

Vinyl Cafe award winner

Frank Matys

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WASHAGO - Frank Cooper's coloured lights have won him national fame. That and more than a few smiles. Strung high across Cooper's Falls Road - suspended between a former general store and a wooden building known locally as "the courthouse" - the strand of 14 bulbs winks into action come nightfall. Three hundred and sixty five days a year. "People are always telling me they like the lights," Cooper, a spry 89 year old, said this week.

Born on the second floor of the building that housed the general store, the Washago-area man first screwed the bulbs in place "some time after the war."

A cousin was extending electrical power from one side of the road to the other at his request and suggested Cooper decorate the cable with lights.

Decades later, they remain a multi-coloured beacon for motorists traveling this rural road on an inky night, a rare source of illumination in a remote area of Severn Township.

People have taken notice, among them Toronto's Tom Glover.

In a letter to CBC radio personality Stuart McLean, Glover recalled the joy of passing under the light strand while driving through Cooper's Falls en route to his family's cottage.

"It marked the beginning and the end of each trip for decades," wrote Glover, noting his father recently sold the cottage after 46 years.

After a final visit, "we started our last drive home," he said, "and there wasn't a dry eye in the van when we drove under that string of lights for the last time."

Glover did not know the identity of the person responsible for the lights, but suggested that McLean, the folksy host of the Vinyl Café, find out.

A nomination for the program's prestigious Arthur Award was in order, he suggested.

(The Arthurs recognize acts of kindness and generosity that, too often, go unnoticed.)

McLean apparently agreed, and after some old-fashioned sleuthing, reached Cooper at his home by phone on the Thanksgiving weekend.

Their conversation was broadcast across Canada.

"For heaven's sakes," an astonished Cooper told his celebrity caller. "It's amazing how the people coming up to the cottages like those lights there."

When the bulbs would burn out, "I would hear about it," he added. "You'd be surprised. Some of these people dropped off a box of bulbs."

He recalled placing a ladder in the rear of a dump truck and raising the box to replace the bad bulbs, a precarious image that had McLean chuckling.

"There's quite a bit of history with those silly lights," said Cooper.



Vinyl Cafe award winner. Frank Cooper garnered national recognition for the strand of coloured lights that he suspended above Cooper's Falls Road decades ago. The Washago-area man will be recognized during a performance of CBC's Vinyl Café Thursday in Barrie. *Frank Matys*

Silly, perhaps, but meaningful, McLean suggested.

"It's often the smallest things that echo in our minds over the years," he said.

Cooper will be acknowledged during an Oct. 27 performance of the Vinyl Café in Barrie, when McLean will ask him to stand as the most recent recipient of the Arthur Award.

Notably, Cooper is the sole person to receive two of these awards, having won his first in 2006 along with long-time friend Maurice Faloon.

They had, in McLean's words, played "the longest ongoing chess match we know about - a match that started in the 1940s, during World War II, when Frank and Moe were stationed together in Burma, and continued until Maurice passed away a few years ago."

Winning a second time, "seemed rather unnatural," Cooper said this week. "I was rather tickled that it happened to me."

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