



ROBERT REGINALD O'BRIEN, THE END OF THE LINE

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Last month we met my granduncle Henry Byrne O'Brien (1876-1949) the eldest son of my great-grandfather R. W. O'Brien. We followed his career as the number one son and heir starting in business with his father in 1893 at age 16, progressing to the establishment of R. W. O'Brien & Co.'s Fur Store selling furs, gentlemen's furnishings and millinery in 1901. Then came the break in the family in 1908 when H. B. O'Brien turned his back on the family business and the family itself and made a complete career change, becoming a real estate and insurance agent as well as the black sheep of the family.

This month we meet the younger son, Robert Reginald O'Brien (1886-1939), who was also my granduncle and the last of the male O'Briens to be actively associated with the family business, and we follow his path in the business world of downtown Collingwood in the early 20 th Century until his death at the early age of 53 in 1939. Notes in his obituary appear to indicate that he had been working in the family fur business from about the age of 16 alongside his elder brother Henry B.

The 2-storey brick building at 69 Hurontario St., built in 1901 to the plans of famed Collingwood architect Fred T. Hodgson, was totally gutted by fire on July 28, 1910. The cause of the fire, discovered by the night constable at 4:00 a. m., was never determined, and the financial loss was estimated at about \$14,000.00 (several hundred thousand dollars in today's money).

It took nearly eight hours of work by the Fire Department before the fire was declared out. R. W. O'Brien was a wise business man and had fire insurance that saw him through the Great Fire of 1881 and now this one almost thirty years later. In the Property Abstract for the building there is no evidence of any loans or mortgages being taken out to rebuild in 1910 so it is assumed that insurance covered the rebuilding. Because O'Brien's building (22 ft. wide) was a later in-fill between two other brick buildings, the exterior walls remained and the interior was rebuilt. Some years ago the owner of the building provided me with a number of photos from the basement under the store revealing charred timbers from that fire.

The family business underwent a change following the 1910 disaster. R. W. O'Brien was in his early sixties at this time and may have decided to slow down a little. The fur business was sold to William Wegener who occupied the second floor of the rebuilt building, and on the ground floor, the gentlemen's furnishings business took on a new name: "O'Brien & Hewson", the principals being Robert Reginald O'Brien and my maternal grandfather Robert James Hewson who had been taken into partnership when he married the eldest O'Brien daughter in 1905. As evidence of the esteem accorded to Reginald O'Brien, in 1908 my grandmother named her firstborn, a son, Reginald.

The *Barrie Gazette Magazine of Industry* for 1911 had the following information on the two new businesses to occupy 69 Hurontario St., formed in 1910 following the fire:

WILLIAM WEGENER--Manufacturing Furrier, Hurontario Street. One of the more recently established fur houses in Collingwood is that of William Wegener, who has finely appointed shop and show room on Hurontario Street, in the same building with O'Brien & Hewson. This was established in 1910 and occupies a well arranged store, stocked with a full line of the finest of furs, made by Mr. Wegener in all the latest and most fashionable styles, as

well as up-to-date fur coats and garments. He makes a specialty of remodeling and repairing and relining of furs of every description, and his work is guaranteed of the highest order. He is an experienced and expert furrier and came here from Hamilton, where he was engaged in this same business. He is an authority on all kinds of furs and there is none superior to him in their making up. He is an Odd Fellow, a K. of P., and a Canadian Forester, one of the substantial business men of this town and popular in social circles.

By the time of the 1923 *Vernon's City Directory* for Collingwood, there was no mention of Wegener at all. The next item in the *Gazette* listings was about my granduncle and grandfather:

O'BRIEN & HEWSON, Men's Furnishings and Made to Measure Clothing, Hurontario Street. *The well-dressed man looks to the outfitter and haberdasher for quality, style and fit. In Collingwood he finds just what he wants in the handsome store of O'Brien & Hewson, located on Hurontario Street, one of the finest and best equipped stores of its kind in this section. This was established thirty years ago by R. W. O'Brien, and the present firm was formed and succeeded him in 1910. It is fitted in elegant and modern manner, and has all the appointments and conveniences of the metropolitan store, while the stock is of the finest quality, latest styles and the most fashionable patterns, "up-to-date goods for wide awake people". In the furnishings department they carry only the swellest styles and stock, and they also carry a fine range of cloths of correct colors and weights. A specialty is made of made to measure clothing, which are perfect in every regard and carry this firm's guarantee with every garment. The individual members of this enterprising firm are R. R. O'Brien and R. J. Hewson, both of whom have a wide experience in this line and thoroughly understand the art of catering to the best trade. Mr. R. W. O'Brien has held many public offices in the County and is one of Collingwood's most prominent citizens.*

The two brothers-in-law as well as R. W. O'Brien who was still involved with the business until his death at age 70 on Dominion Day 1919, entered a period of relative prosperity. In 1917 Reginald O'Brien responded to the call of King and Country and enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force for service in the First World War. With Dr. Donald McKay Sr. present, he underwent a medical examination in Collingwood on October 11, 1917 which revealed every aspect of his health to be "perfect". He subsequently enlisted at Niagara-On-The-Lake on July 22, 1918 and embarked at Montreal on July 28, 1918 as Private R. R. O'Brien, destination Liverpool where the ship arrived on August 15, 1918. There is a wealth of documents about his military service online and from these we learn that his Terms of Service were for the "duration of the war + 6 months" reckoned from July 23, 1918. He served in England until he was demobilized early in 1919. He, standing 5 feet 5 ½ inches tall, weighed 145 pounds at enlistment and 132 pounds on demobilization when his health, including his arteries, was still referred to as "normal". This contrasts with his health at the end of his life when he was a very sick man. Private O'Brien arrived back in Canada at Halifax on a ship named *Royal George* on February 20, 1919. He was "Discharged by reason of Demobilization" in Toronto on March 15, 1919 and would die twenty years later on the very same date at the young age of 53.

In his prime, Reginald O'Brien was quite the sportsman. From his obituary we learn that,

In his younger years Reginald was an enthusiast in sports. He found pleasure in curling and hockey, while baseball and other outdoor games all had for him a genuine interest. Likeable, genial, cheery and ever ready with a jocular remark he was always popular in any company. He was a true pal never with grouch and never with a harsh word toward or about anyone.

When Reginald's father died in 1919, he and my grandfather Hewson carried on throughout the prosperous "Roaring Twenties". It is easy to see that the business did well. My grandfather and his family had the trappings of a prosperous middle class lifestyle. They owned a car and a garage to park it in (my mother called it "the barn") and had a summer cottage at Brock's Beach. Their home on Hurontario St. had a wind up gramophone with a "morning glory horn" speaker, a large floor model radio with tubes in the amplifier the size of pint glass milk bottles and a top-of-the-line Mason & Risch upright piano. Then the Great Depression struck beginning with the stock market crash in late 1929 and would continue for a decade until the activities of one A. Hitler brought the economy roaring back with wartime production. As if the decline in business were not bad enough, O'Brien & Hewson were the victims of a break-in and robbery as the *Barrie Northern Advance* reported on October 1, 1931,

In an early morning raid on O'Brien and Hewson's clothing store, Collingwood, Friday, September 18 th , robbers succeeded in getting away with clothing value at \$400 to \$500. The thieves had apparently taken their time in looking over the stock and selected a variety of clothing, ranging from overcoats to scarves.

The Inflation Calculator for Canada indicates that \$500.00 in 1931 is the equivalent of \$9150.60 in 2022 and this indicates what a serious loss this was during hard times. The store had to support my grandfather's family, although his daughter (my mother) was by then working as a legal secretary and her older brother Reginald Hewson was working as a draftsman in the Collingwood Shipyard. Reginald O'Brien was living in the old O'Brien family home on Pine St. left to him and his spinster sister Vetta by their mother when she died in 1933. Neither Reginald nor Vetta ever married.

Reginald O'Brien became extremely ill in the late 1930's and was attended by Dr. A. R. Atkinson from April 1, 1938 until the day before he died at home

on March 15, 1939. His cause of death was Myocardial Failure due to Malignant Hypertension, Arteriosclerosis and Pernicious Anemia, quite different from his state of health twenty years earlier when he left the army. Dr. Atkinson's name is not as well-remembered in Collingwood as some of the other doctors (McFaul, Maitland, McKay, etc.) of that era because he relocated to the village of Norwood in Peterborough County by at least 1942. The pallbearers at Reginald's funeral (held at the family home) were lifelong friends including D'Arcy Bell of Bell & Son (dry goods, boots & shoes, ladies' ready-to-wear clothing, etc.), another struggling business man on the east side of Hurontario St. In Ruth Carmichael Bryan's *Tales of Collingwood* Mr. Bell is written up in the story *Charade* describing how he bravely kept up appearances during the Depression while running the store by himself and pretending that there were other employees present.

The Collingwood Old Boys Reunion of 1938, promoted by the Progress Club, came at a time when Reginald O'Brien had about eight months left to live. O'Brien and Hewson placed an advertisement in the official programme,

Hello There! Drop In! We're glad to see you. And by the way—have you seen the new Tropical Worsted Suits yet? For eye-catching smartness and up-to-the-minute style they cannot be beaten. Every Tip Top suit is individually hand-cut and tailored to your personal measurements. A full range of patterns and colours and famous British Woolens. Let us take your measurements and send your suit to your home. You'll never get more for your money than you will at O'BRIEN & HEWSON 69 Hurontario St., Exclusive Dealers for Tip Top Tailors Clothes.

The agency for Tip Top Tailors continued for many years, there being a sign stating this connection hanging above the sidewalk even in the 1960's, the anchors for which can still be seen in the bricks above the centre second floor window. The partners may have sold a few suits during the Old Boys Reunion but it was too little, too late. Reginald O'Brien's death the following

year left my grandfather as the only principal in the business and the name was changed to Hewson's Men's Wear.

Seven months after Reginald died, the Town of Collingwood granted itself title to the Hurontario St. building in October 1939 due to unpaid property tax of \$1274.27. My grandfather must have had to decide whether to pay the property tax on the family home and summer cottage or on the store. He was not the only business man on the main street to suffer misfortune. As an illustration of how tough the times were, Ruth Carmichael Bryan recounts in the story *My Grandfather* what conditions were like for business during the Great Depression. Prior to this time period, her grandfather William Carmichael had been prosperous, owning ships, two [business] blocks of stores with flats above, a land company,

...and one morning there was nothing left but the block on Hurontario St. [the 3-storey Carmichael Block which still stands near the north end of Hurontario St.] and a bunch of tenants owing ten years back rent. He took over one tobacco shop and let the rest go. He moved his roll top desk and his safe and files from the office upstairs to the back of the shop. The safe was full of worthless stocks and securities...when he came out onto the main street, he was confronted with boarded up windows, crumbling pavements, and the silent shipyard at the end of the street.

The situation with my grandfather Hewson remained unchanged for two years until, with returning prosperity in the early years of the Second World War and with help from relatives, he was able to reclaim title to the building in October 1941. My grandfather had been an outstanding athlete, a sprinter, in his younger days but he, too, succumbed to heart disease when he died in 1946. He had been joined in the business following Reginald O'Brien's death by his son Howard Hewson and later, Howard was joined by *his* son Jim as a partner until the business was closed.

Reginald O'Brien, a life-long bachelor, was the last male member of the O'Brien family to be actively connected to the Collingwood business founded by his father in the 1800's. He was the end of a blood line of male O'Briens in the mercantile business going all the way back to *his* grandfather Frederick O'Brien who set up as a merchant in Barrie in 1844. Without the aid of modern research so readily available today, Reginald never knew that he was descended from the royal O'Brien clan of Dromoland Castle, County Clare, Ireland, for which the line of descent can be traced back to Brian Boru (941-1014), the High King of Ireland (1002-1014).

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.