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## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROBERT WEBER O'BRIEN— PIONEER COLLINGWOOD MERCHANT

H. David Vuckson

My great-grandfather Robert Weber O'Brien (hereafter referred to as "R. W.") was a prominent business man and politician in Collingwood for much of the forty-five years he lived in town. Born in Barrie in 1849, one of seven children born there to parents Frederick O'Brien and Mary Weber from Dublin, Ireland, he grew up in the "County Town" as Barrie used to be known. His father Frederick died at what we today would consider a young age—48—in early 1866 (however the "average" life-expectancy at that time was between 40 and 50 years). That same year, when barely age 17, R. W. was a Private in the Barrie Rifle Company No. 1 called out during the Fenian Raid of 1866. His unit served for five months at Fort Erie and Dunville in southern Ontario.

In Barrie he worked alongside his older brother Fred as a "Dealer in Grain" to support his widowed mother and four sisters (another brother had died in infancy). By 1874 brother

Fred was getting married for the second time in Guelph and R. W., age 25, moved to Collingwood to seek his fortune. Initially he worked for others, most likely C. E. Stephens who had a Pork Packing House at that time just south of the location of what is now the Town Hall/Arena. He stated his profession as “Pork Inspector” on his Marriage Record when, in July 1875, he married Catharine Amelia Robinson, daughter of (late) Dr. Charles John Robinson and Jeannette Wilkie at Otterfield. Dr. Robinson (1812-1874) had lived the luxurious life of a country gentleman on his estate (named *Otterfield* after a colony of otters in the bay) on the shore of Lake Couchiching north of Orillia. That area is now known as Ardtrea.

R. W.’s advantageous marriage to the daughter of a wealthy man enabled him to enter business for himself as a grocer on Hurontario St. The mercantile business was in the O’Brien DNA (R. W.’s father Frederick and his brother Fred Jr. had followed the same line of work in Barrie). R. W.’s first child Henry Byrne O’Brien (“H. B.”) was born in 1876 and later while in his teen years would enter the mercantile business with his father. Four more children would follow: Eva Mildred in 1882, Zoe Berna in 1884, Robert Reginald in 1886, and Kate Olivetta in 1890.

The O’Brien home (still standing) was on the south-west corner of Pine St. at Fourth St. West. On March 5, 1880 Martha Peters, Widow, of Collingwood sold Lot 41, Plan 73, consisting of one

quarter-acre on the West Side of Pine Street to Catharine O'Brien, wife of Robert W. O'Brien. R. W., the clever businessman, put the property in his wife's name to protect his business interests. The purchase price was \$500.00 and the seller granted the O'Briens a mortgage for half that amount. The lot's price seems to have been quite a bargain when one considers that the same lot changed hands a number of times between 1862 (when it was first created) and the Depression of 1873-79 for amounts of three, four, and even seven thousand dollars during Collingwood's early boom years. The lot was originally created by the Simcoe County Sheriff, Benjamin Walker Smith, who, with advance knowledge of the railway coming to this area and the town that would result, had patented 335 acres of the townsite owned nominally by lumberman Joel Underwood and had the land surveyed into building lots.

The house that was home to the O'Brien family for nearly sixty years was built about 1880 and is described as a "one-storey, hip-roofed, beige-brick Victorian cottage with buff-brick trim, and with front and side brick bay windows". Until it was converted into a duplex in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century utilizing the two original main entry doors (one each facing Pine and Fourth Streets) for the two dwellings, there was a graceful verandah

that wrapped around the north-east corner of the house, encompassing those two entries. For those of you who remember public school teachers Florence Currie and Edna Roberts, they lived in the Pine St. side of the house in the 1950's while the Fourth St. side of the house was occupied by Gertrude and Chalmers Gorsline.

On Sunday, September 25<sup>th</sup> 1881 tragedy struck when Collingwood's Great Fire destroyed a large number of wooden buildings and a lesser number of brick buildings on Hurontario St. R. W.'s store was in one of the wooden buildings near where 69 Hurontario St. now stands. His brother Fred was now a resident of Collingwood and a member of the Georgian Fire Brigade. The firemen had to make the painful decision to let the wooden buildings burn while they had a better chance of stopping the flames in one of the brick buildings and that is exactly what happened. R. W. managed to salvage some of his stock before the flames reached his store. In addition to groceries, he also sold crockery, glassware, flour and feed. Two of the items rescued from his store were a set a china figurines of a boy and a girl. We had these in our home for many years, the date 1881 written on the underside of them. And unlike some merchants who had little or no insurance, R. W. had \$1000.00 insurance which is equivalent to over \$23,000.00 in purchasing power today. For the O'Brien brothers this disaster

was a case of déjà vu for they had seen the same thing happen to their father's store in Barrie in 1864.

With the benefit of his insurance money R. W. was soon back in business. In July 1885 the Collingwood *Enterprise* reported: *An Upset—On Thursday last Mr. R. W. O'Brien was driving to Nottawa when his mare took fright at a passing load of hay, gave a sudden jump, upset the buggy, and made R. W. a [sic] tumble into the ditch at the roadside. Mr. O'Brien was badly bruised but the buggy was not injured.* I suspect that at the time of this incident he was on his way to pick up produce from a farmer.

The same paper reported in August 1893 that R. W. had opened a second business: *A Business Change.—Messrs. R. W. O'Brien & Son have bought out the Metropolitan Tea Store, lately carried on by Mrs. B. Rigg, who retires from business. The stand is one of the best in Collingwood, and the new firm will undoubtedly do a good business. Mr. O'Brien is well known as an experienced man of business, and his son Harry [H. B., age 16], who will be the man in charge, is both industrious and clever. The new firm have considerably changed and improved the appearance of their place of business and they have added a large line of new stock, so as to be prepared for all demands made upon them. Their specialties will be groceries, provisions, flour and feed, crockery and glassware, and in these lines they*

*expect to keep the best and sell the lowest. See advt. They renamed the business "Boston T Store". It was located at 148 Hurontario St. at the north-west corner of Hurontario and Third Streets where the Red Hen Restaurant and former Bell Telephone Building are found today. The display advt. accompanying this announcement reads: Boston T Store, 148 Hurontario St., Collingwood. R. W. O'BRIEN & SON, DEALERS IN GROCERIES, FLOUR AND FEED, CROCKERY & GLASSWARE. Highest Price Paid for Raw Fur, Ginseng, also Hides, Wool and Sheepskins. In this last sentence was a hint of things to come in a few more years.*

The 1894 Board of Trade Review stated: *R. W. O'Brien, corner Third and Hurontario Sts., makes a specialty of groceries and general provisions, dealing largely in dried and canned goods, green groceries and dried meats. This house is popular, owing to the accommodating qualities of Mr. O'Brien and his son, both of whom do their utmost to serve their customers promptly and satisfactorily, and who endeavor always to give good value for money received.* By the time of the 1895 Collingwood Directory, groceries appeared to be taking a back seat to other items: *O'Brien, R. W. & Co. (Robert W. and Henry O'Brien), Hides, Pelts, Wool & Groceries.*

The Fenian Raid of 1866 was already 34 years in the past when officialdom decided to award medals to those who had served

in the militias of the day. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1900 the *Barrie Northern Advance* announced: *MEN WHO WILL GET MEDALS. These Fighters will be Decorated for Quelling the Fenians. Medals are about to be distributed to the following gentlemen who were in 1866 in service with the 35<sup>th</sup> Battalion at the time of the Fenian Raid. In case any parties now dead made application before death, the medal will be given to their heirs.* The long list of men from Simcoe County included R. W. O'Brien and a number of other Collingwood surnames, some of the more familiar ones being Basset, Moberly, Trott and Stephen.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, R. W., while a prosperous merchant and now also a "decorated" veteran of the Fenian Raid, must have considered that he had three daughters approaching marriageable age (only two of them would eventually marry) and he must have also concluded that there was more money to be made selling furs than perishable lettuce and radishes. On May 8, 1901 Charles Cameron, widower, sold the 22 ft. wide lot at 69 Hurontario St. to Catharine A. O'Brien, wife of Robert W. O'Brien for \$3300.00. The remains of a stone house owned by Charles Cameron had stood on this lot since the time of the Great Fire of 1881. R. W. commissioned local architect Fred T. Hodgson to design a 2-storey store and warehouse that was to become R. W. O'Brien & Co.'s Fur Store. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1901 a mortgage of \$6000.00 was obtained from the Agricultural Savings & Loan Company for

construction of the building. In October 1901 Mr. E. J. O'Sullivan rented the upper floor and opened a branch of his Owen Sound Business College for one term before relocating elsewhere.

O'Brien's business selling furs, gentlemen's "furnishings" and millinery was underway on a grand scale. His eldest daughter Eva Mildred worked as a milliner [a maker of hats] on the upper floor. On Monday evening, August 1, 1904 the Band of the 48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders gave a concert in the Grand Opera House. One of the items on the programme was: "*INTERNATIONAL CONTEST between Englishman, Scotchman, Irishman and Frenchman (5 minutes each) for Silk Hat donated by R. W. O'Brien & Son, Furriers.*" A year later, R. W. and his number one son H. B. were still the principals of the firm when, in August 1905, Eva Mildred O'Brien married Robert James (Jim) Hewson (these were my grandparents) and R. W. took his new son-in-law "into the business" making him a partner.

Like his father before him in Barrie, R. W. knew how to speculate in land and real estate. This he did in Collingwood and the extent of his real estate activities is demonstrated by the fact that at the time of this 1905 wedding, my great-grandmother O'Brien offered my grandmother a choice of three different houses as a wedding present; she chose the house at 433 Hurontario St., the main 2-storey portion of which



still stands (with modern additions) near the rear of the lot. It would be the Hewson home for 52 years. By contrast, in August 1905 H. B. O'Brien, in anticipation of his June 1906 marriage to Euphemia (Phem) Simpson, *purchased* the adjoining property on the Ste. Marie St. side of the fence from his mother. Many of you will recognize this property as the former home of Ed Smart at 458 Ste. Marie St.

The *Collingwood Bulletin Industrial & Commercial Number*, Dec. 20, 1906, pg. 88, ran the following notice for O'Brien's fur store: *FROM THE TRAPPER TO WEARER DIRECT.* *This means only one profit with our guarantee back of every article sold and manufactured by us. NOTICE We pay express charges to any point in Ontario, and send furs on approval at our own expense. Costs you nothing to see our furs. RAW FURS: For the last thirty years the Senior Member of our Firm has been buying and selling raw furs, hides and skins. We can pay better prices than dealers, being manufacturers and using large quantities of Canadian skins. Send For Our Price List Of Raw Furs. We pay Express Charges and furnish shipping tags. O'Brien's Fur Store COLLINGWOOD. Lock Box 83. Reference, Bank of Toronto.* The phrase "for the last thirty years" appears to indicate that R. W. was dealing in "raw furs, hides and skins" from the time he arrived in Collingwood and possibly may have dabbled in this field while still living in Barrie.

In 1908 R. W.'s first-born son H.B. O'Brien, who has been described as "the black sheep of the family", left the family business and distanced himself from the family by completely changing course and going into business for himself on Hurontario St. selling Real Estate and Insurance, a profession he followed for the rest of his life. One relative has stated that he "was never talked about".

While all of this business wheeling and dealing was going on, R. W. found time to serve on the Collingwood Town Council. For eleven of the years between 1885 and 1912 he served as Councillor (twice), Deputy Reeve (once), First Deputy Reeve (six times), and Second Deputy Reeve (twice). During his year as Deputy Reeve, 1888, he also represented Collingwood on the Simcoe County Council. In January 1889 the County Council appointed him to the Board of the Hamilton & North Western Railway component of the Northern & North Western Railway. The purpose of this was to look out for the jilted interests of Simcoe County over the 1879 betrayal by the Hamilton railway amalgamating with its rival the Northern Railway to whom it was intended to give competition and on which basis Simcoe County, Collingwood and the townships the line ran through had given financial bonuses to construct the line. As it turned out, 1888 was the year that the Grand Trunk Railway took over both railway lines into Collingwood and they ignored Simcoe County's right to have a representative on the Board as related

by Andrew F. Hunter in his monumental work *The History of Simcoe County* (Part I, pg. 188).

R. W. was very likely a member of the Blackstone Hunt Club, an exclusive outfit which included professional men and major merchants in town. Every year in November, the club members headed north on the tugboat *Saucy Jim* to their private deer hunting preserve near Parry Sound. It was R. W.'s custom "to spend a couple of weeks in the north country" almost every fall. The interior of O'Brien's Fur Store had a multitude of deer heads with antlers mounted on the walls as well as bearskins on the floor, stuffed birds on the shelves, etc. The slogan was "Sign of the Bear" and an old photo shows a stuffed bear out on the Hurontario St. sidewalk.

In addition to hunting, business and municipal politics, R. W. also found time to be a member of the Orange Lodge, the Masonic Lodge, and First Presbyterian Church. Other interests included cricket, fishing, curling, and horse racing (he owned a race horse named, appropriately, *Lady Collingwood*). In 1903 R. W. was a member of the General Committee of the Collingwood Old Boys' Association. This was a group for sons of Collingwood who had left town and moved to other places in North America to seek their fortunes. The Association held an "Old Boys' Reunion" in the summer of 1903. An arch, erected

on Hurontario St., through which the parade passed in front of the Town Hall proclaimed, "WELCOME TO YE OLDE BOYS. HAPPY TO MEET—SORRY TO PART—HOPING SOON TO MEET AGAIN". From the brochure comes the following membership requirement: *Any person, without regard to age, who has at any time resided for two years in the Town of Collingwood, or its immediate vicinity, is entitled to membership in the Association, the fee for which has been fixed at the nominal sum of fifty cents.*

The good times came to an abrupt halt on July 28<sup>th</sup> 1910 when a policeman on his early morning rounds discovered O'Brien's Fur Store on fire at 4:00 a.m. The blaze, the cause of which was never-determined, totally gutted the building. Because O'Brien's building was an infill between two already existing brick business buildings that were constructed after the Great Fire of 1881, the thick brick walls remained standing so that the interior could be rebuilt. The property abstract shows no evidence of a mortgage for the rebuilding; it is therefore assumed that R. W. had adequate insurance based on his past experience. My mother's brother Howard Hewson who inherited the business from my grandfather told me a long time ago that there were charred timbers in the basement from a fire. The current owner of the building has confirmed to me the presence of blackened bricks and other evidence of that fire 108 years ago.

After the wreckage was cleared away, the building interior was reconstructed and accompanied by a major business change. R. W. had passed his 61<sup>st</sup> birthday and perhaps he decided it was time to slow down. The fur business was taken over in 1910 by William Wegener who advertised a *finely appointed shop and show room on Hurontario St., in the same building with O'Brien & Hewson*, possibly utilizing the warehouse and/or the upper floor. R. W.'s second son, Robert Reginald O'Brien and his son-in-law R. J. Hewson now succeeded R. W. as business partners in a "Men's Furnishings and Made to Measure Clothing" business also in 1910. Imbedded in the concrete sidewalk out front until at least the late 1950's were brass footprints which were placed as though a person were walking along and then turning to the front door of the store along with a similarly-embedded rectangular brass plaque stating "O'Brien & Hewson". Their 1911 advertisement stated: *The present firm...is fitted in elegant and modern manner, and has all the appointments and conveniences of the metropolitan store, while the stock is of the finest quality, latest styles and the most fashionable patterns, "up-to-date goods for wide-awake people". In the furnishings department they carry only the swellest styles and stock, and they also carry a fine range of cloths of correct colors and weights. A specialty is made of made to measure clothing, which are perfect in every regard and carry this firm's guarantee with every garment.*

In 1912 R. W.'s second daughter Zoe Berna married Harry R. Storey, a purser on the passenger steamships of the Northern Navigation Co. This union produced my cousin Dr. Bob Storey, well-known Collingwood physician. Also in 1912 R. W. applied for the grant available under the Fenian Raid Volunteer Bounty Act whereby veterans of the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870 that were still living could receive a federal cheque for \$100.00. Part of the application involved getting a "Comrade's Declaration" from someone who personally knew the applicant and could attest that the applicant had indeed served in 1866. R. W. got his Comrade's Declaration from fellow veteran William Peter Soules, a Barrie municipal politician who had also served in the Barrie Rifles.

After a full and rewarding life, and having attained his "threescore years and ten", Robert Weber O'Brien died on Dominion Day (it was not called Canada Day until 1982) Tuesday, July 1, 1919 in his 71<sup>st</sup> year following a "stroke of paralysis" on June 30 and another stroke on the day of his death. The business he founded at 69 Hurontario St. would continue to operate as O'Brien & Hewson for another twenty years.

Messrs. O'Brien & Hewson had their share of business misery as well when they were the victims, not of a fire, but of a break-in at their store in 1931. There is never an opportune time to

be the victim of theft but to have this event occur during the Great Depression when there was so little business to begin with was quite a blow. The *Barrie Northern Advance* reported on October 1, 1931: *In an early morning raid on O'Brien & Hewson's clothing store, Collingwood, Friday, Sept. 18<sup>th</sup>, robbers succeeded in getting away with clothing valued at \$400 to \$500. The thieves had apparently taken their time in looking over the stock and selected a variety of clothing, ranging from overcoats to scarves.* The Inflation Calculator tells us that \$500.00 in 1931 was equivalent to \$8085.37 in 2018. This loss, together with the poor business conditions in the 1930's when the store had to support Reginald O'Brien and the five members of the Hewson family, may have contributed, in part, to the fact that my grandfather lost the building to the Town of Collingwood for unpaid property taxes in October 1939.

Reginald O'Brien died on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1939 at age 53 (unmarried) after an illness of several months and with his death (he was the last O'Brien family member directly connected with the business) the store had become Hewson's Men's Wear operated by my grandfather R. J. Hewson and, after his death in 1946, by *his* son Howard Hewson who was eventually joined by *his* son Jim. My grandfather was able to pay off the back taxes and reclaim ownership of the building in 1941 due to both an increase in business because of the war, and financial assistance from his sister Pearl's husband Jack

Mathers. During the Great Depression of the 1930's many people, of necessity, lived by the adage "use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without" but when it came to death, an undertaker was needed and business had never let up at the Mathers Funeral Home in Stayner—people were literally "dying to get in there".

### R. W. O'Brien's Estate

R. W.'s Will signed on October 29, 1890 left everything he owned to his wife Catharine Amelia. Since at his death in 1919 the store on Hurontario St. and the house on Pine St. were in his wife's name, and the business was in the name of his son and son-in-law, there was very little in the way of "General Description of Property" when the Surrogate Court of Simcoe County summed up his estate. He had \$675.00 in the Canada Life Assurance Co. and 500 shares in Paragon-Hitchcock Mines Ltd. (Shares were \$1.00 each and R. W.'s "Amount Paid Up" was \$50.00.) This mine has an interesting connection to Collingwood. Begun in August 1918, and capitalized at two million dollars, it was situated on Lot 10, Concession 1 of Tudhope Township in the Elk Lake area of the Temiskaming District in Northern Ontario. The Head Office was in Collingwood for good reason: a number of the Officers were Collingwood men. The President was Dr. Donald McKay (Sr.), the Secretary was David Melville. Reginald Gilpin, F. Feighan,



Wm. T. Herrington, Chas. Pitt and W. A. Hamilton, all of Collingwood, were Directors. The remaining Officers were: Vice-President, W. R. Hitchcock, Cornwall and J. P. Welsh of Wabun near Elk Lake, the latter in charge of the fourteen men employed at the mine in 1919. The area contained gold, silver and cobalt. The old Hitchcock mine was still being explored in 2017 when the muck pile revealed quantities of cobalt and silver that had been missed in the original diggings.

R. W. also owned some real estate in the north. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century the huge part of Ontario north of the Great Lakes and Georgian Bay used to be called “New Ontario” and so we find R. W. owning a half-interest in Lot Number 8, Concession 2, Township of McCool, New Ontario (in the Cochrane District) as well as Lot Number 6—south half—in the 5<sup>th</sup> Concession of Coulson Township, New Ontario (also Cochrane District). The value of the two real estate holdings possibly in the middle of nowhere at the time (one hundred years ago) was \$175.00. Together with the Life Insurance and the Mine Stocks his “Property” was worth \$900.00. The word “None” was repeated thirteen times down a list of items such as sheep and swine, horned cattle, horses, farming implements, debts, clothing and jewelry, etc.

After R. W.’s death his widow and her two unmarried children continued to live in the house on Pine St. In 1933, Catharine

Amelia O'Brien died and the house was left to her son Robert Reginald and daughter Kate Olivetta as Joint Tenants. When Reginald died in 1939, the property was sold to Gertrude M. Gorsline, wife of merchant Chalmers Gorsline. The last remaining O'Brien family member to have lived in the house "Aunt Vett", a spinster school teacher, then took up housekeeping with her widowed sister Zoe Storey a block away at 266 Maple St. There is a charming anecdote about this move. In the Victorian era the fireplace in the parlour/drawing room was often the family gathering place. The two sisters had the main fireplace surround and mantle from Pine St. removed and reinstalled in the living room on Maple St. as a remembrance of their beloved former family home where they were born. As mentioned earlier, the Pine St. house was eventually divided up into two dwellings and lost its wraparound verandah and its last connection to its Victorian-era past as a single family home.

In 1958 the Pine St. property underwent another major change when it was subdivided. Gertrude Gorsline sold the westerly 60 ft. along 4<sup>th</sup> St. West [i. e. what had been the back yard where R. W. would have had his barn/stable/horse/buggy, etc. in the early days] to Eric M. Stewart and Mossie D. Stewart for \$1500.00. Eric MacFarlane Stewart was the owner of White's Bungalows at Wasaga Beach at the time. Prior to being a tourism operator, for thirty years he owned and operated a

Men's Wear store at 93 Hurontario St., just north of the Town Hall. The Stewarts had a one-storey home built on that subdivided land at what is now 70 4<sup>th</sup> St. West. It is so ironic that a business man who for three decades was a direct competitor with O'Brien & Hewson/Hewson's should end up living on what had been O'Brien's backyard! Such are life's surprises.

When R. W. died in 1919 both Collingwood newspapers spoke well of him. The Collingwood *Enterprise* described him as *one of our leading and best known citizens...a popular citizen of the town with a host of friends who greatly regret to learn of his death.* The *Bulletin*, a bitter rival to the *Enterprise* said, *Collingwood lost a citizen who for many years was prominently and actively identified with the affairs of the town in many ways...Mr. O'Brien was a good citizen and had a wide circle of friends. He was popular with all, a good companion and a good friend.* That two rival newspapers, polar opposites in their politics, actually could agree on something is a measure of the high esteem and respect with which the people of Collingwood viewed my great-grandfather. The *Enterprise-Messenger* edition of July 5, 1919 stated, *The funeral of the late R. W. O'Brien on Thursday afternoon, was the largest and most representative that has taken place in Collingwood for some time and every walk of life was represented amongst those who gathered to pay a last tribute to an old friend.*

R. W. O'Brien served his adopted hometown well in many ways and left a lasting legacy of the brick commercial building at 69 Hurontario St. which is still serving as a clothing store known most recently as "Poise On Main" and now, since July 2018, known as "Homme Femme".

***David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien, the subject of this story. David's roots in town go back to 1875; he and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B. C.***