

My Memories of Ralph Lamoureux, York University's First Rhodes Scholar (1945-1989)

I attended Humberside Collegiate in Toronto's west end. I got to know Ralph Lamoureux who attended Parkdale Collegiate, the first school to the east, through sports. Ralph played football and ran track for Parkdale.

Ralph came from a troubled family. He was kicked out of the house when he was 16. He didn't want to leave school and apparently his parents wanted him to work.

He lived on his own, which seemed romantic to other teenagers. Doubtless he received welfare. He was a bright student and Parkdale teachers got him a part time job as a school caretaker, something that wouldn't happen today.

Some Friday nights he would let me and other Humberside friends into the school and we would play basketball in the gym. Pretty innocent stuff. We would all go for dinner at the Noshery afterwards. During this period, I saw a lot of Ralph and he got to know the rest of my family and participated in several Christmases.

I went to Western and Ralph, at the encouragement of my mother, Clara Thomas, went to York.

After two years Ralph left school to earn and save some money. He went to work for the Toronto office of British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) – now part of British Airways.

He did save money, but he also used the very cheap staff fares to travel to some exotic locales. Again, very romantic.

In 1968 Ralph returned to York for his third year as I started my first year of an MA in Historical Geography on campus.

During his fourth year Ralph applied for a Rhodes scholarship with the help of a number of York academics including my mother. Some athletic ability was needed for the scholarship. Ralph trained himself into being one of York's best squash players.

In 1970 Ralph was appointed York's first Rhodes Scholar. He began studying at Oxford the same fall as my wife Linda and I began teaching at an international school in the Netherlands. We were able to see Ralph a number of times that year.

Ralph made a poor choice of colleges – Balliol, known as the college of old Etonians and other posh Brits. He changed his name to Rafe and affected an English accent. He took readily to the Balliol drinking culture. Two North Americans who were at Oxford over the period, Bob Rae and Bill Clinton, made more sensible college choices.

Almost assuredly Ralph became an alcoholic at Oxford. He applied for a third year of the Rhodes scholarship, a rare occurrence, got it, but in the end, he never graduated from Oxford.

After Oxford he spent some time in South Africa working for a British bank. He applied for a job at External Affairs, as our foreign service was then known and, on the strength of his Rhodes, was hired. He was posted to Thailand but he was returned to an Ottawa desk job shortly thereafter, after he was involved in a drink-fueled incident with our ambassador.

After some years in Ottawa, with no hope of a posting – External never fired people – he applied for a job with the Social Science Research Council and again he got it on the strength of his Rhodes. I largely lost touch with Ralph over this period.

Sometime in the 1980s he moved to Toronto to pursue a fine arts degree at York in acting. He also got involved with Little Trinity Church downtown.

In January 1989 he apparently went on a bender and died round about January 22, 1989.

There was a funeral at Little Trinity but no published obituary. I'm told there was a tree planted in his memory in Ottawa.

A year later I worked with a couple of Parkdale teachers who had known him to create a memorial plaque in the auditorium of that school.

It bothered me that there was no memorial to Ralph at York, but I wasn't sure how to go about creating it and where it would be placed. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of York in 2009 a book, *York University: The Way Must Be Tried* by Michiel Horn, was published that year. There is a paragraph and picture about Ralph Lamoureux's historic first Rhodes Scholarship in it.

Ralph was a complex person. He had many acquaintances, but few real friends. He was always striving for more. In the case of Balliol College perhaps too much. He was bright, charming and talented and a good athlete. He deserved the Rhodes Scholarship and it's a shame he wasn't able to have the distinguished career he was certainly capable of.

Steve Thomas

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