.”

David Radley, past president and cur-

rent Clan lead for the Fergus Scottish Festival, pipes in with a similar sentiment.

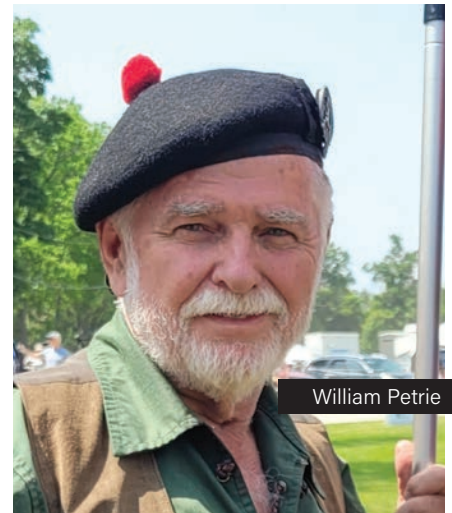
“Frankly, it's a very important part of the festival, not only to the people that host the tents, but the people that visit the tents, who are often very passionate about their Scottish roots.

“It's one of the ways that they can identify with those roots. If you've been at the festival, you'll know it can be very difficult to get around the clan area because there are so many people wanting to come and identify with their clans. We talk of the four pillars that hold up this festival; Highland dance, pipes and drums, heavy athletics, and clans. The clans is one of those four major focuses for the festival.”

**“Clans have been a part of Scottish life going back centuries, initially forming as a circumstance of geography and familial bonds.”**

“You can look at clans as being lineage-based, and that's typically how it works,” explains William Petrie, chair of Scots of Canada. “But also remember, clans are tribal organizations. If you move into an area or you marry into that area, you become part of it. It's not because of genealogy - it's because of community. You'd swear allegiance to the clan chief if there is one, but a good number of them didn't have one. When you moved into a MacGregor area, you became a MacGregor, that's it.”

Of course, as times changed, so too did



William Petrie

the function that Scottish clans performed in society. The modern concept of the Scottish clan system is more heraldry than hamlet, with an official system regulated by the Court of the Lord Lyon in Edinburgh. Historically, one needed to prove lineage to a clan in order to join.

And while Scottish culture remains very popular in North America, Petrie paints a grim portrait of the clan system as recently as 2019, which was when he stepped into a leadership role with Scots of Canada.

“I took over as chair, and I started solving problems by first finding out what the real problem was. In the case of clans and Scottish societies of Canada, membership was down to about 49 members, from a high of about 75-80 in the heyday. People were leaving, saying they don't see any value in it, that it was not doing anything. And if you don't do anything, nothing happens. If you're not out there in front of people or doing things, then you're going to reap the rewards of that, which is nothing.”

Clans have never formed in a vacuum; they exist to serve a communal need, whether it be operating as a community under a sovereign, aiding people displaced by the clearances to stay connected with their kin, or helping ex-pats feel like they have a piece of home across the Diaspora. If that purpose is lost, it can mean an existential crisis for that clan.

“I delved a little bit deeper into that, and what I discovered was that there were a lot of organizations that were initially formed because of that need for community, for helping each other,” Petrie elaborates. “For instance,



the Clan Gregor Society was the second or third clan organization that was formed in Scotland, and it was formed to actually help young Clan Gregor members - young MacGregors - because they were still being extremely impoverished and discriminated against back in the early 1800s.

“Some of those had lasted quite some time, but the reasons for them to exist in terms of helping each other faded away, and as a result so did they. When they lost the reasons why their clans were formed, it poses a little bit of problem for them, since that need is not 100% there anymore.”

**“If the problem facing modern Scottish clans is a loss of purpose, the solution is easy - find a new purpose.”**

According to Petrie, it is better to change than die trying nothing, even if it means opening doors to people who might not have met the old criteria for clan membership.

“The reality is that, in Scotland, more than half of the population are not in clans or families,” says Petrie, noting the global pro-

liferation of people around the world. “That is the bottom line; the number one names in Scotland are Smith and Brown.

“That fell into part of what the problem was; we didn't have a large reservoir of people to draw from, in terms of volunteers, or providing a good revenue base. The solution was to open up what we call individual memberships.

“There are two types of membership with Scots of Canada: organizational memberships and individual household memberships. My insane goal is to have 40,000 households. I don't think that's impossible; as of the last census, we had 6.6 million people in Canada who are of Scottish descent, and half of them at least are not in clans or families. So, 3.3 million, that's a good pool.”

Petrie sees household memberships as the way to keep clans an active part of peoples' lives, and to achieve that goal which every long-lived cultural collective seeks to conquer - getting young people involved.

“You have to think pipeline, succession. We want people to get engaged as kids and be part of it, to be there even as they go through the part of their life where they're busy with

the career and the kids. But then they will come back and bring their kids with them.

“It is a microcosm in terms of what the criteria is for membership in Scots of Canada as an individual household; you're aligned with our organization and agree with our objective to promote Scottish culture and history, and you're Scottish by birth, descent, or by inclination.”

The simplest thing Petrie has done to revive Scots of Canada membership - which is now up to 116 clans - is just reminding people that the organization exists, and what it has to offer.

**“This is human nature; people need to belong, to feel loved and useful, and to have hope. Any cultural society has to fulfill certain portions of that...”**

“The worst thing for any clan organization is to just say you get to belong, and then not let people know what's coming or what they are going to be doing. The number one reason you're going to lose clan members is they forget about you, or they don't see value in what you are doing. That value just has to apply to that sense of belonging, to a sense of hope.”

Perhaps that is why the clan tent is such a vital pillar to the Fergus Scottish Festival, and why it is such a hit with attendees.

“It's becoming easier for a number of reasons,” shares Radley. “So many people come with idle curiosity, it's amazing how many of them get involved and engrossed with their Scottish background. I think that's where the festivals come in; at the festivals, it used to be people wanted to go to collect things. They wanted to come away with little trinkets, as if to say, ‘I've been here and I've got a badge.’ Now they want to go for experience. It's really neat to see these people who have come Saturday morning, met with their clan, went off and got themselves outfitted, and they're out there in The Parade of Clans that afternoon.

“We've now got 52 clans registered this year, which is close to our record,” Radley adds, admitting to at least one problem, but one that's nice to have. “The biggest challenge right now is finding space to get all the clans into our area this year. We need a bigger footprint.”

