



## Town Hall Tales

By Esther Taylor

Not too many people can boast of getting their post-secondary education in the same room which was their kindergarten environment. I started school in the old Town Hall Council Chambers. Thirty-one years later, in the same location I began my post-secondary education—two memorable years as Acton's first woman councillor.

Believe me, this is the kind of education one does not acquire for love or money at a university or college. It yields lasting scars—but no formal diplomas or degrees. It's safe to report that I took crash courses in psychology, political science, economics—and survival. My colleagues and I baked in the summer through sessions that occasionally dragged on until 3 a.m. In winter, we shivered and chattered our molars if we happened to be seated too far from the pot-bellied stove, only source of heat in the town's historic political arena.

In later years, when councils were not required to look twice at every dollar, the room was renovated, almost past recognition. In my time as chairman of property, parks, arena and fire, it was a dingy disaster, but no one complained. As one of the last unpaid municipal councils, we gave scant heed to our surroundings, except when the temperature got out of hand, which it did frequently, and always as a result of exterior weather conditions.

If the old walls could speak, they would report savage debates that literally turned the air blue. Literally, because the more furious some councillors waxed, the more ferociously they puffed on their fags and pipes. Here, alas, when I was old enough to know much better, I became hooked on nicotine in self defence. Just another costly facet of my post-secondary education.

I was elected in 1950, heading the polls then and next time around. Had I ventured a third term, I

wouldn't have made it as garbage collector. So much for popularity and public favour. At least my political experience taught me this much: never run for public office, if you're certain of getting booted in the posterior. It's a waste of time—and these days, also a waste of money.

Financially, candidates successful or not, stood to lose little in elections of the early fifties. If I remember correctly, I paid for one advertisement in each try for public office, a minimum outlay for all I learned, on the street and in council chambers.

What qualifications did I bring to the job of municipal councillor? Hmm. Well, I had a Grade 13 diploma for subjects I studied at home and at school without a teacher, because those were the years of Acton Continuation School. Hopelists seeking Grade 13 classes had to travel to Guelph. Lacking funds (depression time: sob, sob) I grinded my teeth and did it the hard way—on my own, plus

some math help from another student a year ahead of me.

So I had this formal education, which wasn't worth a damn in helping one to land a job. In addition I was armed with high ideals about honesty, loyalty and the rewards of public service.

All in all, I was probably one of the most naive would-be politicians that ever took the oath of office. To be blunt, very dumb in some areas. A late bloomer, as always, it took me two years to learn what canner humans are literally born knowing. It was an education right enough, one I don't regret, because I needed to learn that politics although fascinating, can be a dirty, cutthroat game. Loyalty may be a drawback

in a successful political career, and it's suicidal to espouse unpopular causes.

During my first year as chairman of property, arena, park and fire, we bought a new fire pumper. Still shockingly green behind the ears, I failed to savvy when a salesman invited me out to dinner in the course of negotiations. Fortunately, I refused the invitation, not realizing until much later that this was a bid to buy my influence.

Also during my first term, a delightful rumor went the rounds, that council had accepted a \$16,000 bribe from a local industry for favours received by the latter. Funny: I never did see a dollar of that money, nor did

my colleagues. The scuttlebutt took a long time to languish and die.

An unpopular move that split council was the decision to buy a snow blower. Wow! What a furore that sparked! Those of us who voted for the infernal machine, had to live with it for the rest of our months on council.

In due time, I discovered that a town councillor must develop a thick skin in order to survive. Although we were unpaid public servants, we had to suffer considerable bad-mouthing, because our fellow citizens were beginning to take more of an interest in public affairs. Gone forever were the years when nomination meetings were held in the council chambers,

sometimes with such sparse attendance that those present went out into the streets looking for more bodies. The meeting at which I was first nominated was held upstairs with a record attendance of 150. Times were changing, and people with them.

It was my luck to serve when our streets were torn up for installation of sewers, approved by a slim majority of 35, if I remember correctly. Irate citizens nailed us left and right on the streets and at council meetings.

One of the most savage battles in which I was involved at council level concerned the disposal plant and payments to the contractors. That session boiled on until 3

a.m. Unblushingly, I recall one councillor calling a colleague an SOB. Perhaps it's just as well that historic walls can not speak of the past.

My first year I sat at council table with Charles Wood, Lorne Wiecek, Ray Thompson, Jack Greer, and Alf Fryer. The late Ted Tyler was mayor, Jack Hargrave, reeve, and J. J. Stewart, deputy-reeve.

In the 1951 election, Tom Salmon defeated Mr. Tyler, but had to resign in mid-December because of ill health. This necessitated another mayoralty contest, won by Ben Hachin with a seven-vote lead over the former mayor. Ab Irwin and Clarence Rognvaldson were

new councillors.

Newcomers and veterans, we continued our education in sociology, political science, psychology, economics—and survival. Sometimes as light relief, the town fathers took turns hiding the size ten footwear of the so-called Lady councillor. It's surprising how many hiding places they found in the old Council Chambers.

Brick by brick and two by four by two by four, the downstairs room in the old Town Hall is without a doubt the most historical place in Acton. I hope it and the rest of the building survive, because they can never be replaced. Memories are fine, but even the most vivid memories fade with time.



THE CERAMICS OF Del and Ed Howse were part of the Senior Citizens Week display in the library last week. James Hennessey, Mrs. J. Hargrave, Tom and Jessie Ware, Laura Dittich, Florence Wilker, Nellie Beatty and Anna Miller also exhibited their art in the library's display case.



BRINGING BACK MEMORIES an old fire engine took part in the parade on Saturday. Deb Thornhill and Mrs. C. K. Browne are seen waving to spectators on the sidewalk.



KIM McLEAN AND CHRISTINE Couture got into the spirit of M. Z. Bennett Circus with their floppy-hatted clown outfits and their winning smiles.



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