

Cornwall Township Historical Society

Newsletter March 2017

www.cornwalltwphistorical.ca

Editor: Don McIntosh

John Lawrence McDonald: A Man for the People

He served as Cornwall Township councillor, reeve, Stormont MLA and S.D.&G warden throughout more than thirty years of public service. The late John Lawrence McDonald was born August 6, 1894 at Harrisons Corners. Even though he called himself a farmer all his adult life, it was often said of John Lawrence that he was fonder of politics than he was of the plough. A confirmed bachelor, John Lawrence's life passion was serving the public as an elected official. He must have had a little wanderlust for as a young man of only 18 years he left the family farm and headed out to burgeoning Western Canada in search of work. That calling came to an end in April 1916 when he enlisted at Winnipeg with the 190th Battalion, the Winnipeg Rifles to serve king and country in the "war to end all wars", World War One. He arrived in England in May 1917 and shortly thereafter was shipped across the Channel to Belgium. Beginning in October as part of a 100,000 Canadian fighting formation, John Lawrence took part in one of the bloodiest battles of the war, Passchendaele. With the Germans stubbornly holding the Passchendaele ridge for months, on a cold October 26 the Canadians were ordered to attack. The Canadian force captured Passchendaele but success came at a bloody cost with nearly 16,000 Canadians killed or wounded. After slogging through the horrors of Passchendaele for weeks, on November 10 John Lawrence was wounded in action suffering from shrapnel wounds to his left arm and hip. Following several months of recuperation in England, he was able to return to active duty for a short time before honourable discharge in January 1919, shortly after the November 11 Armistice.



After returning home to Canada, the West still had appeal for John Lawrence where he returned seeking work. Again, his life there was cut short after the passing of his father Duncan in 1921 and he was called home to run the family farm at Harrisons Corners. Here, he took a keen interest in the problems faced by farmers. Prior to annexation in 1957, Cornwall Township was a rural-urban divide that included an urban area of some 29 square miles which are now part of the City of Cornwall. For a number of years councillors from the urban area dominated the township's activities. Disillusioned by the way rural concerns were being ignored, in 1931 he entered municipal politics as councillor and was re-elected in 1932. In the 1933 election John Lawrence led a coalition of rural farm candidates hoping to effect change that would favour local farmers' interests. In that year's municipal election John Lawrence successfully ran for the reeveship of Cornwall Township beating incumbent reeve and prominent business man Fred Lefebvre. Additionally, three of the other coalition candidates were successful resulting in a strong rural based council. It was at this juncture that the political career of John Lawrence McDonald began to flourish.

Above, picture of John Lawrence with WWI medals hangs at the Sandtown Advent Christian Church at Lost Villages Museum



During this era municipal elections were held yearly and John Lawrence went on to win the next nine elections for the reeve's position through to the year 1943. Though some were by acclimation, many were hard fought close battles where he faced both labour and urban interest candidates. In fact, the 1934 election gave him a mere 4 vote margin over his opponent John Lafave. With the results contested by Lafave, County Judge Francis Costello ordered a new election. This time, with a boost from additional rural residents who turned out to vote in a December blizzard, John Lawrence was given a handy 153 vote margin for a clear victory over his challenger.

SDG Warden 1941

A Moral Victory Won. John Lawrence was not immune from the rough and tumble of political life. He found out that sometimes political opponents can be malicious and it takes more than a thick skin to survive. In 1940, a civil suit was brought against him by a former opponent who ran twice unsuccessfully in the race for the reeve's chair. Plaintiff Joseph Bourdon and his supporter J.A. Brisson (the former two time candidate for reeve) alleged that John Lawrence wrongfully received monies from the municipality. Justice Urquhart of the Ontario Supreme Court found that the allegation was without merit and dismissed all claims that John Lawrence wrongfully received \$1,909 to cover his expenses between 1934 and 1939. Justice Urquhart pointed out that a bylaw from 1912 authorizes the payment to councillors of \$3.00 per meeting as well as expenses incurred while on township business. John Lawrence claimed expenses for mileage while on township business which he estimated at close to 40,000 miles over the past six years and no claim for his time. As well as completely vindicating John Lawrence, Judge Urquhart also awarded him costs.

His Life in Provincial Politics. 1941 was a rewarding year for John Lawrence. That year he was the unanimous choice for S.D. &G warden in addition to being head of Stormont Cheese Producers' Association, vice president of the Plowmen's Association, a director of the Stormont Glengarry Crop Improvement Association and executive member of the Ontario Agriculture Association. And to add to this, he had begun to set his sights on higher political ambitions: Member of Legislative Assembly of Ontario. On July 17, 1943 at the Finch Community Hall John Lawrence was the unanimous choice to lead the Progressive Conservatives in the upcoming provincial election. The customary vote by ballot was unnecessary after the three other nominees withdrew their names from the ballot. He was said to be the most able man to return the Stormont seat to the PC Party. Warning delegates to be organized, he turned to his supporters and said "No elections are easy. Easy elections are usually lost. Hard fought elections are the ones that provide the biggest majority."

Fergus Brownridge had captured the seat for the Liberals in the previous two elections but when the 1943 election was called he chose to withdraw his name from the nomination giving the nod to Liberal nominee Fred Lefebvre, an archrival of John Lawrence from a previous race for reeveship. He pulled off a decisive victory over Lefebvre enabling George Drew to become premier and form a Progressive Conservative minority government. The seat was won and lost in a see-saw battle from here on. In March 1945 Drew called a snap election and John Lawrence fell by only a slim margin to Liberal rival William Murray. Coincidentally, Murray, like John Lawrence was a former reeve of Cornwall Township. In June 1948 John Lawrence was able to regain the seat once again, defeating Murray. That victory too was fleeting. In November 1951 Finch farmer Peter Manley with his maiden venture into provincial politics returned the seat to the Liberal fold. This ended John Lawrence's career in provincial politics.

It wasn't long before the federal Progressive Conservative Party came calling looking for a candidate to unseat Liberal member Lionel Chevier who held the Stormont seat since 1935. John Lawrence took on the challenge but in the 1953 federal election that followed he was unable to defeat the Liberal juggernaut. At this point he felt it was time to spend some time away from political life. Even through his years away from elected office, his service to the public never waned. He maintained his connection with the cheese producers association, sat on the board of the Macdonell Memorial Hospital and was a member of the Eastern Ontario Development Association. But his sojourn away from political life was brief.



John Lawrence McDonald, centre, accepts P.C. nomination May 1948 at Finch Community Hall

Return to Municipal Office

January 1, 1957 marked annexation day for the City of Cornwall and the Township was being stripped of much of its assessment, public buildings and equipment. Annexation created problems that had to be resolved with the City such as the division of debenture debt, assets and the divestment of administration and the police department. In the December 1956 election it seemed township voters wanted experience to deal with these important issues that the new urban boundary created. Former reeve Emile Menard left township council to run for mayor of the expanded city of Cornwall. This left the reeve's seat up for grabs. John Lawrence ran on his experience as both a former reeve and MPP and the voters gave him an overwhelming victory to direct the new mostly rural township for the next two years.

The era held mixed emotions for many in the township. The mammoth hydro electric project was underway creating prosperity and employment for many but at the same time thousands of acres of prime farm land was being surrendered for the massive Seaway project. As early as the 1920s, planners had a vision to harness the hydro-electric potential of the Longue Sault Rapids. Throughout his years in politics, John Lawrence referred to this vision as the "Big If". When the "Big If" finally did become a reality he advocated and had empathy for those many families displaced and who had their way of life changed forever. On June 28, 1958 just prior to inundation, in his statement to the Standard Freeholder, he reflected with a tinge of nostalgia saying, "While the future of our area is certainly bright the past was a happy time for many people in this area too. We will do well to remember the past at this turning point in our history."

With mandates now being a two year term, John Lawrence's leadership proved to be beyond reproach in the 1958 and '60 elections. He was re-elected as reeve by acclamation both times. The 1962 election proved to be more of a challenge when Councillor Mathew Maloney threw his hat into the leadership ring but was unable to defeat the incumbent. 1964 again was a victory by acclamation but when the 1966 election rolled around voters decided it was time for a change at the helm. Despite having over 19 years experience in the reeve's chair Cornwall Township voters said farewell to John Lawrence McDonald and ended his political dynasty by electing former councillor Harold Brown as reeve to begin a new chapter of township leadership.

With public life now behind him, John Lawrence remained active in various agricultural associations, maintained his connection with the Winnipeg Rifles and was active in the Long Sault branch of the Royal Canadian Legion. In 1967, Canada's centennial year, he received the Centennial Medal for having provided valuable service to Canada. Previously in good health, John Lawrence died in his sleep at his home in Harrisons Corners on Feb 26, 1969 at the age of 75. He is buried at St. Andrews West cemetery. This ended a distinguished career of public service by a prominent Cornwall Township resident.

Editor's Comment: *Having researched this article on the public life of John Lawrence McDonald, I have discovered that there is nothing in our township to commemorate the 30 plus years of service that this man provided for our township. Perhaps it's time for council to honour him in some way: a road or street, a park, a community hall or plaque are just a few possibilities. Cornwall Township had a strong tradition of honouring its own. Let's hope the tradition continues and we do something before it's too late and his memory fades from history.*

Last November president Ken McDonald and secretary Don McIntosh attended a presentation at the South Stormont boardroom by Peter Lockyer and Brad Mann of "History Lives Here Inc.". This production company creates unique short video vignettes in CD format showcasing local history. In their words, "local history is a product and every community has a story to tell." The short documentaries would profile one historical topic in our area; for example, the life of Simon Fraser in Cornwall Township. The videos in turn are distributed through local and world wide media and used to promote and market our area as a tourist attraction.

This would not be a solo venture by CTHS; rather, a partnership with various other historical groups, tourism agencies, Chambers of Commerce and local government. This network of organizations increases the exposure of any single documentary.

Attending the meeting were Jim Brownell from Lost Villages, Kevin Amelotte and Peter Young from South Stormont administration. The consensus was that in this area we have many stories to share with heritage seekers who are thirsting to learn more about the stories behind people, places and events. There is now too an audience of tourists, a new generation of settlers retiring into our communities, local residents, and students unfamiliar with their hometown history who would love to hear about the local history that surrounds us.

As with any project things don't happen immediately but will keep you informed as the local groups come together and as we receive more details from History Lives Here Inc.

Colonel Darby Bergin Plaque Unveiled

CTHS member Carol Goddard wrote the following article. It first appeared in *The Glengarrian* which is the SDG Regimental Foundation Newsletter



L to R: Col Masson, BGen Patterson, Tim Gault, Col Shearing, Hon Col Jim Brownell, RSM Hubley, Museum Curator Leon Chamois.

Colonel Darby Bergin, first Commanding Officer

of the 59th Stormont-Glengarry Battalion, has been honoured with an Ontario Heritage Trust plaque in recognition of his many contributions to Ontario as a physician, political representative, humanitarian and as the first Surgeon-General of Canada. The unveiling of this plaque was held at The Armoury on Tuesday November 8 under the auspices of the Regimental Foundation of the SDG Highlanders

Following a solemn Service of Remembrance conducted by Royal Canadian Legion Branch 297 of Cornwall, speakers remarked on the contributions made by Bergin both locally and nationally. Grand Chief Abraham Benedict of Akwesasne commented on his assistance to the Mohawk community during a small pox outbreak while Honourary Colonel Jim Brownell and BGen Patterson spoke on the work to commemorate this gentleman and a brief biography of Bergin respectively.

A true renaissance man, Colonel Bergin began his career as a physician in Cornwall after completing his medical training at McGill in Montreal. He is known for his work at a typhus hospital, assisting the Mohawk community in Akwesasne during a smallpox outbreak before his election as an MP in 1872 where he championed rural affairs, humanitarian and social justice issues.

He served as the Commanding Officer of the 59th Stormont-Glengarry Battalion, before becoming the first Surgeon-General in 1885 laying the groundwork for the creation of a permanent military medical corp. Bergin was also a key industrial player locally as a founder of the Ontario Pacific Railway and the expansion of the Cornwall Canal.

The Ontario Heritage Trust has erected over 1200 historical plaques since 1957, with the plaque honouring Colonel Bergin located in Precious Blood Cemetery just east of Cornwall where he was buried after his death in 1896.

We were saddened to hear of the passing of Alex W. Fraser last December. Born in Charlottenburg Township, Alex was a long time member of CTHS. He was of U. E. L. descent on both sides of his parent's ancestry, the Frasers and MacDonalds and was a founding member of the U. E. L. branch for S.D. & G. Counties. Having settled in Courtenay B.C. in 2000, Alex remained connected with our society sending us many of the publications he wrote on genealogy and Glengarry history. A donation to his favourite charity the Dalkeith Historical Society was made in his memory.

Pioneer Cemetery Stone Wall Update: We had another incident with a truck striking the stone wall this past December 9. It was one of the worst hits yet that saw boulders landing on highway 138. A backhoe was needed to clear all the debris from the impact area. Fortunately no one was hurt and the culprit was caught.

It was timely that a meeting was planned for December 14th with MTO officials to discuss the progress on design changes proposed for highway 138 at the St. Andrews intersection. Ken McDonald, Don McIntosh from CTHS as well as Fr. Dan Van Delst, Frank Quinn, Judy Maloney and Rod Grant from the parish finance and property committee attended the meeting. It seems that our request to have bollards installed along the corner does not sit well with MTO officials. Various reasons were given including a need for archaeological studies and space restrictions along the sidewalk. Their solution is to raise the sidewalk and install a raised curbing along the radius of the turn. MTO withdrew the option of a stamped concrete barrier along the east wall citing cost. So it appears the only design solution is a raised curbing and even that could be years away. We were told that there is yet to be funding or priority designation for the highway project. The saga continues with more collisions in the forecast.

The following was submitted by Ken McDonald. It was salvaged from an old newspaper article, date unknown.

They Call It Bonville

The name, believe it or not, comes from Ireland and the Irish man who named this hamlet located a few miles north of Cornwall became a legend.

In the crossroads store, formerly a hotel, old timers say the strongest recollection they have of Pete Gibbons, the peddler, was his huge paunch and the manner of his final exit—by horse and buggy to catch the train at Apple Hill, never to be heard from again. Legend has it he left town still owing thousands of dollars to local farmers who loaned him money.

It was Gibbons who also conned the Scottish populace into renaming Glenco (or Glencooney) after Bonville, a village in Ireland. That was prior to the First World War when the crossroads was named McPhaul's Corners, after the first settler who arrived about 150 years ago and the area was known as Glenco. (His kids went to school however where the spelling was promptly changed to McPhail.) A few 100 year old houses are still in use.

Bonville had two hotels and a post office at one time. Since then, the place has seen one hotel burn and the other become a grocery store.

The other store has changed hands six or seven times within memory, the cheese factory was replaced once and three schools have been built.

If you drop into Quinn's store, ask proprietor Lorne Wheeler to show you where the main door of the hotel used to be and how the staircase climbed up the centre of the store above where the soft drink cooler stands now. You can almost visualize the carpets, the rooms full of travelers and the barmen hurrying back and forth.

News From Yesteryear

St. Andrews Saints Win Hockey Championship

Things were rockin' on Friday March 13, 1964 at the old Long Sault arena. There was a packed house of over 500 spectators when the St. Andrews Saints beat the St. Regis Indians in game six of a seven game series to win the Long Sault Hockey League finals. When the final whistle blew the Saints handed the Indians a resounding 11-4 defeat winning the league championship. Top scorers were Ron Branchaud and Kevin MacMillan who each scored three goals. Kevin Wheeler and Harry Fetterley each contributed a pair and Ron Alguire a single. Seven penalties were handed out, four against the Saints!



Back Row Left: John Bertrand (stick boy), Terry Wheeler, Tony Wheeler (coach) Brendan Murphy, Bob MacGillivray, Ron Branchaud, Larry Robertson, Harry Fetterley, Ron Alguire, Glen MacDonald, John Wheeler, John McDonald (coach), Arnold Fetterley (assistant manager) and Gord Roberson Manager. Front Row Left, Kevin Wheeler, Dalton Adams, Garry Murphy, Kevin MacMillan, Alfred Smith, Garrett Wheeler, Ab McDonald and Jim Eastman.



Congratulations to the boys and girls of St. Andrews School on their award winning video explaining the origin of the school's name. They won first place among 170 entries in a contest held by the Catholic board. View it at www.tinyurl.com/guplnr9. CTHS donated \$100 to the students to be used for school activities.



May your glass be ever full.
May the roof over your head be always strong.
And may you be in heaven half an hour before the devil knows you're dead.



Our next meeting is Tuesday March 28, 7:30 pm at the Heritage Centre. Hope to see you there. Reminder, pay your 2017 dues if applicable.