

W.P. MacDonald

Served as Lambton County's Agriculture Representative for 40 Years

It has often been said by the older farmers among us that that few men were more instrumental in the agricultural development of Lambton County than W.P. MacDonald.

William P. MacDonald was born in 1886 near Stayner, Ontario where he grew up on the family farm. After attending local schools he enrolled at the Ontario Agricultural College, graduating from that facility with honours in 1915.

Fresh out of college, he moved to Petrolia, Ont. where in 1916 he assumed the position of Lambton County Agricultural representative and held that post until his retirement on June 1, 1956. It has been said that several times during his long career he had passed up offers for promotion, rather than leave Lambton County. Known to all at the time as one of a most highly respected and knowledgeable men in Ontario agriculture, it left many to speculate that he may well have become the deputy minister of agriculture had opted to move on from his post in Lambton.

In an article in the Petrolia Advertiser Topic its editor described MacDonald as a man of another age who saw farming not so much as an industry but as a culture. "He had an encyclopedic knowledge of Lambton soils and Lambton people," stated the article. "To him the soil and the people were as one and he condemned the oil industry for drawing farmers away from their land and handing them false premises of quick riches."

It is widely agreed among those who knew him that W.P. MacDonald's greatest contribution to agriculture was his role in overseeing the formation of the many farmer organizations that over the years have greatly benefited Lambton's agricultural community. He is widely credited with planting the seeds that resulted in the formation of the Lambton Federation of Agriculture, the Lambton Plowmen's Association, Lambton Soil and Crop Improvement Association as well as many cattle clubs throughout the country.

He was instrumental in the organization of the Lambton Junior Farmers Association, Lambton Federation of Agriculture, Lambton County Soil and Crop Improvement Association and numerous cattle clubs throughout the county.

The Hon. Ralph Ferguson, former MP and Minister of Agriculture, noted that it was W.P. who prompted many young farmers to take an active role in both federal and provincial farm organizations which helped develop leadership skills that were sadly lacking among farmers of that era.

Ferguson noted that he was among many who came up through the ranks of the Junior Farmers and many other Lambton farm organizations with the inspiration and encouragement of W.P. MacDonald.

Ferguson added that it was only years later when he read W.P. MacDonald's memoirs that he understood his reason for encouraging the formation of Junior Farmers Clubs across the entire county. "He wrote that the farm community of that era, before and after the Great Depression and World War Two, lacked capable leaders who could advance farmers and their organizations to a better and more prosperous life in society," said Ferguson.

"His goal was to see those leadership skills instilled in Lambton County's young farmers."

He added that when one considers, the number of number of leaders of both national and provincial marketing boards who have originated from Lambton County, W.P. MacDonald's foresight and objectives were certainly achieved.

Brooke-Alvinston mayor Don McGugan recalled attending Junior Farmer meetings in the old Agriculture Office on Petrolia's main street as a teenager and greatly admired W.P. MacDonald for his commitment to agriculture and young people.

"I don't think he ever spent a night at home," said McGugan.

"He was out to a Junior Farmers, 4-H or a commodity group meeting every night, he inspired a lot of young people to become active in these organizations."

In the early days of the 20th century school fairs also played an important role in agricultural education. These were popular social events for rural schools and often involved the entire community, not just the students and teaching staff. Once again it was W.P. MacDonald who came to the fore in preparing and executing the school fair program throughout Lambton County.

Enniskillen Township farmer Roy Elliott recalled as a teen taking part in agricultural field trips lead by W.P. MacDonald. "Mac always told us that a farm that would grow good crops would also grow good weeds," he said. "We always joked that in that case there were a lot of good farms around in those days."

W.P. MacDonald also took a keen interest in the political and civic affairs of his home-town of Petrolia. He was a long-time member of the Petrolia and Enniskillen Agriculture Society and was active in that town's Chamber of Commerce. An avid curler, he was a founding member of the Petrolia Curling club and once guided that organization to a provincial championship.

In addition to being a charter member of the Petrolia Rotary Club he was an active and devoted member of St. Phillips Church. He was among those who participated in the sod-turning ceremony to launch construction of the town's new arena and fair exhibit building in 1961, having participated enthusiastically in the three-year fund-raising campaign that proceeded that joyous occasion. W.P. MacDonald remained an active member of the Petrolia community until the time of his death on Mar. 5, 1971 at the age of 85.

The late W. P. MacDonald was nominated for induction into the Lambton County Agricultural Hall of Fame by Brooke-Alvinston mayor Don McGugan.