

Theodore Pringle Loblaw 1872-1933

On September 20, 2008, the Ontario Heritage Trust, the Simcoe County Historical Association, Stevenson Farms and the Essa Historical Society unveiled a provincial plaque at Stevenson Farms near Alliston, Ontario to commemorate Theodore Pringle Loblaw, 1872-1933.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

THEODORE PRINGLE LOBLAW 1872-1933

T.P. Loblaw was born in Elmgrove, Ontario to William James Loblaw and Isabella Stevenson. Orphaned in his teens, he was raised by his Scottish-born grandparents, William and Elizabeth Stevenson, who lived in the farmhouse on this property. At age 17 he moved to Toronto with twenty dollars and a dream. In 1897, Loblaw married Isabella Adam and in 1900 purchased his first grocery store on College Street with partner J. Milton Cork. Loblaw pioneered the concept of self-service grocery stores that provided all types of food products under one roof and opened the first Loblaw Groceteria in 1919. His innovative merchandising methods fundamentally changed the way that people shopped for food in Canada. He donated generously to the Toronto Western Hospital, the Toronto Kiwanis Club and Alliston's Stevenson Memorial Hospital. Loblaw is buried at the Alliston Union Cemetery. He was inducted into the Canadian Business Hall of Fame in 1999.

THEODORE PRINGLE LOBLAW 1872-1933

T.P. Loblaw, né à Elmgrove (Ontario), est le fils de William James Loblaw et d'Isabella Stevenson. Orphelin dans son adolescence, il a été élevé par ses grandsparents d'origine écossaise, William et Elizabeth Stevenson, qui vivaient dans la ferme sur cette propriété. À 17 ans, il est parti à Toronto avec vingt dollars en poche et un rêve en tête. En 1897, il a épousé Isabella Adam et en 1900 il a acheté sa première épicerie sur la rue College, avec son partenaire J. Milton Cork. M. Loblaw a lancé le concept des magasins d'alimentation libre-service qui proposent toutes sortes de produits alimentaires en un même lieu; il a ouvert la première Groceteria Loblaw en 1919. Ses méthodes de marchandisage innovantes ont révolutionné la façon dont les personnes faisaient leurs courses au Canada. Il a fait des dons généreux en faveur de l'Hôpital Toronto Western, du Toronto Kiwanis Club et de l'Hôpital Stevenson Memorial. M. Loblaw est enterré au Alliston Union

Cemetery. Il a été intronisé au Temple de la renommée de l'entreprise canadienne en 1999.

Historical background

T.P. Loblaw possessed a strong sense of vision and purpose in his innovative approach to the grocery business during the early 1900s. In 1927, he voiced his commitment to modernization and good value for consumers. He addressed other retailers who feared that Henry Ford's improved merchandising practices in his retail provision shops, with their drastically reduced prices, would result in lower profits. "Whoever improves methods, so that the public benefits, performs a service. Others should adapt themselves to the new methods." Like the American industrialist, Loblaw became a millionaire by pioneering a revolutionary concept in merchandising that significantly reduced costs to the consumer. Increased product turnover allowed him to purchase in bulk and continually provide fresh goods to shoppers. Loblaw's new concept employed the notion of the self-service cafeteria to grocery shopping. "Groceterias" altered the way we shop and completely changed the retail world.²

Theodore Pringle Loblaw was born on July 1, 1872 at Elmgrove in Essa Township, Ontario.³ His father died when he was an infant and his mother when he was 15. Theodore was then adopted by his maternal grandparents, William Stevenson and Elizabeth Pringle, and went to live with them on their farm near Alliston.⁴ Later in life, Loblaw and his brother James ("Jack") would buy the Stevenson farm, which remains in the family today.⁵

At the age of 17, Loblaw worked as a ploughman on a local farm and managed to save \$20. Using a dollar of his savings – plus a \$10 gift from his brother and a new suit from his sister – he headed for Toronto in search of a better job. He eventually obtained a job in a grocery store, Cork's Cash Grocery located at 400 King Street East, working for J. Milton Cork.⁶ After work each Saturday night, he would ride his bicycle home to Alliston and then ride back to Toronto early the following Monday morning.⁷ He spent two evenings a week in night school, and continued to save his money.⁸ He later summarized, "The longer I live, the more I am convinced that the difference between the clerk who saves part of his salary, and the one that spends all of his, is the difference, in a few years, between the owner of a business and the man out of a job." ⁹

In 1897, Loblaw married Isabella Adam. By 1900, he had purchased an interest in a store on College Street with his previous employer, J.M. Cork. This was the beginning of a lifetime business partnership between the two men. ¹⁰ Their second store, located at 511 Yonge Street, was the first to use the name "Loblaws." Loblaw thought he could apply the department store concept to the grocery business by maintaining a chain of stores, buying large quantities of less

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expensive goods and passing on the savings to consumers. By 1919, he owned 19 traditional-style grocery stores. He sold them and they became the foundation for the Dominion Store chain – one of Loblaw's future competitors. ¹²

That year, Loblaw became the manager of the United Farmers of Ontario Co-operative, a position that involved travelling throughout the United States. In his travels, he visited the "Piggly Wiggly" self-serve stores, which were founded in 1916 by Clarence Saunders in Memphis, Tennessee. Loblaw decided to see if this "groceteria" system would work in Ontario – a system of grocery shopping that would utilize what Loblaw called "short-cut" methods. Loblaw attributed his desire to save time and expense to his partial Scottish ancestry and farm upbringing. He frequently recounted how he carefully saved money from an early age. One night, when driving J. Milton Cork home, he discussed his idea of establishing a chain of large, well lit, spotlessly clean and brightly painted stores that would provide the best possible convenience to the customer. He wanted retailers to be able to fix their own prices and move away from prices being set by food producers and processors. Profits would be realized by selling large volumes at lower prices.

The first Loblaw Groceteria opened in June 1919. 16 Cork supplied a portion of the capital and managed the store. It was divided into three sections - an entranceway, a sales area and a storeroom. Customers were able to select merchandise themselves from store shelves rather than be waited on by storekeepers. Unlike earlier methods – where open bins of dry goods such as oats, flour and sugar were placed out on shop floors - the new store endeavoured to sell sealed packages of food that could not be contaminated with dust or dirt. After filling their market baskets, customers carried them to one of the counters located near the entrance. Groceries were bagged for the customer to carry home as the bill was totalled on an adding machine. Previously, grocery orders were generally delivered to homes by delivery boys on bicycles and the cost of each bill was charged to purchasers' individual accounts. The eventual proliferation of the automobile augmented the new shopping methods, making it easier for customers to take their purchases home themselves. In addition, the adoption of the domestic ice box - eventually followed by the refrigerator - meant that household kitchens could be stocked with perishable food items for longer periods of time. Ultimately, all types of food were made available to consumers under one roof in the Loblaws stores, eliminating the need to visit individual shops such as the butcher, the bakery and the cheese shop. It was a simple idea, but revolutionary for its time. 17

In 1921, Loblaw and Cork incorporated Loblaw Groceterias Company Limited, using their first two stores as its foundation. The company expanded at an exponential rate, opening stores in Ontario with subsidiaries in New York State, Pennsylvania and Chicago, Illinois. Each store averaged 3,000 square feet¹⁸ of selling space. In 1928, each store had an objective of doing \$250,000 worth of business per year. ¹⁹ That same year, Loblaw built a state-of-the-art four-

© Ontario Heritage Trust Page 3 of 5

storey warehouse at Fleet and Bathurst Streets in Toronto that included recreation facilities for Loblaw's 800 employees. The recreation centre was composed of a large lounge, bowling alleys, billiard rooms, card rooms and a concert hall complete with stage.²⁰

Despite his wealth, T.P. Loblaw never forgot his roots. In 1926, he donated \$100,000 to build the Stevenson Memorial Hospital in Alliston. One of the most modern facilities of its day, it was opened in 1928 and named in honour of Loblaw's maternal grandparents. In 1929, Alliston was able to pave its streets because of another Loblaw donation. That same year, Loblaw and Cork donated \$1 million toward the building of the new Toronto Western Hospital. Loblaw served as an executive member of the Kiwanis Club of Toronto, was a director of the YMCA and was a member of the Board of Governors for Toronto Western Hospital, the United Church of Canada, The Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Canada and the International Order of Foresters. Loblaw 1926, he donated \$100,000 to build the Stevenson Memorial Hospital and Stevenson Memorial Hospital Hospital and Stevenson Memorial Hospital Hospital Hospital And Hospital Hos

By 1933, the Loblaw chain included 107 stores in Ontario and over 50 stores in the United States. But on April 2 that year, T.P. Loblaw died following minor surgery at Toronto Western Hospital. He was buried in the Alliston Union Cemetery. He was predeceased by his wife and survived by his four step-children. In his will, Loblaw forgave the \$125,000 in advances still owed to him by Stevenson Memorial Hospital, and donated \$25,000 to Emmanuel College of Victoria University. The will also established the "T.P. Loblaw Charitable Trust" to be administered by the Downtown Kiwanis Club of Toronto for work with underprivileged boys and other charitable purposes in Toronto.

In addition to his philanthropy, Loblaw's major legacy is the chain of groceteria-style stores that revolutionized the grocery store business. Like those of Henry Ford, T.P. Loblaw's innovative ideas remained sound and fundamentally changed the way that people shopped for food and other items. Today, "Loblaw" is Canada's largest food distributor and a leading provider of general merchandise products, drugstore and financial products and services.



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© Ontario Heritage Trust Page 4 of 5

[&]quot;Ford Benefactor as Retail Grocer," *Toronto Daily Star, Pages of the Past*, March 30, 1927, http://micromedia.pagesofthepast.ca/PageView.asp (accessed November 7, 2004), 23.

² B.E.S. Rudachyk, "Theodore Pringle Loblaw Biography," *The Barrie Advance,* November 21, 1999. Alliston: Simcoe County Heroes Collection, http://www.ibidnet.ca/displayessay.php?ltemID=291 (accessed September 24,

2004).

- ³ Encyclopedia Canadiana, (Toronto: Grolier of Canada, 1977), 193.
- ⁴ Robert E. Harrison, ed. *Theodore Pringle Loblaw (Loblaw & Stevenson) Family Study*, (North York: Robert Harrison, 1996) 22.
- ⁵ R.E. Knowles in interview with T.P. Loblaw, "Wealth has not Spoiled Canada's Groceteria King," *Toronto Daily Star, Pages of the Past*, February 27, 1929, http://micromedia.pagesofthepast.ca/PageView.asp (accessed November 11, 2004), 2.
 - ⁶ Knowles, Toronto Daily Star, February 27, 1929, 2.
- ⁷ Harrison, *Loblaw & Stevenson Family Study*, 24, conversation with T.P. Loblaw's relative and close friend, Mrs. Mary Elspeth (Wood) Milne.
- ⁸ The Globe, April 3, 1933, from the globeandmail.com, http://199.198.129.206/default.asp, (accessed November 21, 2004), 1.
- ⁹ Harrison, *Loblaw & Stevenson Family Study*, 35, quotation from extract of July 26, 1930, *Alliston Herald* article located on Microfilm Reel #20, Alliston library.
 - ¹⁰ Knowles, Toronto Daily Star, February 27, 1929, 2.
- ¹¹ R.E. Knowles in interview with T.P. Loblaw, "Wealth has not Spoiled Canada's Groceteria King," *Toronto Daily Star*, Pages of the Past, February 27, 1929, http://micromedia.pagesofthepast.ca/PageView.asp (accessed April 24, 2008), 1.
 - ¹² Seventy-fifth anniversary: a celebration, Loblaw Companies Limited, (Toronto: Loblaw, 1996), 31.
- ¹³ Piggly Wiggly. "Where it began ...," http://www.pigglywiggly.com/cgi-bin/customize?aboutus.html (accessed November 21, 2004).
- ¹⁴ R.E. Knowles in interview with T.P. Loblaw, "Wealth has not Spoiled Canada's Groceteria King," *Toronto Daily Star, Pages of the Past*, February 27, 1929, <u>micromedia.pagesofthepast.ca/PageView.asp</u> (accessed November 11, 2004), 2.
 - ¹⁵ Seventy-fifth anniversary, 31-33.
- ¹⁶ Robert E. Harrison, ed. *Theodore Pringle Loblaw (Loblaw & Stevenson) Family Study*, (North York: Robert Harrison, 1996) 47-48, (http://calendar.county.simcoe.on.ca/partners/newteclib/history/database/0152_13.html).
 - ¹⁷ Seventy-fifth anniversary, 33.
 - ¹⁸ 914 square metres.
 - ¹⁹ Seventy-fifth anniversary, 37.
- ²⁰ "Fine Recreation Club for Employees," *Toronto Daily Star, Pages of the Past*, October 4, 1928,

http://micromedia.pagesofthepast.ca/PageView.asp (accessed November 11, 2004), 2.

- ²¹ "To Build Hospital for Orangeville, Barrie," *Toronto Daily Star, Pages of the Past*, December 6, 1926, http://micromedia.pagesofthepast.ca/PageView.asp (accessed November 11, 2004), 7.
 - ²² Rudachyk, "Loblaw Biography."
- ²³ "Grocery Magnates Give \$1,000,000 to Hospital," *Toronto Daily Star, Pages of the Past*, February 26, 1929, http://micromedia.pagesofthepast.ca/PageView.asp (accessed November 11, 2004), 1.
 - ²⁴ Harrison, Loblaw & Stevenson Family Study, 39.
 - ²⁵ Harrison, Loblaw & Stevenson Family Study, 36.
 - ²⁶ Harrison, Loblaw & Stevenson Family Study, 39.
- ²⁷ Theodore and Isabella had no children of their own, but adopted one grand-niece, Jean Agnes Loblaw 1917-1993, and were foster parents to three nephews, Alexander Burr-Loblaw (b. 1904), John Burr-Loblaw (b.1906) and James Fraser Burr-Loblaw. The boys were orphaned when Isabella's sister in Scotland passed away. Theodore and Isabella arranged to bring the boys over from Scotland to Canada and raised them and Jean as their own children.
 - ²⁸ Harrison, Loblaw & Stevenson Family Study, 40.
 - ²⁹ Rudachyk, "Loblaw Biography."