

Book Review

BUILDING AN EMPIRE: "Big Pants" Harry F. McLean and His Sons of Martha

by Teresa Charland
Riparian House, P.O.Box 721, Merrickville,
Ontario, K0G 1N0
\$24.95 (ISBN 978-0-9689929-2-0)

This recently published book is the excellent and easily read biography of Harry F. McLean, one of Canada's true characters. He was a very successful contractor who started at the bottom and worked his way up to being "the Boss" of his own firm, making millions of dollars in the process. It is hard to believe that he had a home in Merrickville as he seemed to spend all his time in various hotels, visiting job sites by airplane, car, train or whatever means was necessary, at all hours of the day and night!

He realized that his workers were the vital component of any project and he insisted on safety measures, many before their time, on his jobs. However, if a worker was injured or killed on a job he was quick to ensure that his family was taken care of financially. His paying-off the mortgage on a newly widowed woman's farm is cited, as are many other examples of his support of his

employees. They responded when he needed them, even to paying their own way across the country to help out on contracts.

His firm's largely forgotten role in restoring services and assisting in rescue work after the Halifax Explosion, in 1917, is well told.

His rather eccentric (usually anonymous) philanthropy is given its rightful place as a major part of the make up of this interesting man.

Although he was not an Engineer, some years after the inauguration of the Iron Ring Ceremony he gave financial support, to ensure its continuation, to its founder, Professor Haultain, of the University of Toronto.

The Society was well aware of the "Sons of Martha" memorials that he had erected at job sites where workers had been killed:

"In loving memory of those who worked and died here".

A four-sided cairn was erected at each site with the above dedication and eight bronze panels, two on each face, containing the eight verses of Kipling's poem "The Sons of Martha".

The ten sites that have been documented by the CSCE History Committee are:

Abitibi, Canyon Dam, Ontario.
Churchill, CNR, Manitoba.
Cranberry Portage, Sherritt
Junction, Manitoba.
Grand Falls, O.B.Davis Park,
New Brunswick.
Guysborough Railway, Nova Scotia.
Hawk Lake Quarry, Ontario.
Merrickville, Deeks Quarry, Ontario.
Moosenee, ONR, Ontario.
Washburn, Joe Taylor Pioneer Park,
North Dakota, USA.
Quebec City, Wolfe's Cove tunnel,
Québec.

The CSCE History Committee became interested in the cairns after the Hawk Lake cairn was restored by the Lake of the Woods Chapter of the Professional Engineers of Ontario. In June 1995, Ralph Crysler, the Committee's chair at the time, and I, visited as many sites as possible westerly from Toronto.

The author does not mention the cairn at Churchill. We documented it and lent encouragement for its restoration by a local womens' group. Eventually they had two new plaques made to replace the missing ones and restored the cairn. No mention either is made of McLean's firm building some of the railway line northerly to Churchill from its original line destined for Port Nelson: possibly because the contract was awarded without bidding, causing a political scandal.

One cairn has been documented in the USA at Washburn, North Dakota. There may be two other cairns there, one on a New York subway tunnel contract and the other on the Delaware Aqueduct. Even with the help of the ASCE, the Committee has been unable to find them! ■



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