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Valuing Our History

R.W. Gladstone: From teacher to Armco to Senator

A few readers may recall a pair of columns as while ago on Senator James McMullen of Mount Forest. At that time I remarked that Wellington County, despite its size and political importance historically, has produced only three senators since Confederation.

This week I am turning to another of these: R.W. Gladstone of Guelph.

On first appearance, Bob Gladstone seemed an unlikely politician. A slim man, rather shy and retiring, he looked more like a schoolmaster or junior accountant than a successful politico. His success came from his careful attention to detail and a self-effacing modesty that earned loyalty and trust from both voters and colleagues.

Though Gladstone's name is intimately associated with Guelph, he was not a native. Born in 1879, he grew up on a farm in Kent County. At 18 he took a short course in teacher training in Ridgetown, and spent the next three years as a country school teacher.

His quiet manner disguised a restless ambition. In 1899 he decided to try his fortunes in the west. Arriving in Winnipeg, he soon had a job as a travelling salesman for Massey-Harris. For eight years he travelled, racking up considerable commissions in the years when western agriculture enjoyed its greatest boom.

In 1907, he associated himself with some American investors connected with the American Rolling Mill Company (ARMCO). This firm had started production in Middletown, Ohio six years earlier, producing specialized steel products. The investors wished to establish a plant in Canada to manufacture culverts and piping of corrugated, galvanized steel.

The result was the formation of the Ontario Metal Culvert Company, which soon became incorporated as the Canada Ingot Iron Company. The new firm sought a location centred on the burgeoning southern Ontario market, and convenient to shipping facilities for the galvanized steel that would come from Ohio.

An old industrial building in Guelph seemed ideal. Located at the northeast corner of the Norwich Street bridge, the old Ingles and Hunter factory (ancestor of the appliance manufacturer) had been awaiting a permanent tenant ever since the original firm moved to Toronto. Gladstone supervised the installation of new equipment into the old machine shop and foundry. Initially employing a half dozen workers, Canada Ingot Iron was in full production by 1908.

R.W. Gladstone's timing couldn't have been better. With the boom in road construction, the market was immense for his culverts, which were far more durable than the old wooden structures they replaced, and cheaper than concrete alternatives.

With Gladstone's close attention to detail, the firm did well. Soon there were lines of guard rails, traffic signs, and even scrapers and graders. At the end of the First World War production could no longer be done efficiently in the old plant. Gladstone purchased a site upstream, on George Street between the Canadian Pacific tracks and the river. This provided ample room for expansion, and direct access to the railway. Production moved to new facilities here in 1920.

Meanwhile, Bob Gladstone started to take part in civic affairs. He took turns at the head of both the Chamber of Commerce and the Y.M.C.A. During the war years he devoted much time and energy to Red Cross activities. He supported the temperance cause in the city, and made many friends in the commercial sector through the Rotary Club.

Gladstone's business ability, his high personal reputation, and his affinity for the policies of the Liberal Party made him a potential candidate for office in the mid 1920s. With a general election called for Nov. 2, 1925, the Wellington South Liberals met on Sept. 19 at Guelph's city hall. Five nominations came forward at the meeting, including that of Gladstone. All withdrew, making Gladstone the unanimous choice.

He had his work cut out. Hugh Guthrie was the sitting member, and had been since 1900. Originally a Liberal, Guthrie had abandoned Laurier during the war, and now sat as a Conservative. Many Conservatives saw him as a future leader and prime minister.

Gladstone had good news on Sept. 26, when the Progressive Party met and decided not to run a candidate. Their feeling was that a third candidate would assure the reelection of Guthrie. On the other hand, the Progressives did not come out with an official endorsement of Gladstone.

Old Hugh Guthrie was never more at home than when on the platform. He had held the riding for twenty-five years, and his father had held it before him. Sure of solid support in Guelph, he spent much of his time in the towns and townships. About 300 people, half of them women, turned out to hear him in the Fergus Town Hall on Oct. 5. Tariffs were the hot issue locally. Guthrie wanted them higher and Gladstone lower.

At the Fergus meeting, Guthrie thought that Canada should embargo exports of pulpwood, nickel, and asbestos to the United States until prices improved. He thought that Gladstone's low-tariff policy had an element of hypocrisy, because Canada Ingot Iron enjoyed the protection of a 30% tariff.

One week later, Gladstone and his supporters came to Fergus. It was a double-headed evening, with another meeting in Elora. The speakers shuttled back and forth between the two. Gladstone himself led off in Fergus. Nervously and painfully, he outlined his own career, then told the crowd that both parties had blundered badly in the past,

especially regarding railway policy.

Toward the end of his rambling speech, Gladstone answered the charges made against him by Hugh Guthrie from the same platform a week earlier. He told the crowd that high tariffs hurt his firm because they apply to the raw materials that Canada Ingot Iron used. He then scored local points by noting that the same situation applied to the main Fergus industry, Beatty Brothers.

Before he sat down he said, "I am not a good speaker, but promise to give a good business consideration to all the interests in the country."

His introduction to Fergus and Elora voters that night was not impressive, but the other speakers more than made up for Gladstone's deficiencies. There were some mixups with the shuttle of speakers that night, and the meetings stretched out to more than four hours. Speakers sweated as they kept talking, continually glancing anxiously at the door for their replacement to arrive.

Though off to a shaky start, Gladstone learned quickly. Two weeks later he impressed a crowd of 3,000 at a Liberal rally in the Guelph Armoury, then jumped into his motor car and gave another speech in Fergus. This time he focused exclusively on tariff issues, with a tightly argued and impassioned address.

When the returning officer posted the results, few were surprised that Hugh Guthrie had been reelected. R.W. Gladstone had captured Elora, Erin, and all six townships in the riding, but Guthrie's majorities in Fergus and Guelph put him ahead 9,100 votes to 8,100. Gladstone had picked up votes from some Progressive Party supporters, but many others did not vote at all.

The national results produced a minority government, and period of turmoil that resulted in another election 10 months later. This time, the United Farmers were the first in the field, nominating W.A. Burnett of Nichol Township, near Alma.

Liberals expected to run Gladstone again, but at their nomination meeting the riding association decided instead to endorse Burnett, and not field their own candidate.

It was a strategy to try to knock off Guthrie, but it did not work. The incumbent won by almost 1,100 votes. As in 1925, Guthrie's heaviest support came from the working class St. Patrick's Ward in Guelph, known simply as "The Ward," where he piled up a three-to-one margin.

The 1926 election resulted in a majority Liberal government, which sat until Mackenzie King called the next election for July 28, 1930. The Wellington South Liberals held their nomination meeting on June 11. Six names came forward, including those of Gladstone, Chris Wilson of Fergus, and Udney Richardson of Elora.

All withdrew except John B. Mitchell, the baldheaded president of the Guelph Spring

Axle Company, and a tireless Liberal worker for years. Noting a downturn in the economy, R.W. Gladstone had decided to concentrate his attention on his business.

Mitchell did better than either Gladstone or Burnett had done, but not by much. Guthrie took the seat yet again by a vote of 8,900 to 8,000. He became Minister of Justice in the government of R.B. Bennett, and stuck with that ship as it sank through the depression.

The prime minister did not call the next election until October 1935. It would result in major changes in Wellington South.

[ photograph ]

Organizing outside Guelph: The city, with two-thirds of the population of the old South Wellington riding, totally dominated it. Nevertheless, The towns and township were important, particularly for R.W. Gladstone if he were to offset Hugh Guthrie's immense popularity in Guelph. Due to mixups in shuttling speakers between Elora and Fergus, these meetings lasted more than four hours.