

Wheldon 'Steamer' Emmerson

Friend remembers former mayor and Citizen of the Year

By TOM RAMAUTARSINGH

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Georgetown resident Tom Ramautarsingh, a friend of Steamer Emmerson wrote this obituary.

Who was the gentleman who laughed, exchanged a joke, shared his knowledge or made a comment on Main Street, in the coffee shop, or in Young's Pharmacy, or for that matter, anywhere?

It was Wheldon "Steamer" Emmerson, well known in Halton Hills and throughout Halton and Peel Regions. He was better known as "Steamer" than Wheldon.

Steamer graduated from the old Chapel Street public school (now demolished), went on to Georgetown High School, enlisted in the Lorne Scots on April 26, 1941, at the tender age of 15. He was sent back to Canada from England because of the age requirement, but he soon re-enlisted and returned to England.

His neighbors were the Alcott family and he frequently visited their home. Gordon Alcott and Steamer became close friends. He accompanied Gordon to Toronto, with Gordon's main objective of organizing the Little NHL. This was founded in 1936. Steamer vividly remembered the great thrill of playing hockey at the famous Maple Leaf Gardens. Gordon had arranged for Little NHL teams to play a game before the regular scheduled NHL game between the New York Americans and the Maple Leafs. There were 16,000 roaring fans as Steamer and his friends put on the greatest show on earth. Steamer played

hockey at every level of the game in town and went on to serve on the executive of the Raiders and junior teams.

He was a most loyal citizen and served Canada in three regiments — Lorne Scots, Midland and the Algonquin. It was while serving with the Algonquin Regiment that he was wounded at the Hochwald Forest in Germany. The Canadians were about to cross the Rhine River on February 28, 1945, when Steamer was wounded (just a few months before Germany surrendered). He was sent to hospital in Ekloo, Belgium. He rejoined the Algonquin Regiment after two weeks leave of absence. The Regiment returned to England, then they sailed from Southampton for Canada.

For more than 50 years Steamer showed his natural proclivity to be involved in community affairs when he started to produce minstrel shows. The original minstrel shows always featured Steamer. These shows evolved into variety shows with their main objectives of entertainment and raising funds for children with speech difficulties. He was also the founder of the barbershoppers in town.

He had been an invaluable Rotarian and was presented with the prestigious Paul Harris Award (the highest award that is bestowed on Rotarians), and was accepted in Rotary International. He instituted the Rotary Seniors' dinners which he emceed for 25 years.

Honors came in batches and soon afterwards the Lions Club selected Steamer

as Georgetown's Citizen of the Year for 1984. In April of 1991, Steamer completed 50 years of community service in Georgetown and was presented with a scroll by the mayor and members of Halton Hills council.

Steamer continued to be a fundraiser, master of ceremonies for different organizations and charities, an entertainer who kept his audience in stitches and earned a reputation as a raconteur with a big heart.

Political life was another sphere of his activities. He was councillor for Ward 1 when he entered municipal politics in 1966. In 1969 he held the highest political office in Georgetown; he became the mayor of Georgetown. He proved to be a popular mayor. Not many people can claim to have a park named after him or her. Wheldon "Steamer" Emmerson, the flamboyant mayor, had this honor. The Emmerson Park is situated at the northern part of the community of Georgetown. Steamer served on the Georgetown Police Commission, the Hydro Commission and was the first Water Commissioner.

Steamer, as mayor and as a citizen, had been a stout supporter of the education system. He remembered when "Big" Jim Singleton, Halton's Director of Education, came to Georgetown to calm Mayor Emmerson in an incident to which the mayor took exception. Singleton had this senior official apologize to Mayor Emmerson for this action.

As Deputy Sheriff for Halton County, he served for a period of 10 years. He retired in

1980. Many of his stories (real), appeared in his weekly column. Steamer had a good understanding of the law and briefed many a judge in what he ought to do. Steamer was a lawyer without the qualification. In one instance, he advised his brother Jim as to the direction he could take. Jim was charged with not shoveling the snow on the front sidewalk of his residence in "big" Brampton. You guessed it. Steamer knew the law and brother Jim won his case.

Steamer served on the Canadian Cancer Society as chairman of the Central District of Peel, Dufferin and Halton Counties. He was also founder of the former Canadian Cancer Daffodil breakfast in Halton Hills. This event traditionally kicked off the annual cancer campaign.

Always active in community sports, he also had a stint as sports scribe for the old Georgetown Herald. With the new arena on the east side of Georgetown, and it being named The Gordon Alcott Arena, it was Steamer who rounded up the 90 original Little NHLers of 1936 and they oversubscribed towards the placing of a bust and plaque honoring the late Gordon Alcott as the founder of the Little NHL, with Georgetown as its birthplace.

Steamer had the distinction of chairing the first few meetings of the Esquensing Historical Society during its formation. When the election came around, he chose to stand for the office of the vice-president.

Steamer wrote a weekly column entitled, "Have you got a minute?" His popular column

covers anything that has happened or could possibly happen. His avid fans awaited abatedly for each weekly instalment. His accounts were vivid, jovial, historical and reflective of his own inimitable style. His articles reached not only the citizens of Halton, but also the citizens in communities across Canada and the United States.

It has not always been a bed of roses for Steamer. In July of 1988, after two heart attacks, he underwent successful quadruple heart by-pass surgery. He made a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Since his surgery, he founded the Zipper Club for people who have undergone similar surgery. Steamer said, "The club was named after the stitch marks it leaves."

Steamer is married to beautiful Muriel Hewson. She was his confidante and critic, especially before he made his speeches or wrote his column. Steamer says, "If Muriel approves of what I intend to say or write, then it is OK for the audience." Hewson Crescent and Elizabeth Street were named after her parents.

In his later years Steamer also embarked on another challenge; he furthered his education at Wilfrid Laurier University. On one of my visits I remember Steamer was completing an assignment from the Ministry of Education Independent Learning Centre. I suggested to him that as a senior citizen he can work towards a degree. His eyes lit up and he heeded my suggestion of making an application.

Walter Biehn, former owner and publisher of The Herald, said of Steamer, "If you meet him once you don't forget him. He is a million dollar personality."

Steamer, in his addresses, had a favorite saying when he quoted Will Rogers, "If there is no malice in my heart, there is no malice in my humor." Steamer had been made the recipient of a multitude of awards, honors and good wishes. He had lit the torch, set high patterns of service and everyone thanks him for his contributions.

He was certainly a man of dignity, of warmth, of courage, of worth and a man who possessed an indomitable spirit. He was a veritable Renaissance man — a man for all seasons.

Steamer Emmerson believed in and practised the adage of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "I say in all sincerity make the most of yourself, for that is all there is to you." Steamer Emmerson in no uncertain way followed the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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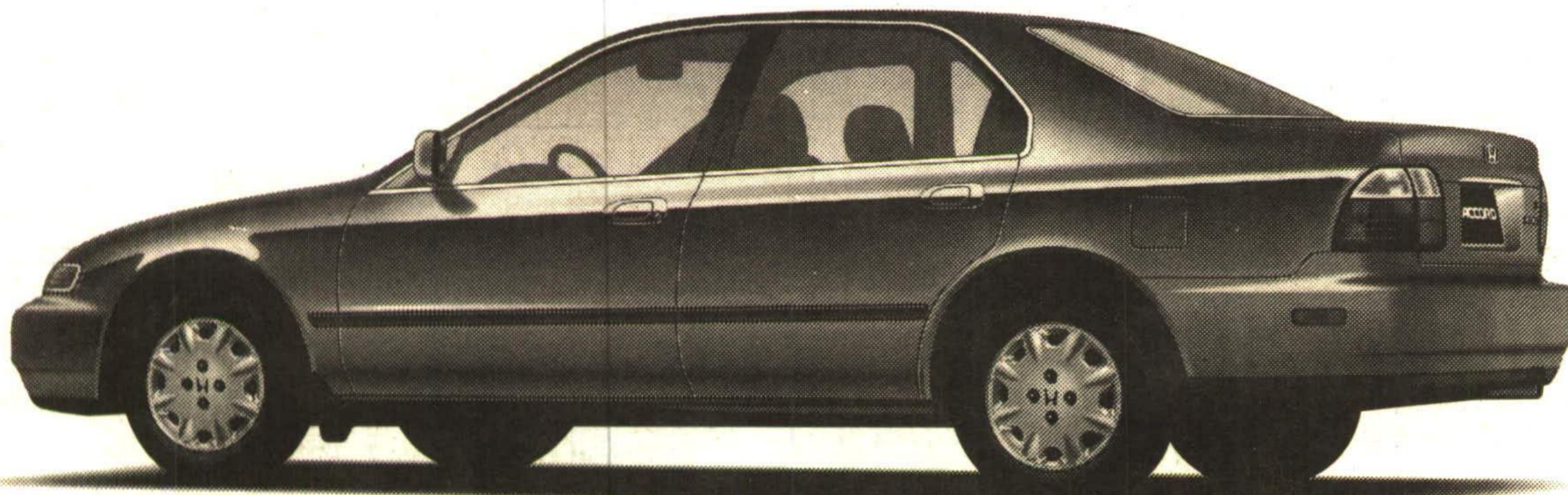
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