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R. Thomas Orr 1870-1957

On Friday, May 30, 2003, the Ontario Heritage Foundation unveiled a provincial plaque to commemorate the driving force behind Stratford's parks system – R. Thomas Orr. The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

R. THOMAS ORR 1870-1957

A life-long member of the Stratford Parks Board, R. Thomas Orr was the driving force behind the Stratford parks system. Orr led the fight to save the riverfront and millpond from railway development and oversaw the transformation of the former industrial area into parkland. In 1936, Orr's plans to link Stratford with the birthplace of the English playwright William Shakespeare led to the creation of the Shakespearean Gardens. These parklands provided an inspirational setting in 1953 for the Stratford Shakespearean Festival. During his life of community service, Orr also helped to establish Stratford's library and the war memorial, to extend Highway 7 to Stratford, and to found the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority and the Stratford Historical Society.

R. THOMAS ORR (1870-1957)

Membre permanent de la commission des parcs de Stratford, R. Thomas Orr est l'initiateur du système des parcs de la ville. Il mène la lutte pour sauver de l'expansion ferroviaire les berges de la Tamise et la retenue d'eau pour le moulin et préside à la transformation de l'ancienne zone industrielle en parcs. En 1936, son projet de lien entre Stratford et le lieu de naissance du dramaturge anglais, William Shakespeare, aboutit à la création des jardins de Shakespeare. Ces parcs forment le merveilleux décor du festival Shakespeare de 1953. Durant sa vie au service de la collectivité, R. Thomas Orr contribue également à l'ouverture de la bibliothèque de Stratford, à l'érection du monument commémoratif de guerre, au prolongement de la route 7 jusqu'à Stratford, et à l'établissement de la Upper Thames River Conservation Authority et la Stratford Historical Society.

Historical background

His early life

One of Stratford's leading citizens, R. Thomas Orr served his community for over 50 years. Orr brought his vision, leadership and "intelligent attention to work for the city"¹ and was directly responsible for the construction of Stratford's library and the war memorial, the extension of the provincial highway to Stratford, and the founding of the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority and the Stratford Historical Society. Orr was also the driving force behind the creation of the Stratford parks system, which transformed a "stump-filled mud hole into a place of beauty and utility".²

Orr was born in Downie Township near Stratford, Ontario to an Irish family who arrived in Stratford in 1855. His father established a mill and a contracting business, which Orr joined after completing his schooling. His job was to adjust and tender insurance claims. This experience with the construction industry was the foundation for his later accomplishments. It developed his ability to prepare plans and to construct them. After a time, he established his own insurance firm and was also partner with James Russell, a local architect with whom he maintained a lifelong relationship. In 1903, Orr married Nellie Webster, formerly of Stratford, in Winnipeg and returned to Stratford to raise his family of two sons and three daughters. He lived there until his death in 1957.

Over 50 years of community service begins

Orr's first public office was with the Mechanics Institute. This organization was financed by a municipal council grant and was charged with providing reading materials to its members from its premises in city hall. Orr was a great supporter of the library movement and when the Stratford city hall burned down in 1897, his efforts focussed on rescuing the books.

Because of his interest in promoting literacy and education, Orr asked if Andrew Carnegie would finance a public library in Stratford. Carnegie responded by offering \$12,000 to Stratford if the city would supply the land for the building and an annual maintenance budget equal to 10% of the grant. The grant was later increased to \$15,000. The city council agreed to the conditions of the grant and the library opened in 1903.

Creation of the Stratford Parks Board

After the successful completion of the library project, Orr began to focus on developing the Stratford parks system.

¹ Stratford-Perth Archives, *Stratford Beacon-Herald*, August 28, 1929.

² Stratford-Perth Archives, *Stratford Beacon-Herald*, March 17, 1957.

The *Public Park Act* had been passed in 1883 to develop more recreational parks for the growing urban population. As a result of this legislation, municipalities in Ontario were given the power to establish Parks Boards to manage the development of municipal parks. The Parks Boards were independent, arms-length bodies, which tended to develop long-standing memberships. Parks Boards often attracted community, business and industry leaders who felt park development was beneficial to the community.

The Stratford Parks Board was established in 1904 through the efforts of Dr. Edward Henry Eidt, a local dentist and council member who had been instrumental in having the city purchase land for Stratford's Queen's Park in 1885. Eidt consulted with Berlin (Kitchener) and Brantford, which had already formed Parks Boards. Both communities supported the concept and with their hearty endorsement Eidt convinced city council to approve the formation of the Stratford Parks Board. R. Thomas Orr was appointed to the Board, becoming its first secretary. He remained on the Board until he became an honorary lifetime member in 1953.

Orr hires Frederick Todd to plan the Stratford park system

When the first Parks Board was appointed, Stratford had one park, Queen's Park, situated at the east edge of the city. Like other parks designed during the 19th century, Queen's Park was a large, central open space. Orr wanted to expand the park system along the Avon River, which had been heavily industrialized. He retained the pioneering landscape architect Frederick G. Todd of Montreal to plan the Stratford park system.

Frederick G. Todd (1867-1948) was born in New Hampshire and worked for the Frederick Law Olmsted firm and its successor, the Olmsted Brothers, until 1900 when he opened his own practice in Montreal, becoming the first in Canada to call himself a landscape architect. During his career, Todd completed park projects across Canada including Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg, the Ottawa Improvement Plan in Ottawa, Ille Sainte-Hélène and the Plains of Abraham in Quebec, Parliament Hill in Ottawa and two parks in Cambridge (Galt). He also worked on several major private commissions in Montreal and Brockville, including the estate of Senator George T. Fulford, which is now owned by the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

Orr and Todd shared the common vision of planning for Stratford an extensive park system running along the Avon River in Stratford. As Todd wrote to Orr: "it seems to me you have the unusual opportunity of making a park drive from the centre of your city to Queen's Park of very unusual interest". This concept of a linear riverfront park was strongly influenced by Todd's work in Boston with the Olmsted firm.

Saving the riverfront from railway development

One of the first obstacles Orr overcame with Todd's assistance was the proposed construction of Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) lines on the north bank of the river in 1905. While Council believed the railway development would improve the local economy, Orr opposed the loss of

the riverfront lands. He successfully lobbied for the condition of a two-year start-up schedule, which the railway did not meet. Consequently, the land on the north bank of the river was saved from railway development. In 1908, Orr faced another challenge when the province announced plans to construct the Stratford Normal School. Council welcomed the provincial teaching college and allocated land in Queen's Park for its construction. Believing that the school might impede access to the park, Orr, with the support of Todd, was able to renegotiate its location and guarantee that the school would not be fenced, ensuring that this popular park remained accessible to the public.

During this early phase of park development, the Parks Board under Orr's leadership also began to acquire the lands along the river, completing its assembly by 1911. The driveway layout, entrance gates and picturesque groupings of trees in Queen's Park that survive today, were designed by Todd and executed by Orr during this phase.

In 1913, the CPR presented another proposal to develop railway lines along the south bank of the Avon River. Although the city council supported the CPR proposal, Orr strongly opposed it. The Parks Board rallied public opinion against the plan, which was narrowly defeated by plebiscite.

Bringing the parks to life

Orr encouraged the community to use the parks by creating recreational facilities for baseball, cricket, tennis and lawn bowling along the south bank.

Orr also recognized that the parks were important commemorative spaces, commissioning Walter Seymour Allward to design the Stratford War Memorial in 1922. Orr selected the original site at the intersection of Erie and Ontario Streets and began collecting the names of the war dead from the community. Allward, the Toronto sculptor who also designed the Vimy Memorial in France, created a war memorial consisting of two bronze figures on a granite plinth. Allward's use of metaphorical figures was uncommon for its time and the lasting power of the Stratford War Memorial is a tribute to his design.

Seven years later, Orr also proposed the construction of a band shell along the south bank. His concept was initially opposed by city council, which disagreed with its design and location. Orr persevered, even after council retracted its offer of funding, and hired James Russell to construct the band shell in the location that Orr had selected. The site could accommodate large numbers of people and took advantage of the naturally sloped bowl. At its opening performance, the audience commented on the excellent acoustics. Eventually, the success of the band shell encouraged council to reverse its decision and to contribute to the project.

The Shakespearean Gardens

Throughout his career with the Parks Board, Orr developed links between his city and the birthplace of the English playwright William Shakespeare, Stratford-Upon-Avon, England. In 1927, R. Thomas Orr visited Stratford-upon-Avon where he developed an ongoing relationship with the Trustees and Guardians of Shakespeare's birthplace. Orr wanted to build Shakespearean Gardens in Stratford, Ontario that would consist of plants mentioned in Shakespeare's works and a replica, which was never constructed, of Anne Hathaway's cottage, the pre-marital home of Shakespeare's wife in Shottery, England. The site that Orr selected for the gardens in Stratford was located west of the Huron Street Bridge on the ruins of a mill, which had burned down in 1922. In 1935, he began searching for a landscape architect to design the gardens.

After consulting with Dr. Christie, president of the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, Orr approached what was then the premier firm of landscape architects in Ontario, Dunnington-Grubb and Stensson of Toronto. Orr eventually hired this firm to design the Shakespearean Gardens.

The Dunnington-Grubb and Stensson firm was made up of Howard Dunnington-Grubb (1881-1965), Lorrie Dunnington-Grubb (1877-1945), and J.Vilhelm Stensson – all founders of the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects in 1934. Together, they established Sheridan Nurseries and carried out a range of public and private commissions including the Oakes Garden Theatre and Rainbow Bridge plaza in Niagara Falls, which has many similarities to the Shakespearean Gardens. They also designed formal estate gardens throughout southern Ontario and prepared plans for University Avenue in Toronto, Gage Park in Hamilton and the sunken garden at McMaster University.

The combination of design firm and nursery was an innovative way to ensure a supply of the plants they specified for their formal designs, since the number of nurseries supplying plants was limited. Orr purchased most of the Shakespearean Gardens plants from the Oakville Nursery, whose owner helped to install them. Orr also requested contributions of plants from several sources. He received Stratford's first rose standards from Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor General of Canada, and rosemary from the Montreal Botanical Gardens. He also requested, but did not receive, roses for the Shakespearean Gardens from King Edward VIII.

In May 1936, the Shakespearean Gardens was officially opened by Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor General of Canada. The gardens were located beside the historic Perth County Court House on the site of the stone mill that burned in 1922. Its layout consists of a series of geometric beds that form three terraces. The first terrace, a knot-garden, is laid out in a simplified Elizabethan style, the second terrace consists of an open lawn, the third terrace contains formal rose gardens. Each terrace is surrounded by low stone walls and brick-edged gravel walkways. The selection of plantings in the garden is taken from the works of Shakespeare and includes

yews, colourful herbs, annuals, roses and perennials. The lych-gate at the entrance was built by James Russell.

The completion of the Shakespearean Gardens realized Orr's vision of creating an extensive riverfront park system – an important cultural landscape comprising Queen's Park at the eastern edge of the city (site of the Festival Theatre), Victoria Lake, the band shell, the war memorial designed by Walter S. Allward and Orr's pride – the Shakespearean Gardens. In May 1953, *Maclean's* magazine wrote that Stratford "has a park system unique in North America".³ The following month, the *Beacon-Herald* added: "Stratford's beautiful parks system, through the years, has been publicized more than any other feature of the city. In fact the city is built around its parks".⁴ Tom Patterson, founder of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada in 1953, wrote about the relationship between the parks and the festival in *First Stage: The Making of the Stratford Festival*: "We had a city named Stratford, on a river named Avon. We had a beautiful park system ... Why not a Festival? And, what better place than in Stratford, Ontario."⁵

A conservation authority

Orr was a proponent of preserving and promoting natural and cultural heritage. In 1922, he founded the Stratford Historical Society and six years later installed stone cairns with plaques along the Huron Road to commemorate the opening of the Huron tract to settlement.

Orr also encouraged tree planting in Stratford on Arbour Day in cooperation with the Men of the Trees, an international tree-planting organization. Today, one oak tree planted to commemorate the coronation of King George VI in 1937 remains on the lawn of the Perth County Court House.

Orr broadened his conservation efforts by supporting the formation of the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, which was created in 1947. The repeated flooding of surrounding communities promoted awareness of the importance of the natural conservation movement in Ontario, which began in 1946 with the creation of the Ausable River Conservation Authority. Orr strongly supported the practice of reforestation and hedgerow tree planting to promote soil conservation and infiltration of rainwater to recharge ground water levels. These initiatives were especially beneficial for farms around Stratford whose prosperity depended on adequate ground water and good soil retention. In 1953, Orr was named honorary vice-chairman of the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority in recognition of his early and consistent support.

"Have a plan and stick to it"

³ *Maclean's*, May 1953, n.p.

⁴ *Stratford Beacon-Herald*, June 27, 1953, p. 1.

⁵ Tom Patterson, *First Stage: The Making of the Stratford Festival*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987) p. 26.

Throughout his life of community service, Orr strongly believed it was important to “have a plan and stick to it”. A unique individual with a broad vision for his community and an eye for detail, Orr was adept at gaining support from others to realize his plans. His early training in construction, his design sense and his knowledge of plants gave him the authority and credibility to achieve his goals. To Orr, community services were as important to Stratford as economic development. He successfully lobbied the municipal government to fund the park system and the provincial government to extend Highway 7 to Stratford to promote visitation. During his lifetime of public service, Orr made significant contributions to his community. Although he modestly shared his successes, his leadership and vision were the driving forces behind the creation of the Stratford Carnegie library, the war memorial, the provincial highway to Stratford, the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, the Stratford Historical Society and Stratford’s beautiful park system – an important cultural landscape space established during an influential period in the history of landscape architecture and design in Ontario.

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