

Formidable railway entrepreneur was native son

BY ERIC BALKIND (WITH FILES FROM ERIC ELSTONE)
In Acton's Fairview Cemetery lies the only person from Halton ever granted a knighthood. Sir Donald Mann (1853-1934) was a remarkable Canadian; in his time blacksmith, contractor, pioneer railroader, mining entrepreneur and sporting enthusiast. His most famous legacy is the impressive Mann Cup, awarded annually since 1910 to the top lacrosse team in the country. At the time, Mann paid for the new trophy with \$500 out of his own pocket.

Donald Mann was born in a log cabin on a 50 acre farm on Lot 28, Concession 4 in Esquesing; the fifth

of 10 children born to Hugh Mann and his wife, Ellen MacDonnell. Most of his youth was taken up on the farm but in slack times he attended the former Bannockburn School (now a private home) at the corner of Highway 7 and 4th Line, just east of town. He was a tall, barrel-chested lad who must have been a tower of strength in the fields; later, it would be recorded that, with arms extended in front, he could lift a man by the shoulders and hold him clear of the ground.

Donald had studied for the ministry (in fact, he has been claimed by both Methodists and Presbyterians) and he was also interested in spiritualism. His father wanted the

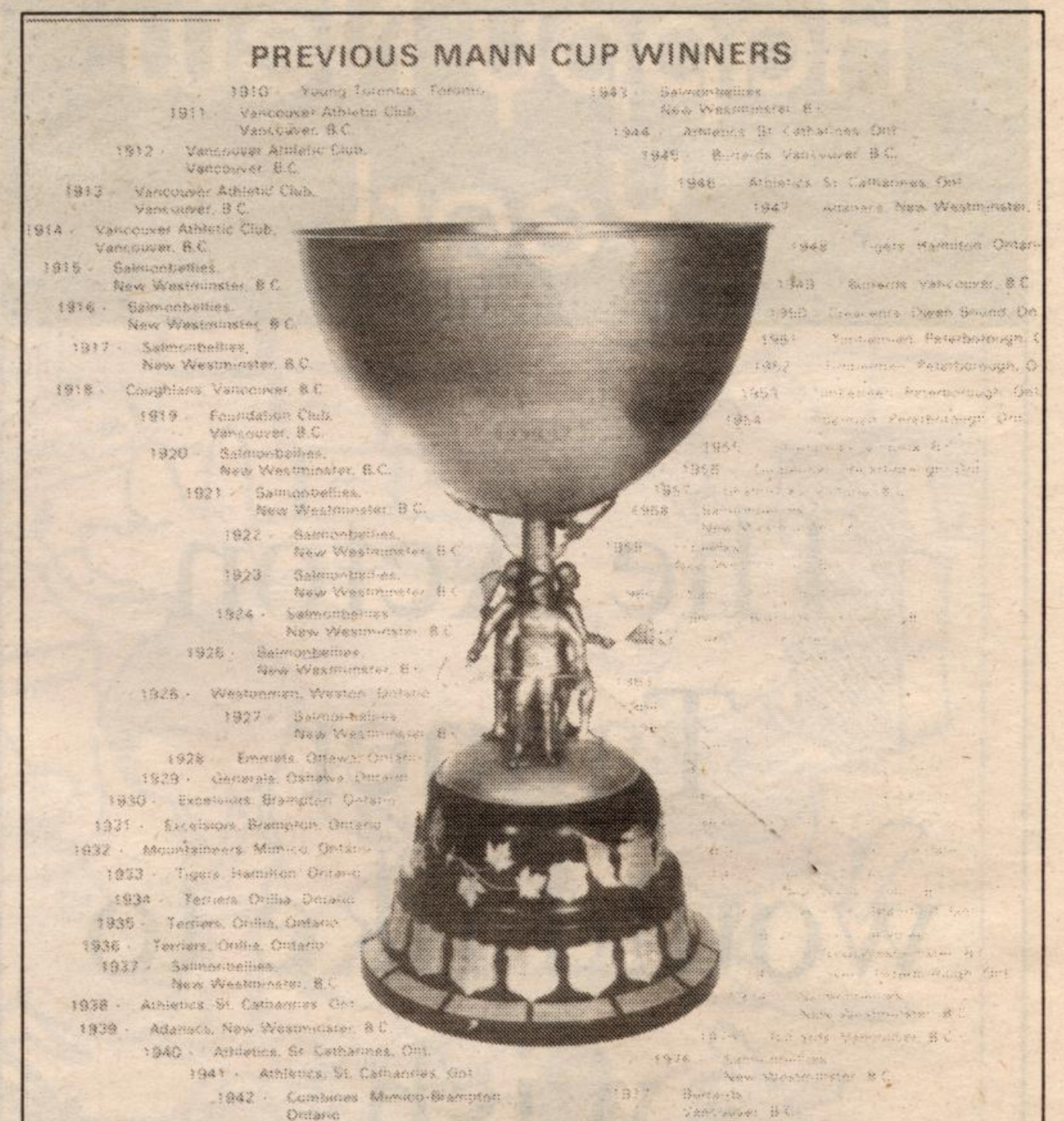
lad to take a degree in theology or to remain on the farm but Donald was having none of that; instead, he found his way to the lumber camps of Michigan and northern Ontario and within three years he was a foreman — a job requiring skill, strength, courage and stamina. On one occasion, he tramped all night through waist-deep snow carrying 200 pounds of flour and a side of pork on his back in order to reach a camp of starving men.

He became an expert with the cross-cut saw, the canthook and the broad-axe. The latter skill stood him in good stead when he was challenged to a duel by an arrogant foreign nobleman; he was given the choice of weapons and when he chose the broad-axe (claiming incidentally, that it was Canada's national weapon) his challenger had enough discretion to forget the imagined stain on his honour.

Mann met his partner, William Mackenzie (who also was to gain a title), when both men were trading for mules; typically, he ended up with the best animals. The two men joined forces to forge the rail line which ran across Maine from Quebec to New Brunswick; later, when they realized the potential in the prairies, which immigration posters lauded as "Canada's 1,000 mile farm," they bought up their first railway in Manitoba.

Mann and Mackenzie were sharp businessmen and they managed to float a bond option guaranteed by the Manitoban government. Pierre Berton once described them as being like police interrogators operating in pairs and playing alternate Good Guy-Bad Guy roles in their business dealings. "One would use the other's obstinacy to drive a harder bargain, explaining that any other position would cause the breakup of the partnership." It must have worked well because, at the height of their success they were granted loans to the tune of over 200 million dollars by the Government of Canada. At today's rates that would be equivalent to a billion dollars or more!

During the construction of the 123-mile stretch across farming country between Dauphin and



Gladstone (south of Lake Manitoba) and on towards Winnipeg local farmers were so happy to be getting their own railway that they worked on the line for free. The company, in return, helped them to obtain good-quality, low-cost seed for their fields.

By 1902 the Canadian Northern Railway, supported by the Canadian Bank of Commerce and financed mainly with other people's money ran some 1,200 miles of track which was often known as "the farmer's railroad." Mann was the construction genius behind the job and he had an amazing capacity for detail. A contemporary said, "He could tell off-hand the mile cost of any road or section of road on the railway."

The Canadian Northern came close to being a transcontinental line but political intrigue and private interests killed it. What is clear today is that while some private fortunes were established as the result of the wheeling and dealing which went on, as usual it was the public which paid the price.

Mann also had an interest in the Toronto Suburban Railway — an electrical line which ran from To-

ronto to Guelph until the 1930s. Today, the Halton County Radial Railway Museum (on Guelph Line south of Rockwood) is established on land which includes part of the original railbed. Together with his partner Sir William Mackenzie, he was also the founder-owner of a shipping line.

So long as the Mann Cup is around, we will remember that Sir Donald was fond of sports. An indication of the cup's value is the fact that in 1980, the Stanley Cup was appraised at \$60,000 while the Mann Cup was said, by the same evaluators, to be worth \$75,000.

Since no historical tale is complete without a little mystery we will leave you with one. It is reported that (in 1911) Mann presented a silver cup to the 20th Regiment for a rifle competition. That trophy has since disappeared but — it's got to be around here somewhere or other. Maybe it's time to take a look in that old trunk in your attic.

Sir Donald was knighted by King George V in London, England in 1911. He died in 1934; on his tombstone (located on the hill beneath towering trees and towards the southeast corner in Fairview Cemetery) you can read these few words:

"Sir Donald Mann was, with his partner, Sir William Mackenzie, builder and owner of the Canadian Northern Transcontinental Railway and Transatlantic Steamship Lines."

This short inscription seems typical of Sir Donald, a man who left no diary (that we are aware of) and who remains, to some degree, a shadowy figure in Canadian history.

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