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## **H. B. O'BRIEN—BLACK SHEEP OF THE FAMILY—1876-1949**

### **H. David Vuckson**

My great-grandparents Robert Weber O'Brien and Catharine Amelia Robinson were married in July 1875 at Otterfield, north of Orillia, the country estate home of the bride's parents. They settled in Collingwood to conduct business and raise a family. Their first child was a son, Henry Byrne O'Brien, an early Christmas present born at home on December 21, 1876. My great-grandfather had stated his profession at the time of his marriage as a Pork Inspector. However, having married the daughter of a wealthy family, he went into business for himself as a general merchant and would never work for someone else again. Now, having a son and heir, he may have mapped out his firstborn's life in his mind, perhaps even imagining a family business dynasty. It was not to be.

Number one son Henry, groomed by his father in the ways of business, entered the business world with his father in 1893 at age 16 when they took over an additional business. Great-grandfather O'Brien originally had a general store on the east side of Hurontario St. in one of the many wooden buildings that were destroyed in the Great Fire of September 25, 1881. Being an "experienced man of business", he had fire insurance and resumed business in a part of the brick block that still stands at the north-east corner

of Hurontario and Simcoe Streets. In 1901 he purchased a nearby 22-foot wide lot that was the site of the remains of a burned out stone house owned by Charles Cameron. Here, in 1901 he erected the building which stands at 69 Hurontario St., designed by architect Fred T. Hodgson.

The additional business location of 1893 was on the west side of Hurontario St. at the corner of Third St. where the former Bell Telephone Building (erected in 1919) still stands. The first announcement appeared in the *Enterprise/Messenger* newspaper on August 3, 1893:

**A BUSINESS CHANGE.**—*Messrs. R. W. O'Brien & Son have bought out the Metropolitan Tea Store, lately carried on by Mrs. B. Rigg, who retires from business. The stand is one of the best in Collingwood, and the new firm will undoubtedly do a good business. Mr. O'Brien is well known as an experienced man of business, and his son Harry, who will be the man in charge, is both industrious and clever. The new firm have considerably changed and improved the appearance of their place of business and they have added a large line of new stock, so as to be prepared for all demands made upon them. Their specialties will be groceries, provisions, flour and feed, crockery and glassware, and in these lines they expect to keep the best and sell the lowest. See advt.* The advertisement referred to proclaimed,

**BOSTON T STORE, 148 HURONTARIO ST., COLLINGWOOD. R. W. O'BRIEN & SON, DEALERS IN GROCERIES, FLOUR AND FEED, CROCKERY & GLASSWARE. Highest Price Paid for Raw Fur, Ginseng, also Hides, Wool and Sheepskins.**

We find a description of this business in the 1894 *Board of Trade Report* for the year 1893:

*R. W. O'Brien, corner Third and Hurontario St., makes a specialty of groceries and general provisions, dealing largely in dried and canned goods, green groceries and dried meats. This house is popular, owing to the*

*accommodating qualities of Mr. O'Brien and his son [H. B., age 16], both of whom do their utmost to serve their customers promptly and satisfactorily, and who endeavour always to give good value for money received.*

This business arrangement appears to have worked well and great-grandfather could feel proud that he had his (then) only son working in the business. By 1901 when the new brick store was erected at 69 Hurontario St., another business change took place. By this time, R. W. O'Brien had three daughters and another son, and the two eldest girls were approaching marriageable age. He changed course and went into the combined business of furs and gentlemen's "furnishings" where there were greater profits to be made than selling canned goods and lettuce.

On Monday Evening, August 1, 1904 there was a concert in the Grand Opera House by the band of the 48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders. Mixed in with the musical numbers was the following:

**INTERNATIONAL CONTEST between Englishman, Scotchman, Irishman and Frenchman (5 minutes each) for Silk Hat denoted [sic] by R. W. O'Brien & Son, Furriers.**

About a year later, some discontent began to appear in the close-knit O'Brien partnership. H. B. O'Brien's eldest sister Eva Mildred was working downtown as a milliner. 21-year-old Robert James Hewson who first worked as a clerk for E. Fair & Co., obtained a position in O'Brien's fur store, working alongside H. B. O'Brien who was five years older. Things progressed and R. J. Hewson and Eva Mildred O'Brien fell in love. They were married from the O'Brien family home at the south-west corner of Pine and 4<sup>th</sup> Street West on August 30, 1905. The new Mrs. Hewson was my beloved grandmother. In storybook fashion, R. J. Hewson married his boss's daughter, was taken into partnership in the business, and many years later inherited the business when the last of the male O'Briens connected with it

died. This series of events did not impress H. B. O'Brien and his expectations for his future.

The year 1905 appears to have been the time when further family discord surfaced. My great-grandfather O'Brien, speculated in land in Collingwood as did *his* father before him in Barrie in the 1840's and 50's. On July 6, 1905, my great-grandfather purchased an acre of land fronting onto both Hurontario and Ste. Marie Streets. The purchase price was \$1900.00 and title was placed in the name of my great-grandmother, something commonly done by business men to protect their interests. In August, H. B. O'Brien bought the east half of this one acre block of land from his mother for \$600.00 which included the house on it. The following year on May 18, 1906 H. B. sold the property to his future wife Euphemia Pauline Simpson for one dollar. They were married in the First Presbyterian Church on Monday, June 11, 1906. The brief announcement in the newspaper was headlined "AN EARLY MORNING WEDDING". The ceremony took place at 6:00 a.m., this likely dictated by the need to catch an early morning train out of town to go on their honeymoon. The marriage did not produce any children.

In 1905 my grandmother was offered a choice of three houses as a wedding present by her parents. The house she chose at 433 Hurontario St. is way back in from the town sidewalk near the rear of the lot. The original two-storey section, of which I have many precious memories, still stands with later additions at the back. So, my grandmother gets a free house, and her husband is made a partner in O'Brien's store. At the very same time, her brother, H. B. O'Brien, has to *purchase* his house from his mother in advance of his intended marriage to Euphemia Pauline Simpson. The house H. B. purchased was right across the back fence from my grandmother's house and it still stands today on its half-acre lot at 458 Ste. Marie St. Many of you will have known this as the former home of Ed Smart.

It is not known for certain what the dynamic was between H. B. O'Brien and his sister and brother-in-law who lived right across his back fence but there must have been a smouldering resentment over my grandfather Hewson being made a partner by his father-in-law without working for it the way H. B. did and receiving a free house to boot. A parting of ways occurred within the O'Brien family in 1908 when H. B. bailed out of his father's fur store, completely changed direction and went into business for himself as an Insurance and Real Estate agent. From what I have gleaned, he also bailed out of his own family and was seldom, if ever, talked about. Either he felt overlooked by his own family or perhaps he felt that he didn't "fit in". On August 11, 1915 Euphemia O'Brien sold the Ste. Marie St. property to Robena Manson, the wife of business man David Manson for one dollar plus the assumption of a \$2,000 mortgage (we met the Mansons in my story of October 2017). Robena would continue to own the house until August 1950 when it was sold to Ed and Eileen Smart.

H. B. O'Brien's business office was located on the west side of Hurontario St. in more than one location as the years went by. In the 1910-11 *Vernon's Directory* it was between Second St. and the Bank of Commerce. By the time of the *Vernon's Directory* for 1912-13, it was just south of Third St. By the time of *Vernon's* 1923 Directory he was listed as "Broker & hides", east side Maple St.

Euphemia ("Phem" for short) had a stroke in August 1937 which left her paralyzed. Dr. Maitland attended her from August until the day before she died (December 7, 1937) at the age of 61. By this time the O'Briens were living in a second floor apartment in the building at 68 Hurontario St. at the corner of Second St., ironically, almost directly across the street from his father's building. In the 1945 *Voter's List* H. B., age 69, is listed at this address and his occupation is given as "Second Hand Dealer" [!].

H. B. soon completely changed direction again. In March 1947, his cousin Jeannette L. McLennan from Beaverton had to swear a substitute *birth* registration for him. It is interesting that he had to go so far afield to find someone to do it when he had three sisters living in Collingwood. He probably needed this for his impending marriage to Lennie McPherson from Quebec. The 1949 *Voter's List* finds him living in retirement in Portneuf, a village east of Quebec City, with his second wife. His condition is given as "Rentier" which means a person of independent means. In the spring of 1949 he visited Collingwood and, on his return to Portneuf, he died suddenly on May 26th. The body was returned to Collingwood and he was buried in the same plot as his wife Euphemia in the Presbyterian Cemetery on the Poplar Sideroad. His old friend Reginald Brown, a Collingwood "Old Boy" from Kelowna, B.C., travelled back to Collingwood with his wife for the funeral and was one of the pall bearers for his old friend.

And so, the black sheep of the O'Brien clan passed from the scene in his 73<sup>rd</sup> year. We don't know if he had regrets about his estrangement from his parents and siblings. Nevertheless, he was a part of the Collingwood business community for half a century. Next to nothing is known about his second marriage and his brief residence of about a year in Portneuf, Quebec.

*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.*