

Lorne C. Henderson

Lambton Agricultural Hall of Fame

Among the many to have made their mark on agricultural and the rural communities of Lambton County, few have left a more indelible imprint than the Hon. Lorne C. Henderson.

With a long and distinguished career of public service at both the local and provincial levels, Lorne was the consummate grassroots politician. Armed with a prodigious memory for people's name, birthdays, anniversaries and family connections, he had the unique ability to set aside partisan political differences to work in the best interest of all his constituents and for the benefit of all farmers across the province. While best known for his role as the long-time Member of Provincial Parliament for Lambton East and his time as Ontario's Minister of Agriculture, Lorne was first and foremost a farmer and remained in this vocation his entire life. He loved people, loved his province, and certainly held a special affection for Lambton County.

Lorne Charles Henderson was born October 31, 1920 on Lot 15, Concession 7, Enniskillen Township, the youngest of three children born to David and Elizabeth (Robinson) Henderson. As was customary in those days, Lorne was born at home, but was attended to by Dr. Lorne Smith, a physician at Petrolia's Charlotte Eleanor Englehart Hospital. It was in honour of this much-revered local physician that Lorne received his given name. It's also interesting to note that his birth marked the beginning of a life-long relationship Lorne would maintain with C.E.E. Hospital. As family members were quick to point out, "Charlotte's House" as that hospital is affectionately known, held a special place in Lorne's heart his entire life.

When Lorne was a month old, his parents moved the family to Lot 8, Concession 5, Enniskillen, the farm on which he grew to manhood, later farmed, and where the Henderson family continues to reside today. Lorne attended the local one-room school and while he advanced no further than grade-8, education was always of great importance to him. He always held his teachers in the highest of esteem and in later years, he and long-time friend, Pat Stonehouse, would serve on a committee that provided much of the historical background for author Lawrence Crich's book "A History of Education in Enniskillen Township."

Farming Career

Lorne began farming on his own account during the dark days of the Great Depression and got his start in the fall of 1937 when he entered a share-crop agreement with the owner of a farm on the Eighth Concession. He once recounted that his income from the first year of that venture was \$50 and two loads of hay. The following year he fared a little better with the take being \$100.

In 1939, he began farming the land at Lot 6, Concession 5 Enniskillen, which belonged to his uncle, Arthur Henderson. Farming was a little better that year and he often recalled that 1940 brought bumper crops of wheat and oats that carried harvesting into Christmas. In 1946, he purchased this farm and year later married Reta Pearl Sackrider. However the farm was back the side road and Lorne wanted to remain close to the fourth-line community he had grown up with. Consequently, he detached the kitchen from the house on the home farm, moved it east of the main house and made a comfortable cottage for his widowed father and bachelor brother.

Lorne and his new bride then moved into the main house and it was here their three children were born: Shirley in 1949, David in 1952 and Marian in 1962.

Lorne, like others in the area, was largely engaged in livestock farming, primarily a cow-calf operation. This was largely because the heavy clay soil in South Lambton at the time was not drained and, for the most part, did not lend itself to the production of cash crops. Consequently, most farmers in the area restricted their farming operations to growing hay and pasturing cattle.

However, a neighbouring farm did have four runs of tile across it and at an early age Lorne recognized the value of tile drainage, taking notice that the land above the tile drains maintained better soil structure, was less compacted, and generally grew far superior crops. As a consequence, Lorne became an early supporter, and one of the province's most vocal advocates of farm tile drainage.

Son, David, added, that if Lorne had a second calling it was as a carpenter for during his early years of farming, Lorne also found off-farm employment as a barn framer and carpenter, and was the lead hand at more than a few shed and barn-raising within the community.

David noted that while Lorne's formal education ended at grade-8, he was largely self-educated and had a great mind for mathematics. Consequently, he quickly mastered the art of reading a framer's square and was often consulted when someone in the neighbourhood was laying out a cottage or mansard style roof.

Personal Development

Lorne completed his grade-8 schooling and in those days post-elementary education was not always a viable option for many farm families. However, in 1939 at age 18 Lorne enrolled in a Short Course on Agriculture which was offered at that time by the Ontario Department of Agriculture and was held in Brigden. Many young men and women who were destined to become prominent farmers and community leaders in the area were enrolled in that course and along with receiving some agricultural education, Lorne established many personal connections that would prove helpful during his political career. In 1989, Lorne attended a 50-year reunion of that class.

Municipal Career

Lorne's municipal career actually began in 1938 when he was appointed by the Lambton County Roads Department to be Patrol Foreman for the Fourth Concession of Enniskillen between Highway #21 and Brigden. This essentially meant he was given the arduous task of grading the road with a team and horse-drawn grader. This would be his first time on a municipal pay roll and was paid the grand sum of .45 cents per hour for man and team. It should be noted here that in those days many of the roads in Lambton County were impassable in the spring of the year. It was this that eventually inspired Lorne to run for municipal council in 1946. He simply wanted to do something to improve the quality of roads in Lambton County.

Daughter, Shirley, noted that this job was also Lorne's first experience at networking with the neighbours in the community. As it was often difficult for people to get to town in those days, Lorne would often take orders for groceries and other necessities, pick them up while in Brigden, and deliver them on his return trip with the grader.

In January 1946 Lorne was first elected as a councillor on Enniskillen Council and served in that capacity until 1950 when he was elected Deputy Reeve. In 1952 he was elected Reeve and in 1957 Warden of Lambton County and also served as director on the Ontario Municipal Association.

Lorne firmly believed that once a municipal politician achieved the office of Warden it should be the culmination of his or her municipal career. Consequently, he did not stand for re-election in the next election and spent the following four years out of elected office.

However, in January 1958, he was appointed the tax assessor for Enniskillen Township where once again, he was in a position that enabled him to network with people across the entire municipality. In June of 1959, he was also appointed Provincial Returning Officer and in the Federal elections of 1962 and 1963 served as Federal Returning Officer. In 1988, Lorne was recognized by the Ontario Good Roads Association for 50 years of municipal service.

Provincial Government

In the summer of 1963, Lorne was encouraged to seek the nomination for the Conservative party in that fall's provincial election and at a nomination meeting held at Petrolia's Victoria Hall received the nomination to be the Standard Bearer for the Lambton Progressive Conservative Association. On Sept. 25, 1963 he elected with more than 50 per cent of the vote. He was re-elected to that office in the elections of 1967, 1971, 1975, 1977 and 1981 increasing his majority of the vote each time. In all Lorne served 23 years as the MPP for Lambton.

In 1975, he was appointed Minister Without Portfolio, in 1977 served as Chairman of Cabinet and in 1978 was appointed Minister of Government Services. Lorne proved to be as skillful at networking at Queen's Park as he was on the back roads of Lambton County and he soon made valuable connections on both sides of the house. It was about this time that a Toronto daily newspaper referred to him as the most powerful politician in Ontario.

However, in 1979, Premier William Davis gave him the job of his dreams when he appointed him Minister of Agriculture and Food. However, it really couldn't have been a worse time to be Minister of Agriculture. With interest rates at the time eclipsing 20 per cent and commodity prices in a slump, there was a flurry of farm bankruptcies and the Minister of Agriculture received most of the heat.

David Henderson recalled: "Pig and cattle farmers in Huron-Bruce and Lambton were going broke by the handful and every morning there were calls for father's resignation from the floor of the legislature," he said. "They were difficult times for everyone."

Nevertheless, Lorne was re-elected in 1981 with more than 63 per cent of the vote and the following year was appointed Provincial Secretary for Resources Development. However, after suffering some ill health, Lorne resigned from cabinet in 1983 but completed his term as MPP for Lambton. In 1985, he retired from provincial politics after having served 23 years in the Ontario Legislature.

Community Involvement

When it comes to community involvement, few could match Lorne Henderson's record.

As the late Sarnia MPP Jim Bullbrook once commented in the 1970s, "Lorne is the past master of everything that ever went on in Lambton County."

Always interested in wildlife and conservation, Lorne was one of the founding members of the Lambton Rural Game Protective Association and served as its president in 1953.

In 1959, Lorne served as chairman of the Lambton Farm Safety Council.

Both Lorne and Reta were dedicated members of the Petrolia and Enniskillen Agriculture Society and served as its president in 1960. In 1963, he was president of the St. Clair District Boy Scouts as well as president of the Five Counties Trustees and Ratepayers Association.

In 1968, Lorne was made an Honourary Member of the Walpole Indian Reserve and was given the Honourary title, "Chief Blue Sky." From 1972 to 1974, he served as chairman of the Ontario Land Drainage Association's Land Drainage Committee and in 1989 was made an Honourary Life Member. He is a past director of Union Gas and past chairman of the Petrolia Discovery. Lorne is a past board member of the Lambton Housing Authority and served as chairman in 1991-92. In 1995 he was appointed manager of the Lambtonian Senior's Apartments. He was a long-time supporter of the Petrolia's St. Andrew's Society and served as its chairman in 1995. He is also a past member of the Advisory Committee of the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Development Commission and served as Honourary Chairman of the Victoria Playhouse Petrolia restoration committee.

However, among the community organizations that Lorne had a special affection for was the Charlotte Eleanor Englehart Hospital. He served on that board for many years and was once a patient there when then Premier Frank Miller threatened to close it. Lorne left his hospital bed and went to Queen's Park and threatened his resignation as MPP if the government didn't back off on its decision. Lorne, being one of the most popular members of the Conservative Caucus, got his way and the hospital remains today.

In 1986, Lorne was appointed the first and only Honourary Life Member of that board with full voting powers.

Lorne also belonged to many fraternal organizations including the Masons, Shriners, Odd Fellows, Foresters, Rebekahs, Order of the Eastern Star, and was also a member of the Royal Canadian Legion.

Contribution to Agriculture

As a former Agriculture Minister and Food and an active member of so many local agricultural organizations, Lorne's contribution to the farming community are manifold. However, his greatest contribution may have been before he was agriculture minister.

On June 30, 1972, Lorne was appointed chairman of the Select Committee on Land Drainage. While controversial at the time, the committee was charged with essentially evaluating the costs and benefits of land drainage and a review of the Drainage Act, which had not been amended since the 1800s.

The committee travelled to 40 different locations within the province and beyond to hear briefs and presentations and to make independent studies of drainage problems and programs. There was great interest in the rural areas as evidenced by the number of briefs presented at these meetings. The committee made its final report with recommendations June of 1974 and as a result many amendments were made to the Drainage Act that brought substantial benefits to agriculture across the entire province.

As David Henderson pointed out, the committee re-wrote the tile loan system and allowed farmers to borrow money at 4 per cent. He added that during the early 1980s, a time when interest rates were out of control, that allowed many farmers to drain land that, at the time, was considered marginal pasture land.

He noted that the proof stands in the heavy clay soils of South Lambton that today outgrow the sand and lighter soils of other areas.

He said the committee concluded that what was needed in the heavier soils was to remove the heavy rains from it within a 24-hour period.

He said the committee also concluded that one-inch per hundred of fall on tile drainage was enough to accomplish what was needed. This low fall rate, he noted, allowed for 3,000 to 4,000 foot runs of tile which made for much cheaper installations.

David added that while it has taken 30 years to prove its value, the Municipal Drainage Act on Tile Drainage Installation was a document well before its time.

It should be noted that today more than 80 per cent of the farm land in Lambton County is tile drained.