

## PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT WAS WITNESSED BY HUGE CROWD

by Lewis Zandbergen

Every village, town and city has its myths and legends. Ghost stories, passion triangles, murder and revenge are woven into the fabric of almost every community on Earth.

A local legend which has piqued my curiosity surrounds the events of August 12, 1920, when a "new" Canadian Prime Minister came to Stirling.

I first heard about Arthur Meighen's 1920 visit to our village several years ago and since then have been striving to find out as much as possible about the event. I suppose the caption under the frontispiece in *The Heritage Years* 1983, an excellent volume on Stirling's history brought out during its 125th anniversary in 1983, did as much to set my research in motion as most anything else. Yet, after years of "on again, off again" research, I had little more to show for my pains than several newspaper accounts; what should have been a major event in Stirling's past has been relegated to nothing more than a cryptic caption under a picture of local landmark beside a creek.

Let's start with the caption. It claims Arthur Meighen made his first speech as Canadian Prime Minister under the boughs of the elm tree which once shadowed the banks of Rawdon Creek in the heart of Stirling. The spot has since been built up and the tree was cut down in 1952.

According to contemporary newspaper reports, almost 10,000 (some accounts say 15,000) people were packed into the village to hear Meighen's speech that day. Even though horses and buggies were still common enough, most of the visitors came by automobile. As the reporter for *The Intelligencer* put it, "... thereby demonstrating the passing of the horse conveyance and the prosperity of the farmers of Central Ontario."

This leads to speculations in logistics. Take 10,000 people and subtract the approximate population of the village, say roughly 1,000 (a 1914 statistic shows 848 villagers). That leaves 9,000 who had to have arrived by car or rail. Let's assume 25 per cent (2,250) of the 9,000 arrived by railway; it still leaves 6,750 who came by auto. Although it's unlikely because of the size of most circa-1920 cars, let's assume these folks were packed six to a car. Where in Stirling

would you have parked 1,125 cars? The traffic jam would have been horrendous. Regardless of how they arrived or where they parked their cars, most of the area in the vicinity of the tree was built up. A bridge crossed the creek directly to the east of the elm tree and another bridge crossed the creek a few hundred yards west of the tree. The elm tree itself stood in a small triangle and the bank of the creek sloped down to the water's edge. The tree grew out over the creek. It was a low spot with a stone wall surrounding the base of the tree. (see pictures following page) This would not have been a very good spot for speech making; the speaker would be looking up at his audience and the acoustics would have been terrible. If Meighen made his speech here he would most likely have faced north. Front Street, Stirling's main thoroughfare, is to the south of the location and there is no reason to suppose Meighen would have spoken to a crowd on the opposite side of the street. Why legend maintains he spoke to people on the opposite side of the creek is beyond me. In any case, many buildings stood on the north side of the creek; including a livery stable and sheds for various purposes, the village weigh scales, a home or two and the McKee Block surrounded the site. Where would over 10,000 people have stood in order to hear the speaker?

The newspaper reports come under scrutiny next. Although frequent sunshowers sprinkled those assembled to hear Meighen and the other speakers, at no time were the cloudbursts sufficiently heavy to drive either spectators or guests away. As a matter of fact, newspaper reports say the prime minister and his party were well protected by "... the foliage of a large *maple* tree." References to a "great *maple*" (*Globe and Mail*) and "spreading branches of a *maple* tree" (*The Intelligencer*) also pose a puzzle. (I italicized the word *maple*.) If Meighen indeed spoke under our once beloved landmark elm tree, why did two newspapers 100 miles apart carry identical descriptions of the site? (Perhaps "big city" reporters couldn't tell an elm from a maple.) Why is there no mention of the creek? Newspaper accounts also say there were other speakers, among them Belleville's E. Gus Porter, Member for West



Prime Minister Arthur Meighen  
1874-1960

Prime Minister July 1920-December 1921  
June 1926-September 1926