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Philanthropist remembered

By Deb Bodine Champion
Correspondent

The life of Art Latcham is a rags-to-riches tale filled with magic and good deeds. Considered in his time to be one of North America's greatest sleight-of-hand magicians using coins and cards, he also worked magic in his beloved town of Stouffville and its neighboring communities.



Art Latcham generously donated the 50 acre site on which the hospital stands.

Blessed with a Midas touch when it came to real estate speculation, he freely shared his gold to better the communities that he loved.

It was the generosity of Art Latcham in the 1960s that provided Markham and Stouffville with the 50 acre property which is now the home of the Markham Stouffville Hospital.

His other contributions are widely known and the Latcham name graces countless halls, galleries and monuments from Stouffville to Port Perry, beginning with Stouffville's library, Latcham Hall and Latcham Gallery. Over the years he bought up a number of old schoolhouses, transformed them into community halls and donated them to the host communities. Countless other community facilities were renovated and refurbished: Uxpool in Uxbridge, Zephyr Hall, curling and hockey rinks in Port Perry, Unionville and Stouffville, the Stouffville pool and park facilities...the list goes on and on.

And the continuation of these good works was ensured even after his death when he established the Art Latcham Charitable Foundation in 1969.

"My father always had a soft spot for Stouffville and the surrounding communities. He did a lot for them," said Robert Latcham, one of two stepsons by Art Latcham's marriage to his late wife Elaine. "I must admit, he liked to get a pat on the back for what he did, but that wasn't the reason he did it. He wanted to help the community, to make the community a better place."

Mr. Latcham Jr. also suspects that his father provided for so many community gathering places in order to create audiences for his entertaining magic tricks - a skill that he honed for hours each night, instead of sleeping.

Philanthropist millionaire Art Latcham was humbly born in 1895 in Glasgow, a small farming community in Uxbridge Township. It was there, as a child, that he first became fascinated with the world of magic - an obsession that drove him to walk 15 miles from Glasgow to Markham to purchase his treasured magic books and paraphernalia. It was an enchantment that was to last his entire lifetime, and many Stouffville residents undoubtedly still recall Art Latcham charming young and old alike with his conjuring tricks.

After completing grade four, he worked on neighboring farms until, as a teenager, he headed west to homestead in Saskatchewan. When World War I broke out, he trained with the 10th Canadian Mounted Rifles and served four years on the front line in France where he was wounded in one of the first ever tank attacks.

Upon returning to civilian life in Ontario, he settled in Toronto where he drove a streetcar on the Bloor St. line. But the motorman job was just a front for his real duty - to run for the City of Toronto in the very rivalrous competitions between cities. He was an Olympic class runner and boxer during his 20s.

It was during this time of his life that he began dabbling in real estate - the career that was to make him a millionaire, and provide him with the means to give back to the community that was dear to him.

At the age of 48, Art Latcham married his wife Elaine, a woman 29 years his junior who had two young boys: Robert, who lives with his family in Thornhill and Larry, who now resides in Florida. Elaine Latcham was killed in a tragic car accident in 1976 three years before her husband's death. He died at the age of 84.

Forty-four year old Robert Latcham remembers his father as "the most intelligent man I ever knew; a great man even though he had very little schooling." He was a quiet, unassuming man, with a sense of humor that sometimes got the best of his stepsons. He recalls an incident when his father challenged them to see just how long a box of chocolates that was wrapped and tied in string could sit unopened before they succumbed to temptation. Days later, they opened the forbidden box only to find that their father had beaten them to it - by cutting a hole in the bottom of the apparently intact box!

"It took me years to realize just how funny that was," laughed Mr. Latcham.

Having made his fortune in real estate speculation, Art Latcham enjoyed the freedom to pretty well do whatever he wanted - and that often benefitted his friends and neighbors, though he and his family lived quite frugally. An example of this occurred during the mid-1960s, when on two separate occasions the residents of Markham and Stouffville were treated to books written by D.C. Jarvis, MD on folk medicine and home remedies. Because he believed so strongly that the citizens of the rural towns would benefit from their advice, Mr. Latcham had 5000 copies printed in Winnipeg and personally delivered them door-to-door.

Art Latcham has been honored for his contributions in many ways. In 1972 the citizens of Stouffville honored their magician-in-residence by declaring Dominion Day as "Art Latcham Day." The Stouffville library houses the Art Latcham Memorial Magic Book Collection of 328 volumes dating back as early as the 17th century, and the town hosts an annual magic festival in honor of their own patron magician.

For his prolific contributions to the community he also received the Order of Canada and a Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal.

Not only will he be remembered for these good works - including the contribution of a 50-acre parcel of property 30 years ago that has allowed a state-of-the-art medical facility to be constructed in the heart of his home community - Art Latcham is just as likely to be remembered for his unique one-handed card shuffle and extracting a silver dollar from behind a wide-eyed child's ear lobe.