



ROBERT JAMES HEWSON (1881-1946) –

THE GRANDFATHER I NEVER KNEW

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My maternal grandfather Robert James Hewson, a prominent member of the Collingwood business community for forty years, was born in Osprey Township, Grey County, on January 3, 1881 in the dead of an Ontario winter. This was a time when there were no means of communication in rural areas especially in the winter when roads were virtually impassable and therefore he was delivered at home without the aid of an “accoucheur” or midwife. R.J. was born to a farming family that already had been marred by tragedy and would soon suffer even more. His father George Hewson (1841-1923) had married his first wife Elizabeth Border (1844-1868) in 1863 and they had one son, Gilbert John Hewson born in April 1867, the year of Confederation. George’s wife Elizabeth died in 1868, at the young age of 24, leaving George a young widower with a one-year-old son. In 1870 George Hewson married his second wife Margaret Little (1851-1925) who was ten years younger than him and together, between 1873 and 1895, they had twelve more children—ten boys and two girls. Five of those

twelve children (one girl and four boys) were born in Osprey Township, my grandfather being the last of this group.

Another tragedy struck in 1882 when George's firstborn son Gilbert John Hewson, age 15, was one of four young men who drowned at Brewster's Lake while participating in the Orange [Lodge] Young Britons Picnic on Wednesday, August 9th. Six boys, none of whom could swim, were out on the lake in a small boat. About 4:00 p.m. as they headed for the shore, Gilbert Hewson's first cousin Francis Wisdom, age 18 and an only son, was standing at the stern and paddling with an oar when he lost his balance and fell into the water. In his attempt to climb back in, the boat was overturned and all six occupants were thrown into the water. The two Winters boys had the presence of mind to cling to the overturned boat and were saved but the other four, including the twelve-year-old Miles twins, panicked, became exhausted and drowned in fifteen feet of water. It wasn't until midnight that all the bodies were recovered. A fine summer's day and a happy event quickly turned to immense grief and cast a dark cloud over the close-knit farming community in the vicinity of the hamlet of Maxwell.

George Hewson's mother Janet also died in 1882. She and Elizabeth Border Hewson and son Gilbert John Hewson were all buried in the Hatherton Pioneer Cemetery across from the Orange Hall on the 3rd Concession of Osprey Township. According to the Bruce & Grey Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, that cemetery was abandoned after 1900, was desecrated and has long since reverted to farmland and scarcely a trace of it remains today other than some gravestone fragments said to be found alongside a fence in 1989. This news must have brought back painful memories for George Hewson when he

heard about it in the early 20th Century. More tragedy was to come in 1912.

My grandfather was 19 months old when his half-brother was drowned. By this time, George Hewson had buried his first wife, his first son and his mother and needed to make a new start after this chain of sad events and so, in 1883, the family moved to Nottawasaga Township, Simcoe County. They settled on lot 32, Concession 7 (on the west side of the 6th Line south of Batteaux, more or less across from the Collingwood Airport), where seven more children (six boys and one girl) were born at home on the farm. A bonus that came with this property is that the Batteaux River flows through it.

Of the twelve children born to George Hewson and Margaret Little, all but one lived well into adulthood. The one exception was their son Simon Wilbur, born on the farm in March 1887 without the aid of a doctor. Attended by Dr. Don McKay (Sr.) for twelve days from the beginning of July 1912, he died in his 26th year from the combined effects of measles, appendicitis and haemorrhage of the stomach on the 12th day of that month. As mentioned above, the Hewson family were prominent members of the Orange Lodge and for one of their sons to die on the 12th of July (it was usually referred to as “The Glorious Twelfth” by Orangemen, the date on which the Lodge celebrated victory at the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland) must have been quite a blow to his parents. The 12th of July 1912 was anything but “glorious” since Simon’s father George was “Worshipful Master” of the Nottawa Orange Lodge.

In his younger days, my grandfather Robert James and his younger brother Roy were both known for their athletic ability as sprinters

(ironically, they both died of heart attacks in their mid and early sixties, respectively, after engaging in strenuous activity). My grandfather walked to Collingwood from Batteaux along the Grand Trunk Railway tracks to attend high school at the original C.C.I. at the corner of Hume and Ste. Marie Streets. By the age of twenty in 1901, he, along with one of his older brothers, was living in Collingwood as a lodger in the home of widow Margaret McLean and working as a clerk in the firm of E. Fair & Co. on Hurontario St. At this time, R. J. was a member of the Collingwood Crescent Club, a non-political and non-religious group, whose members were drawn from the young, progressive, intellectual residents of the community. Exactly what they did in their meetings is unknown. One of his fellow members was Harry R. Storey, his future brother-in-law and future father of Dr. Bob Storey. A club group photo from 1902 shows a young R. J. Hewson with a full head of hair parted down the middle as frequently seen in photos from that era. In later photos in his maturity, he was bald.

It was during this time in his early twenties that R. J. Hewson met his future wife, Eva Mildred, the eldest daughter of R. W. O'Brien, my great-grandfather. After a quarter century as a merchant selling groceries, flour and feed, crockery and glassware and as a buyer of raw furs, ginseng, hides, wool and sheepskins, R. W. was now the head of a prosperous business selling expensive furs, "gentlemen's furnishings" and millinery (hats) from his store at 69 Hurontario St. His daughter, my future grandmother, was a milliner and worked upstairs over the fur store making hats.

A romance developed and Robert James Hewson and Eva Mildred O'Brien were married at the O'Brien family home at the south-west corner of Pine and 4th St. West on August 30, 1905. In storybook

fashion, my grandfather left the farm and moved to town, married his boss's daughter, was taken into partnership in the business, and, eventually inherited the business which he operated to the day of his death. At the time of this marriage, my great-grandmother O'Brien offered my grandmother a choice of one of three houses as a wedding present. She chose the house at 433 Hurontario St. and this address, of which I have such precious memories from my childhood, would remain in the Hewson family for 52 years. At the time my grandparents were married, my grandmother's older brother Henry Byrne O'Brien (1876-1949), known as "H.B.", was the sole business partner with his father in the fur store. In retrospect there appears to have been some ill feeling when my grandfather was taken into partnership and within three years, R. W. O'Brien's eldest son bailed out of the family business and went into business for himself on Hurontario St. selling real estate and insurance and continued this for the rest of his working life. I didn't know H. B. since he died when I was two years old, but he has been referred to as "the black sheep of the family" and, according to one cousin, he "was never talked about".

In July 1910 O'Brien's fur store was totally gutted by fire, the cause apparently never determined. 69 Hurontario St. was an infill in 1901 between two already-existing buildings built in the 1880's following the mass destruction of the Great Fire of 1881. My great-grandfather O'Brien was a wise business man and had adequate insurance (during the Great Fire, his grocery store was in one of the wooden buildings that were destroyed and he had insurance that got him back on his feet in short order). Following the 1910 fire, the store was rebuilt within the substantial external walls and a business change took place. R. W. O'Brien was now in his early 60's and left it to his son-in-law R. J.

Hewson and his younger son Robert Reginald O'Brien to form a partnership "O'Brien & Hewson" selling men's furnishings. The fur business was sold to William Wegener who operated in the same building at 69 Hurontario St., most likely on the second floor.

The union of R. J. Hewson and Eva Mildred O'Brien produced three children: Reginald in 1908, my mother Catharine in 1912, and Howard in 1917. The Hewson family had all the trappings of a successful middle class family of that era. They owned a home, a car, and a garage to park it in (my mother called it "the barn"). They had a wind-up gramophone with a large morning glory horn, a top-of-the-line, expensive, Mason & Risch upright piano and a large floor model radio. The Hewsons also owned the first summer cottage at Brock's Beach in the early 1920's. My grandfather's business was successful and the family enjoyed the benefits it could provide.

My grandfather served on the Board of Trade, the Board of Education, was a member of the Collingwood Bowling Club, the Oddfellows Lodge and the Arnstein Hunt Club. Like his father-in-law R. W. O'Brien, my grandfather went hunting every year, coming home with a number of dead deer strapped to the roof of the car. He passed his passion for hunting on to his younger son Howard. In Ruth Carmichael Bryan's book *Tales of Collingwood*, her story *The Return of the Fugitive* tells of one summer evening in the 1930's while the rest of the family were at the summer cottage, a teenage Howard Hewson was alone at the family home engaging in rifle practice behind the garage at the very back of the lot. He had set up a target flanked by bales of hay that were supposed to stop bullets that missed the target. Somehow one of his shots did not observe this protocol and struck his neighbour Mrs. Fawcett who was pattering amongst the flowers in her garden. As she

screamed and fell down, Howard couldn't know that the bullet had been stopped by her corset stays and she was uninjured. Thinking he had killed her, Howard took off on foot (another Hewson sprinter) and didn't show up until the next morning at Ruth Carmichael's house ready to turn himself in to the police. He was relieved to learn that Mrs. Fawcett was still among the living; nevertheless he had the fright of his young life and still had to face his parents and his "victim" over this incident.

Although raised as a Methodist, following his marriage in 1905, my grandfather was a dedicated member of First Presbyterian Church, and served as an Elder for more than 40 years, and for 38 of those years he occupied the post of Clerk of Session (the governing body of the congregation). He was one of only two Elders who voted against church union in 1925 when the United Church of Canada was created. During the Depression he contributed some of his home coal supply to heat the Presbyterian Church on Sunday mornings. During those lean years of the Depression, with his birthday on January 3rd being just nine days after Christmas, my grandmother would take something she bought for him for Christmas and rewrap it as a birthday gift and he would feign excitement and pretend he was seeing it for the first time.

The prosperity of the 1920's came to a screeching halt with the advent of the Great Depression in late 1929. The O'Brien & Hewson men's wear business had to support five members of the Hewson family as well as Reginald O'Brien and this became difficult as business fell off. As if business slowing down were not enough, in September 1931 thieves broke into the store of Obrien & Hewson as reported in the *Barrie Northern Advance* on October 1, 1931: *"In an early morning raid on O'Brien & Hewson's clothing store, Collingwood, Friday, September*

18, robbers succeeded in getting away with clothing valued at \$400 to \$500. The thieves had apparently taken their time looking over the stock and selected a variety of clothing, ranging from overcoats to scarves". \$500 in 1931 was equivalent to the purchasing power of \$8085.37 in 2018 dollars, and this was a substantial loss to the family business. By this time, Reginald Hewson, the older son, had graduated from C.C.I. and was working as a junior draughtsman in the Collingwood Shipyard and his sister (my mother) had graduated from a Commercial Course and became a legal secretary so at least there was some income beyond that from the clothing store.

The store property at 69 Hurontario St. had been in the name of my great-grandmother O'Brien from when it was first purchased as an empty lot from Charles Cameron in 1901. This lot was where Charles Cameron's stone house had stood until it was burned out in the Great Fire of 1881. The lot and the new two-storey building constructed on it in 1901 remained in great-grandmother's name until her death in 1933 when title was transferred to her middle daughter Zoe B. Storey, Dr. Bob Storey's mother. In March 1939 my grandfather's business partner Reginald O'Brien died at the young age of 53. He never married and therefore left no heirs. My grandfather, by default, inherited the business and changed its name to Hewson's Men's Wear and he was joined in the business by his younger son Howard. In October 1939 via a "Tax Deed", The Town of Collingwood took over ownership of the building due to property taxes owing. My grandfather was not the only business man on the Main Street to experience this situation due to a lack of revenue in ten years of hard times. I expect he had to make the decision to pay the property tax on the family home a priority before paying the tax on the store. In October 1941 with wartime business

picking up and with financial help from his youngest sister's husband, Jack Mathers of Stayner, he was able to pay the back taxes and claim ownership of the building. My great uncle Jack Mathers was in the furniture and funeral business in Stayner and, while times may have been tough during the 1930's, he had no shortage of funeral business.

In 1944 with his health failing, my grandfather transferred title to the store to my grandmother. The hard times and stress of the Depression must have taken its toll on his health since, by 1942, he was suffering with angina. On May 2nd, 1946 he went to the store as usual. For some years since the Depression he had rented out space for people to store furniture in the warehouse behind the store. That day, he was moving heavy objects around by himself, probably against his doctor's orders, and suffered a heart attack from which he did not recover. His death registration was signed by his nephew, Dr. Bob Storey, who was just beginning his long medical career in Collingwood following wartime service in England. Title to the store remained in my grandmother's name until 1949 when she sold the property to her son Howard. In 1956 a \$10,000.00 Mortgage was obtained to completely remodel the derelict second floor of the building from its long-ago commercial use in the early 1900's to create the apartment that is there today. When the apartment was completed, Howard and his family moved in and sold their home on Robinson St.

My grandfather Hewson was buried in the First Presbyterian Cemetery on the Poplar Sideroad, the grave being dug by his brother Roy who was the cemetery caretaker. I didn't have a chance to know my grandfather since I was born a year-and-a-half after he died. I did know and adored my grandmother until early in my 10th year when she too

passed away and was laid to rest beside my grandfather to await the resurrection.

Except for the 1912 death at home of Simon Hewson, most of the remaining eleven children of George and Margaret Hewson were scattered far and wide over the Canadian and American west by marriage and careers: one son was in Alberta, two more in Saskatchewan, one in North Dakota, one in Montana and two in California. One daughter was married to a Congregationalist minister and moved to Minnesota and later to North Dakota. The second daughter married the Stayner undertaker Jack Mathers. Pearl Mathers, my grandfather R.J. and his brother Roy were the only ones who remained living close to their parents in Nottawasaga Township. Of the parents, George Hewson died in 1923 from cancer of the skin behind his left ear, with senile decay a contributing factor. Margaret Little Hewson died in 1925 from myocardial failure and chronic bronchitis. Both are buried in the Stayner Union Cemetery along with their son Simon.

David Vuckson, a native son of Collingwood, 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.