

Citizen of the year, Isabel Watson speech reviews 50 years of service

The crowd rose to their feet following Esther Taylor's speech about the 50 year career of the 1976 Citizen of the Year Mrs. Isabel Watson, at a banquet honoring the woman held Friday evening at the Legion hall.

Miss Taylor's speech is reprinted here.

It happens rarely that the histories of an individual and an institution are so intimately linked it is hard to separate one from the other. Such is the case with Acton Public Library, and the Chamber of Commerce 1976 Citizen of the Year. If one were to play a word association game among old-time Actonites, the term 'library' would bring an immediate response: Isabel Watson.

After moving to Acton in 1913 with her widowed mother from the family farm near Rattlesnake Point above Milton, Isabel Elliott then a young school girl lost no time in hurrying to the old Town Hall to buy her first library card for the sum of five cents.

Our Citizen of the year considered this one of the soundest investments she has ever made. It was as well, the first milestone in a book adventure spanning 50 years, and adventure featuring almost unbelievable changes as the quiet village of Acton grew into a nuclear age town.

In 1926, Isabel Watson was appointed librarian, a post she held through lean times, and finally more prosperous years of freer spending. The lean years were memorable for penny-pinching which by today's standards seems laughable.

A search for an old library ledger reveals that even in 1939, Acton's librarian and her assistant were paid monthly at the rate of \$13 and \$8 respectively. These wages went unchanged until 1944.

Regardless of meagre wages and low book budgets, library services were maintained in Acton, thanks to the unstinting work and dedication of Isabel Watson and her assistants. Among the latter, many readers will remember the late Madge Chapman who served with the chief librarian for over 30 years. A warm and gentle person, who loved life and people, she lived to see the opening of our centennial library, but was ill to work in the new quarters.

Small quarters

When Mrs. Watson joined the staff, the library was still housed in the old Town Hall where it originated in 1898 in a small room conveniently close to the jail cells across the hall. In winter, it was heated by a pot-bellied stove, that further reduced the limited space.

Overcrowding forced a move in 1934 to the fourth room of the YMCA, where the library remained until the town's new centennial library was finished in 1967.

Newcomers to the library enthuse over the \$76,000 building and its scenic setting. Their praise delights Mrs. Watson and her staff who are justifiably proud of their modern quarters. As the "Chief" comments from time to time: "They should have seen the old library on peak nights when the room was packed with wall-to-wall readers. Remember those queues out in the Y lobby."

Similarly, when elementary school classes visited the library twice weekly, space was at a premium. As one staffer recalls: "You couldn't move for kids. But somehow the books came in and went out on a regular basis without casualties from the traffic jams."

Credits Les Duby

Our Citizen of the Year readily gives credit to a former Citizen, Councillor Les Duby whose militant campaign as Mayor was largely responsible for council's decision to build a new library.

To quote another long-time staffer: "But for Mr. Duby and a few dedicated board members, we could have wound up circulating books in an old store on Mill Street."

One cannot work at one job for 50 years without accumulating a wealth of memories and impressions. According to local scuttlebutt, at one time a clutch of back-when library trustees considered applying for a Carnegie library. Although the old minute book omits reference to this debate, it was rumoured that the good trustees rejected this opportunity. Why? Because in their collective opinion, Car-



ACTON CHAMBER OF Commerce president Louis Charlebois presented Acton Citizen of the Year 1976, Mrs. Isabel Watson with a plaque honoring her at a special banquet and dance Friday evening held at the Legion Hall.

neigie's wealth was ill-gotten. How times have changed!

Permissiveness and other changing social and moral values have had their effect on reading material. Books that would never have been allowed shelf space in the old library are bought and circulated as a matter of course. Sex and violence have become acceptable, if not palatable to all readers.

It's a far cry from the years when stern board members questioned the wisdom of buying Florence Barclay's novels, including a tear-jerker titled "Innocence." Their objection was not to the contents of the books-but to the morals of the author, who reportedly was 'living in sin.'

Later, a woman trustee, obviously an advance Libber, demanded the withdrawal of a western yarn because one of the characters used such shocking profanities as Damn. She was outvoted.

Isabel Watson belongs to a generation that believed in and practised the work ethic. Even old friends are amazed at her capacity for hard work, a characteristic that might have been inherited from her Scottish ancestors.

Boredom has never plagued our 1976



Citizen of the year she has kept too busy to be bored. She and her late husband Perry starting with a small milk bar on Main Street, built up a flourishing restaurant business just around the corner on Mill Street. Here the Watsons, Isabel Perry and son Tom served the public until the business was sold in 1973.

While her only son Tom was in Scouts, Mrs. Watson was active in the Scout Mothers Association. In her younger years she taught Sunday School at Knox Presbyterian Church where each Sunday a

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ESTHER TAYLOR right, delivers a speech on the 50 years of service to the Acton Public Library of Citizen of the Year 1976, Mrs. Isabel Watson. The honored guest sits modestly by while the speech is being read, during a special banquet in her honor held Friday night in the Legion hall.

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carillon rings out in memory of the late Perry Watson. She is a charter member of the Lakeside Chapter I.O.D.E.

Make interesting book

Other librarians learning of Isabel Watson's long stint as Acton Chief tell her she should write a book about her experiences. If she should decide to embark on a literary career, she can be counted on to give full value, because this is one of her outstanding qualities. Our Citizen of the year never does things by halves.

Should she decide to write a history of Acton library, she will have a wealth of material to research, starting with the first librarian, Mrs. Etta Laird McDonald who was hired for \$40. a year. Her duties included caretaking and book-dusting. Only readers over 14 years could borrow books from the old-time library.

Drawing on first-hand experiences, Mrs. Watson could tell of working with Scott sisters, Letty and Laura, Mrs. Stan Norton, Mary Chalmers, Mrs. George Williams, Mrs. Jack Chapman, Miss Helen Lamb. Her current staffers are Mrs. Eileen New, Mrs. Margaret Merrin, and Esther Taylor, the latter a 20-year assistant. 1976 pages are Kim Bishop, Becky Baxter and Erica Haefner.

Regionalization enveloped Acton library some ten years ago, before the town itself was hauled to the altar with Georgetown and Esquesing. Acton in Halton County, along with Brant and Hamilton-Wentworth comprise the South Central Regional Library system.

Among the blessings stemming from Regional government is a change in the status of Acton library, which is now considered a Halton Hills branch library under the Georgetown's umbrella. On the eight-man board, Acton has two representatives veteran George Lee and former town councillor Norman Elliott.

The young school girl who bought her first library card in 1913, is now a grandmother, with six grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

When she bows out of the book business at the end of the year, Isabel Watson will have the satisfaction that she has always gone the second mile during her 50-odd years as Acton Librarian. She will be missed by readers and staff.

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