

Tall but not tongue-tied: Fred Hotson

VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

Tavistock and District Historical Society

By the time Fred Hotson of Tavistock was 16, he was about 1.94 meters tall (six feet, five inches) and first place winner at the provincial-level oratorical contest competing against 10 other Ontario students. Among them, he was the only one representing a continuation school; they did not offer Grade 13, so he and his classmates had to take the train to Stratford for their final year of secondary studies. His competitors were all from regular high schools or university-focused collegiate institutes, both offering all grades from nine to 13.

The provincial finals were held in Hamilton, where he was accompanied by his principal, his teacher, his father, Hugh Hotson (an English-born footwear salesman with a shop in Tavistock), and John 'Jack' Lemp, Tavistock pharmacist and photographer. The subject of the speeches for all of the participants was: What has Canada accomplished up to that date, 1927, our 60th "Diamond Jubilee" year?

Fred highlighted our unusual bilingual federal government, the superlative engineering of the Niagara hydro-electric generation systems, the exceptional railway stretching 32,000 kilometres from coast to coast and how our North-West Mounted Police (today's RCMP) ensure day-to-day law and order. He made special

mention of the "character that has carried Canada along through 60 years of glorious history and achievement!" He won first prize.

At the Canadian national level in Ottawa, he was with about 30 advisors, friends and family members seated with the crowd reported to be 12,000. He spoke on the same subject, was declared the first-place winner and his delegation erupted with cheers, pennant waving and hats thrown in the air. The London Free Press noted "it was a great speech, filled with noble thoughts and stirring facts, devoid of flowery phrases and patterned on a firm, enthusiastic belief in Canada." Additionally, the paper reported "autograph books were held high above the throng, for (Fred's) name must adorn numerous albums of the fair sex."

When Fred returned home, he was met at the train station in Shakespeare by 50 flag-waving people honking their horns, cheering and a playing band, wrote the Tavistock Gazette. When they arrived on the edge of Tavistock, they were stopped and greeted by many more cheering people and the town's band playing a congratulatory tune. Here, Fred and his family were asked to ride into town in a phaeton (a light, four-wheeled carriage) specially decorated for the occasion but, curiously, not drawn by horses. Rather, they entered the community pulled by Fred's classmates, both male and female, tugging on long ropes!

The Hotsons were taken to the arena for a reception where the ever-poised national champion orator was feted by civic officials and an admiring crowd.

The story doesn't end there. In October 1927, Fred moved up to the International Oratorical

Competition held in Washington, D.C. While in the capital, he had lunch with future Governor General Vincent Massey. McDermott motors, Tavistock, advertised in the Gazette on Oct. 13, 1927, "Everyone is welcome to our showrooms to listen in (to the radio broadcast). This is a big event for Tavistock as Frederick has already advertised the town the world over." Why would a car dealership make this offer? They sold "batteryless receiving sets" (radios).

Overall, third prize went to Fred Hotson, second to a young woman from France and first to a Mexican lad. However, Fred was "first for English speakers" says his obituary in the Tavistock Gazette. Whodathunk it? Tall Fred from John Street in Tavistock was on the international winners' podium but he wasn't old enough to vote!

The inscription on his trophy is very hard to read but it appears to include the words "Tavistock" and "Champion." John "Jack" Lemp took this photo in his studio behind his drug store and, as I've noted in earlier articles, the image was upside-down in the camera, so it appears that Mr. Lemp didn't notice that he needed greater depth of focus on the camera to have both Fred's face and the lettering sharp by manually adjusting to a higher f-stop number.

The look on Fred's face, however, is easy to read: "Public speaking is a breeze. Let's get this picture over with." He's a dapper fellow with his double-breasted jacket, collar pin and almost plastic coif.

Fred then attended the University of Toronto intending to be a minister in the United Church, but the Great Depression changed his plans as he wanted to support



(JOHN LEMP PHOTO; LSC SCAN #9068)

Whether under pressure delivering speeches at international oratorical competitions, or posing for a photo with his winner's trophy, Fred Hotson was a stoic fellow. He was only 17 years old when he sat for a photo in John Lemp's studio in this 1927 winner's portrait.

his parents. He found full-time work at the Toronto Daily Star as a journalist where he was already known there. First, because the Star sponsored the Canadian oratorical contests and publicized his spectacular successes. Secondly, because he was a "cub reporter" there already in 1929. By age 26, he headed the Star's syndication department, distributing its news to other publications. He rose through the ranks and became executive editor of the Star Weekly, taking charge of a large staff.

Fred's oratorical skills also landed him work as a news commentator at CFCA radio in the late 1920s and '30s. The 1940 publication "Today's Young Men" commented that Fred "climbed to the top of the ladder, not in spite of the Great Depression but because of it." In 1960, he changed directions at the Star, taking charge of its philanthropic initiatives such as the Santa Claus and Fresh Air Funds supporting families in need.

He was now 50 years of age. In 1962, he was nominated as the federal Liberal candidate for Perth but was not elected. In 1974, he was in charge of the paper's public affairs and general policies, and after 44 years at the

Star, he retired later that year.

Fred died of cancer at his home in Gravenhurst on May 8, 1983, at age 73. He left his wife, Isabel, and children, Norman and Anna Belle. His brother, Ralph, was living in Tavistock. Frederick Pearson Hotson was a towering man with a giant reputation.

The last history mystery: The Oct. 16 question was "What school is in this article?" It was open to readers up to and including age 14. No one responded with the correct answer. The answer is: Tavistock Public School. The second floor and two-storey front entrance were added in 1898. The photo was taken in 1885. A similar photo is in Bill Gladding's book, *Crossroads In Time*, on page 74.

This week's history mystery: is open to all readers. What was Fred Hotson's prize when he won the Canadian national oratorical competition in 1927, in addition to the trophy that he posed with? The first person to send the correct answer to me at tim_mosher@hotmail.com will have their name, the name of their community or rural route number published with the next Vintage Views article.



(REG INNELL, TORONTO STAR PHOTO)

The Toronto Star hosted a series of panel discussions at St. Lawrence Hall in Toronto and Fred was the moderator of many of them, here in 1970.