

Obituaries

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JAMES ANGUS, 82 » TEACHER, ADMINISTRATOR

Educator was dean of Ontario's first university-level faculty of education

Battling academic turf wars, bureaucracy and tradition, his program became a provincewide model

BY FRANK B. EDWARDS

James Angus developed his taste for schooling early in life. At the age of three, he regularly snuck into his older brothers' home-schooling lessons. A year later, in 1932, he insisted on attending Grade 1 at the wilderness log schoolhouse the families of Big Chute, Ont., had built.

When he still hadn't tired of the classroom after two weeks, the teacher allowed him to stay, declaring him the school's best student.

Over the 59 years that followed, Angus taught in the Arctic, Singapore, Ontario and New Brunswick, and was appointed dean of Ontario's first university-level faculty of education. He is credited with creating the model the province of Ontario followed when it moved teacher-training programs into universities in 1969.

He died at the age of 82 on June 16 of respiratory failure after breaking his hip.

Angus, who was born on April 27, 1928, grew up in the woods of the Muskoka region before it became a cottage playground. His father, William (Scotty) Nesbitt Angus, was the federal government's lockmaster at Big Chute, where he oversaw the marine railway that carried boats across a section of the Severn River that had no hydraulic lock. It was part of the 19th-century Trent-Severn Waterway that connected Lake Ontario with Georgian Bay by way of Peterborough and Orillia.

Big Chute had no road access and only four families lived there. But like Angus' Scottish immigrant parents, the residents wanted their children to have a good education and built a one-room school out of local materials.

The blackboards were made of slate salvaged from an old pool table. Mary Elizabeth Cowan, the first young teacher whose \$800 salary made up most of the \$1,200 annual budget, used a pool cue for a pointer, but bought a new 25-cent leather "correction strap" for maintaining discipline among her 16 students.

Like his three brothers and sister, Angus was sent to Toronto, at 14, to complete his final three years of high school, returning each summer to the woods beside the Severn River to swim, fish, pick berries and catch bait for local fishermen.

Upon graduation, he attended University of Toronto for a general arts degree, earned his teaching certificate at the Hamilton Normal School and, by 1950, had married nurse Leola Coombs and was teaching at George R. Allan Public School in Hamilton.

In August, 1952, the young couple took government jobs in the coastal town of Coppermine, now Kugluktuk in western Nunavut. Angus was a "welfare teacher" in one of the Arctic's seven Inuit community schools; Leola ran the village's nursing station. As a welfare teacher, Angus' job reached beyond the dozen or so students in the classroom. He was required to visit each Inuit family monthly to monitor their living conditions, keep hunting records, organize social events and market local crafts to southern buyers. Having grown up in the backwoods, Angus fit into the isolated community easily.

Shortly after his arrival, he joined a group on dogsleds to hunt a herd of 75,000 caribou. When his Inuit companion fell ill, he took the man's rifle and shot three animals for him, adding to the day's harvest of 300. At school, he kept a rifle handy in case a flock of ptarmigan came within shooting range of the classroom.

Recognizing that books about farming and automobiles had no relevance to his students, Angus created his own northern stories, writing them on the board for his students to read aloud.

Despite the couple's modest housing, their apartment was always open to guests, including Prince Philip who flew in for a morning's tour and a royal lunch in the summer of 1954 just before the Anguses finished their two-year stay.



James Angus was appointed dean of education at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay in 1969.



Angus and students greet Prince Philip, who was visiting Coppermine (now Kugluktuk, Nunavut) in 1954.



The class of 1936 at Ontario's Big Chute School. Jimmie, as he was known then, is in the front row, second from the right.

Other visitors included government ministers, journalist Pierre Berton and bush pilot Max Ward who had just started Wardair.

Through the rest of the decade, Angus taught elementary school in Hamilton, St. Catharines and Bolton, Ont., before taking a job as a teaching master at the North Bay Teachers College, the prime source of new teachers for northern Ontario.

One of his students was

Tom Douglas, now an Oakville-based historical writer, who entered teacher training after high school.

"Most of us found that teachers college was a joke. There were very few classes that taught us how to teach. ... But Jim really taught us the mechanics of being a teacher."

The lessons included a session on how to strap a misbehaving student.

As a child, Angus had

years. (Alternatively, students with a bachelor degree could earn a B.Ed. in one year.) Angus believed this provided the best of both worlds – a solid, liberal education and effective classroom and curriculum training.

He later wrote in *Schoolroom*, his memoir, "With naïve optimism and support from program users, I presented the programs to the Senate's Academic Planning Committee. ... I soon learned how difficult it is to create a new program on a university campus."

Angus' plans were scrutinized critically at all levels, from senior education ministry staff and university presidents across the province to faculty associations, teachers college staffers, and student organizations – each group wanting to protect its own interests. In the end though, his approach became the standard for most of Ontario's new education faculties.

Later he added a masters degree program and an aboriginal education degree that prepared teachers for work in native communities.

His marriage did not survive his 10-year term as dean. Midway through the 1970s, the Anguses divorced.

In 1978, Angus met Patricia Shaw, an Ottawa medical technologist, during a Wardair tour of Greece. Later, he visited her during a research trip to Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa and started a long-distance courtship that lasted until they married in 1980.

For all his travels and work in education, Angus never lost interest in his father's work at the Big Chute marine railway. After years of research, he wrote *A Respectable Ditch*, the definitive history of the Trent-Severn Waterway, a transportation route which – due to politics and geography – took 87 years to complete. The book was published by McGill-Queen's University Press.

"His book is my bible. I use it constantly in my work," says Parks Canada historian Dennis Carter-Edwards, who is responsible for managing the agency's cultural resources in central Ontario. "It is a delight to pick up and read."

A series of self-published books followed, including a history of 73 mills on the Severn River and *A Deo Victoria*, the story of a prosperous Georgian Bay Lumber Company. His "Severn Publications" titles sold almost 10,000 books.

Before retiring to an Orillia condominium with a view of Lake Simcoe in 1994, Angus served for two years as a district governor of Rotary International with responsibility for clubs in northwestern Ontario, North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin. A Rotarian for 40 years, he helped establish student exchanges with China, a water treatment plant in Haiti and a medical outpost in Peru. In 2005, he produced a history of the Canadian Rotary Club.

In addition to his historical research, he served as president of the Orillia Historical Society, played a crucial role in the creation of the amalgamated Orillia Art and History Museum, and became involved in the rehabilitation of a tumbledown mill in Coldwater, north of Orillia. He estimated he had visited 74 countries.

His historical expertise won him an appointment to the board of the Heritage Trust of Ontario that he held for eight years until he resigned in 2008 due to Parkinson's disease.

"He was a wonderful man and we miss him very much," says executive director Richard Moorhouse. "What he brought to the board was his love of history and knowledge of the province, along with a wonderful sense of humour and enthusiasm and good judgment. He was able to engage everyone so well because of his teaching background."

Angus leaves his wife Patricia, his son David, three stepdaughters, six grandchildren, eight step-grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

» Special to *The Globe and Mail*

I REMEMBER » BRUCE McPHERSON

Karim Durzi of Toronto remembers Bruce McPherson, whose obituary appeared on July 7.

Some four decades ago, when I was working for the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, I authored a study on the furniture industry in the province. I travelled extensively throughout Southern Ontario to gather information and observe the conditions of the industry firsthand. In the course of the study, I visited a large number of factories, saw a good deal of the operations, and interviewed at length the owners and managers of the plants.

Time dims the memory, and the names and views of the individuals I spoke to do not readily come to mind. The one exception, though, is my meeting with Bruce McPherson, owner of the Gibbard furniture operation in Napanee. I vividly remember Bruce and his passion for the industry. Never have I met a man who so much identified with his craft, spoke so lovingly about the materials he used, and so valued the quality of his product.

"Mr. Durzi," he told me, "wood is a living product, and we have to treat it with love and care. It breathes, and it changes over time."

Understandably, his passion kept the Gibbard name among the most respected in the country, and Bruce's loyal workers supplied our embassies around the world with some of the finest furniture available anywhere – a showpiece of Canadian craftsmanship. Sadly, with changes in the industrial landscape and the recent financial crisis, Bruce McPherson's pride and joy went down. I am sure there were tears in his eyes.

I REMEMBER » BRUCE McPHERSON

Garth Goddard of Toronto remembers Bruce McPherson.

When my wife's mother died in 1991, Susan and I inherited some money with which we bought some Gibbard furniture for our apartment bedroom: campaign-style pier chests and bedside tables. We also inherited from her parents an appealing, vaguely Art Deco style set of dining room furniture: dining table, buffet, and china cabinet. It wasn't until many years later that we happened to look at the inside of one of the buffet drawers and discovered the manufacturer's name – Gibbard. We were delighted to think that, 40 years earlier, Susan's parents had been as drawn to the company's fine furniture as we were. Mr. McPherson has gone, now, as has his company, but it looks as though our furniture will remind us of them, and their craftsmanship, for years to come.

I REMEMBER » DOROTHY DOOLITTLE

Margot McIntyre of St. Catharines, Ont., remembers Dorothy Doolittle, whose obituary appeared on July 2.

In 1977, when my husband came to St. Catharines to work at Ridley College, one of the first people we met was Dorothy.

She immediately asked how my brothers were, they having attended Ridley in the 1960s, and asked after them by name. She was so genuine and warm, with an incredible memory for faces and names, and when she talked to you her attention was undivided.

Not only did she pay special attention to the girls at Ridley, but I remember on more than one occasion she held a cocktail party for the entire faculty and staff of the school.

Our paths crossed many times over 40-odd years. There was a sparkle about her that never faded and she always left you feeling that she was truly glad to have seen you.

Her accomplishments were many and varied and we are all the better for them. She enriched the lives of all who knew her and we will miss her greatly.