

MEDIA
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HISTORICAL TORONTO – DONALD JONES O'Connor's candy profits sweetened Toronto charities

In the middle of a college campus in North York, there's an elegant old farmhouse with pillars in the style of a Greek temple framing the front door. In the early 1930s, Toronto named O'Connor Drive after the man who once lived here.

When Frank O'Connor died in this house in 1930, the premiers of both Ontario and Quebec came to his funeral and many of the leading men of Toronto came as honorary pall-bearers.

He had begun his career in Toronto with a small candy store on Yonge St. and became a multi-millionaire. He was made a senator by the Canadian government and was decorated by the Pope.

The college that surrounds his house today was named the Senator Frank O'Connor College so that his name would not be forgotten. But it is doubtful if many who travel along O'Connor Drive today know that it was named after the Irish millionaire farmer, Frank Patrick O'Connor, who founded the Laura Secord Company.

Small Store

His family came from County Cork in Ireland. Frank was born in the village of Desoronto in eastern Ontario in 1885 but grew up in Peterborough. He left school when he was in his teens to work in a factory and in 1913, when he was 28, he and his young wife came to Toronto and opened a small candy store at the corner of Yonge and Elm Sts.

O'Connor decided that the only way to make a lasting success of his company was to use the best ingredients he could afford and always to sell his candies freshly made.

It was his wife who suggested that they name their business the Laura Secord Candy Company. She liked the idea of a distinctly Canadian name and said there was something good and old-fashioned about the name that seemed ideal for a brand of home-made candies.

O'Connor painted his store white to symbolize cleanliness and printed the name Laura Secord in black. The black and white colour scheme of that first store has become the lasting trademark of the company ever since.

The store was an immediate success and O'Connor was soon opening stores throughout the city and, later, across the country. IN 1921, he expanded the business into the United States, but, since Laura Secord was the name of a Canadian heroine in the war of 1812 between Canada and the U.S.A., he named his American business the Fanny Farmer Candy Company.

In 1923, on the company's 10th anniversary, O'Connor said that since his employees had helped make it a success they had a right to share in its profits and the Laura Secord Company became the first candy business in the world to adopt a profit-sharing plan.

O'Connor soon became a millionaire but never make a show of his wealth. His one extravagance was a 500-acre farm that he bought north-east of the city near Victoria Park Ave. and York Mills Rd. where he could raise pure-bred Ayrshire cattle and a stable of racing horses.

He named it Maryville Farm after his daughter and, as his racing colours, he chose the black-and-white Laura Secord colours. In the late 1920s, when he was serving as a new member of the Toronto and York Road Commission, there was a discussion about what to call a new three-mile road that passed O'Connor's farm. O'Connor suggested they call it O'Connor Drive. He made the suggestion as a joke, but the name stuck.

At the height of the depression of the 1930s, O'Connor began giving away most of his fortune. At a time when few men were millionaires in Canada, O'Connor gave more than \$3 million to churches, schools and charities.

In 1935, he gave a personal cheque for \$500,000 to the archbishop of St. Michael's Cathedral with the request that it be used for both Catholic and Protestant causes and specifically suggested the Institute for the Blind and the Sick Children's Hospital and The Star Fresh Air Fund.

All his life he was a staunch supporter of the Liberal party and it was said that his contributions and influence helped Mitchell Hepburn become premier of Ontario in 1934. In 1935, on behalf of a grateful party, Mackenzie King made him a senator. In 1937, in recognition of his extraordinary generosity, the Pope made him a Knight Commander of St. Gregory the Great.

In 1938, when his health began to fail, he sold his interests in the Laura Secord Company. Today, (*this article is written in 1978*) it is owned by John Labatt Ltd. He left most of his estate to charities and he left his farm to the Christian Brothers.

Public Tribute

The farmhouse is now used as a residence for members of this religious order who have either retired or who are teaching in the Senator Frank O'Connor College that now surrounds the house.

Shortly before his death in 1939, he received a remarkable tribute. A testimonial dinner was held in the Crystal Ballroom of the [King Edward Hotel](#).

The crowd overflowed the hall and the head table was filled with the chief representatives of the king, the government and the city.

It was an informal night among friends and the speeches were mainly reminiscences. Canon Cody and Sir William Mulock reminded everyone of O'Connor's many gifts to the university.

Lieutenant-governor Bruce joked that O'Connor was the only farmer he knew who had the nerve to own a summer cottage. And one of the priests of St. Michael's Cathedral remembered that whenever one of the city's charities had been in financial trouble, the late Archbishop McNeil had always had one reply, "we must see Mr. O'Connor about that."

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