

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

### **RENFREW MILLIONAIRES**

In 1910, local tycoon M.J. O'Brien bankrolled a new hockey league, the National Hockey Association (NHA), then launched a bid to bring the Stanley Cup to Renfrew. He recruited stars like Lester and Frank Patrick and "Cyclone" Taylor to the Renfrew *Creamery Kings* with extravagant salaries that earned the team the nickname of the *Millionaires*. Their 1910 season featured exciting games against rivals from Cobalt, Haileybury, Ottawa and Montreal that were followed closely by fans nationwide. Renfrew's hopes were dashed when the Millionaires failed to win the cup. After the First World War, the NHA would become the National Hockey League, signalling an end to big-league hockey in small, town Ontario.

### **LES MILLIONNAIRES DE RENFREW**

En 1910, le magnat de l'industrie locale M.J. O'Brien finance une nouvelle ligue de hockey, l'Association nationale du hockey (ANH), puis débourse sans compter pour donner à Renfrew une équipe capable de remporter la Coupe Stanley. Il recrute des joueurs vedettes comme les frères Lester et Frank Patrick, ou encore « Cyclone » Taylor, dans l'équipe des *Creamery Kings* de Renfrew et leur verse des salaires extravagants qui vaudront à l'équipe son surnom des *Millionnaires*. La saison 1910 est marquée par des rencontres passionnantes, suivies de près par les partisans à travers le pays, contre leurs rivaux de Cobalt, de Haileybury, d'Ottawa et de Montréal, mais les *Millionnaires* ne parviennent pas à remporter la Coupe, réduisant à néant les espoirs de Renfrew. Après la Première Guerre mondiale, l'ANH devient la Ligue nationale de hockey. Ce tournant mettra un terme à la présence des petites villes d'Ontario en ligue majeure de hockey. (Traduction libre)

### **Historical background**

In today's National Hockey League<sup>1</sup>, small-market Canadian-based teams are an endangered species. Both Quebec City and Winnipeg have lost their teams to wealthier American locales, while Calgary, Edmonton and Ottawa are far from secure. Incredible as it may seem however, small-town Canada once competed seriously for the Stanley Cup. In 1910, the small Ottawa Valley community of Renfrew launched an unprecedented bidding war that, comparatively speaking, compares to the inflated salaries of today. It was virtually the last such challenge, marking the chaotic transition from one era of hockey to the next.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in 1997-98.

Governor General Lord Stanley could not have realized what he was starting when he donated a trophy in 1892 to be presented to the club champion of hockey in Canada. An ardent sportsman, Stanley became passionate about hockey during his tenure in Canada, even sponsoring a team at Rideau Hall for which his two sons played. He felt that the declaration of a national champion was required to lift the game to the next level. "I have for some time been thinking," he declared, "that it would be a good thing if there were a challenge cup, which would be held from year to year by the leading hockey club in Canada. There does not appear to be any outward sign of the championship at present, and considering the interest that hockey matches now elicit, I am willing to give a cup that shall be held annually by the winning club." Officially named the Dominion Hockey Challenge Cup, it instead immortalized Lord Stanley's own name. The Stanley Cup was a challenge cup, with the right of a team to mount a challenge to be determined by two trustees appointed by Stanley.

Hockey fever swept the country in the years that followed as the number of teams and leagues increased rapidly. By 1900, hockey was the most popular winter team sport in the country; towns everywhere, no matter their size, boasted at least one team. According to sports historian Frank Cosentino:

Hockey, in the latter part of the nineteenth century was a relatively young sport, played locally in scattered areas of the country. With the introduction of the Stanley Cup, the game assumed a national focus especially when, in February of 1896, the Winnipeg Victorias defeated Montreal to win the Cup for the west for the first time. The victory was a source of western pride. It signalled the beginning of many similar attempts by various communities to gain what was already a nationally respected symbol. The opportunity to gain the prized trophy was reason enough for many teams to offer jobs, or situations, and/or financial rewards to players who it was felt could win the Cup.

This situation was not unique to hockey, as sports in general had become "powerful vehicles for expressing community aspirations, spirit, and pride." Cheering for the home team originally meant cheering for the friends, relatives and neighbours that comprised it. Naturally, then, "when local athletes or community teams began to represent their communities, the significance of winning or losing increased dramatically."

This increasing identification of a community with its sports teams meant an increased interest in the game itself and, especially, on its outcome.

When a local favourite went forward to challenge an individual or team in another town or city, and especially if that town or city was perceived as an economic or political rival, the contest was inevitably followed with great interest. Indeed, the threat of a symbolic loss of superiority, or the chance to advance community prestige, meant that some communities began to dedicate considerable energy and resources into supporting their teams and ensuring that they were competitive with the best.

As a result, towns were no longer content to be represented by locals only but began to seek talented outsiders to bolster their ranks. Pure amateurism began to give way to a professionalism that was not always above-board. "A longstanding taste for spectacle in popular culture, a desire for competitive teams in communities that lacked the population and resources of the major cities, the articulation of individual and collective" identities in sporting competition, and the impulse toward civic boosterism in a competitive market society: all of these elements combined to create markets for professional hockey." The Renfrew Millionaires provide an excellent example of this process.

The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an increasing professionalism in hockey. Teams avidly sought players that would give them a chance to win the coveted trophy. While the major centres, particularly Montreal and Ottawa, maintained a tight hold on the Cup, under the rules they had to accept the challenges approved by the Cup trustees, sometimes several in a season. This led to anomalies such as the Stanley Cup series between a pick-up team from Dawson City in the Yukon and the famous Ottawa Silver Seven, who handily disposed of the upstarts. The unlikely came true, however, when the Thistles of Kenora successfully challenged for the Cup in 1907 and defeated the Montreal Wanderers, giving hope to small towns everywhere.

The following year, 1908, marked a divide in hockey history. The Montreal Wanderers regained the Stanley Cup as amateurs. Then they promptly declared themselves professionals. The increasingly professionalized nature of the game was now completely out in the open. This fact was recognized by the Stanley Cup trustees, who declared that the trophy was to be awarded to the best team in the country "no matter how they are got together." A bidding war then broke out, instigated by the backers of the Renfrew team, who felt misused by both the Stanley Cup trustees and the big city teams who regarded them as comparatively insignificant.

In 1907, Renfrew won the Upper Ottawa Valley League and began to talk about challenging for the Cup. "Don't laugh," the Toronto Telegram advised its readers. "If you never lived in a country town, you don't know how seriously these people take themselves ...," deriding Renfrew as the champions of "a fence-corner league."

Renfrew residents were indeed proud of their town. Ninety kilometres west of Ottawa and with a population of about 3,000, Renfrew was best known for its creamery; its hockey team was officially called the Creamery Kings. But its biggest advantage was the presence in the town of some very wealthy individuals, notably M.J. O'Brien. O'Brien was indicative of his time, one of "a new generation of industrialists and lumber, mining and banking tycoons who were making their fortunes in the wide-open entrepreneurial atmosphere of the time. In the West and North, in particular, freebooting entrepreneurs began to challenge the more self-consciously genteel capitalists of earlier decades ..." In O'Brien's case, his wealth was derived from his ownership of one of the world's richest silver mines – in Cobalt, Ontario – as well as his railway, lumbering and milling interests.

O'Brien's wealth – and his willingness to spend it for the sake of civic pride – was the key to Renfrew's ability to launch a realistic quest for the Stanley Cup. O'Brien was not alone in this regard. The only way small-town teams could compete with the big cities in the scramble for players was to offer larger salaries, something that was beyond the resources of the "local businessmen and professionals who generally ran small-town clubs, and it invited the participation of mining tycoons and local industrialists as patrons, sponsors and, ultimately, owners." O'Brien exemplified this process. There is no evidence that O'Brien had any personal interest in the game, and it seems clear that he was involved solely to "buy" a Stanley Cup for Renfrew.

Renfrew issued a challenge for the Cup in 1907 and in 1909. On both occasions, they were turned down by the trustees, at least in part because there were already too many outstanding challenges. Nevertheless, Renfrew felt unfairly treated. A possible shorter route to the Cup was through joining the Eastern Canada Hockey Association (ECHA), comprised of teams from Montreal, Ottawa and Quebec City. The League champion was awarded the Cup, but was then expected to take on outside challengers. When Renfrew applied for admission, it was turned down, largely at Ottawa's instigation.

Renfrew's chance eventually came, because of dissension within the ECHA. The majority of the clubs voted to form a new league, the Canadian Hockey Association (CHA), excluding the Montreal Wanderers, who had fallen out of favour with the other owners. Furious at this Machiavellian ploy, the owner of the Wanderers approached Ambrose O'Brien – who had the day-to-day running of his father's hockey interests – about forming a rival league. Thus, the National Hockey Association (NHA) came into being, a strange combination of two teams from Montreal and three small Ontario resource towns: Renfrew, Cobalt and Haileybury. The second Montreal team was to have an all francophone lineup, and was given the name Les Canadiens – one of hockey's most storied franchises. The key to the NHA league was the O'Brien fortune – he wholly or partly owned the three Ontario teams and also bankrolled the formation of Les Canadiens.

Hockey was clearly in a state of flux. Amateur teams gave way to professionals and rival leagues were formed. A chaotic free-market system existed, with players free to sell their services to the highest bidder. The situation was tailor-made for O'Brien, who was determined to secure the best players available. As one of the team's executive committee stated, "We want the very best team money can buy, the best team in the world, in fact. And we don't care where the players come from."

The situation was exemplified by the case of the Patrick brothers, Lester and Frank, two of the greatest stars of their day. Courted by six different teams – on one day alone – Lester was offered \$1,200 by the Montreal Wanderers, \$1,500 by the Ottawa Senators and \$3,000 by Renfrew, an unheard of salary at the time. He signed with Renfrew on the proviso that they also take his brother. O'Brien's biggest coup was signing Cyclone Taylor, the Bobby Orr of his day and the star of the Ottawa Senators. He was paid the staggering sum of \$5,250, making him the highest-paid per-game athlete in the world. His salary, covering a 12-game season played over a period of two months, compared favourably to that of baseball legend Ty Cobb, who received \$6,500 for a seven-month,

154-game season. It was befitting that the team's nickname of Creamery Kings soon gave way to Millionaires.

The upstart league soon overshadowed the rival CHA, and the latter quickly recognized the inevitable and sought amalgamation. Only two teams were accepted by the NHA – the Montreal Shamrocks and the Ottawa Senators. With the collapse of the CHA, the Stanley Cup was awarded to the NHA champions.

The Millionaires provided the people of Renfrew with an unprecedented winter of excitement as hockey fever reached a peak. When Renfrew played in Ottawa, the game was relayed back to Renfrew by telegraph, where the whole town was caught up by the emotion of the moment. Unfortunately, as many later sports moguls found, money cannot necessarily buy championships. The all-star Millionaires never properly came together as a team until it was too late. The Montreal Wanderers won the league championship and with it, the Stanley Cup.

There was never a prospect that Renfrew would break even, let alone make money, given the salaries paid, which bore no relationship to the team's ability to raise revenue in a rink that held only 4,000 fans. Losses for the season totalled \$11,000. Although Renfrew returned to competition in 1911, the glitter had vanished. Only five of the preceding year's team members returned, and O'Brien largely withdrew his involvement. He turned over Les Canadiens to Montreal interests and withdrew support for Haileybury and Cobalt, which dropped out of the league altogether. Renfrew finished third in the league and was the only team to lose money that season. At that point, O'Brien abandoned his interest in the NHA and Renfrew dropped out of professional hockey.

Renfrew was the last small town to launch a serious attempt to win the Stanley Cup. In 1912 and 1913, Moncton and Sydney challenged but were hopelessly outplayed by the NHA champions. In 1918, the NHA became the National Hockey League and the modern era of hockey was born.

Renfrew's brief moment of glory showed how "a mix of wide-open entrepreneurialism and civic boosterism brought high-level and semi-professional hockey to small Canadian resource towns." Unfortunately, it also showed that the ability to sustain such teams depended on the willingness of financial backers to pour money into losing propositions. Once that willingness disappeared, so did the team.



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