

# RALPH D. MITCHENER (1926-1995)

## A TRIBUTE

*by Charles I.G. Verge*

Each year ORAPEX celebrates a prominent philatelist and his accomplishments by depicting the individual on the cachet for our show cover. This year Ralph Donald Mitchener, a local philatelist, has been chosen for this honour.



Ralph, a cherished member of the world philatelic community, passed away on December 20, 1995. His lung cancer had been diagnosed only six weeks before. He spent his last days in hospital supported by his family and his many philatelic friends. His funeral was a celebration of the family man, the philatelist, and the friend. The national and local philatelic communities were well represented.

There is a lot to be said about Ralph Mitchener: husband, father, grandfather, bureaucrat, journalist, historian, and philatelist. Here is a little bit of a 'potted' biography of the man I call my friend and mentor.

Born in Fort Garry, Manitoba on May 25, 1926, Ralph had lived in Ottawa since joining the Public Service in 1951. He received degrees from the University of Manitoba (BA, 1947), the University of Toronto (MA, Sociology and Demography, 1951), and Carleton University (BA, Geography, 1955). From 1956 to 1961 he completed his course work for a Ph.D. in the History and Administration of Higher Education at New York University. He received a Canada Council grant for these studies, which he attributed to the novelty of weekend commuting costs from Ottawa.

He served the Canadian public first from 1947 to 1949 as a social worker in Dauphin, Manitoba before joining the Federal Civil Service with the Higher Education Section of Statistics Canada (1951-1967) and then with the Education Support Programs Branch of the Department of the Secretary of State until his retirement in 1986. He also had a three month assignment with UNESCO as an "expert in education statistics" in East Africa, just prior to the independence of what was then Tanganyika. During his career he had more than twenty articles published on historical, current and future aspects of

Canadian education. These included articles in the *Canadian Annual Review* and UNESCO's *World Survey of Higher Education* as well as contributions to *The Encyclopedia Americana*. He was named an Honorary Life Member of the Canadian Association of University Teachers in 1967 for his work on their behalf.

His community activities and other outside interests included baseball, hockey, and writing. He played hockey with local senior teams in Manitoba and was most proud of, his two base hit off Satchel Paige. He coached Little League baseball and managed peewee football teams and was Chairman of the "A" Division of the National Capital Minor Hockey Association. In addition, he was a faithful supporter and promoter of the Hockey Hall of Fame. He donated material to it and his thematic exhibit on Hockey has been displayed there on numerous occasions.

A member of the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada since 1962, he actively participated in the Society as Library Affairs Officer from 1983. He became the Society's Historian in 1986 and Editorial Consultant of *The Canadian Philatelist* in 1990. The membership elected him a Director of the Society in 1991 and he was re-elected in 1993 and 1995.

In 1989 he was made a Fellow of the Society, the highest award given to a philatelist in Canada. Since 1985, Ralph had been a Director of the Postal History Society of Canada. He was a Past President of the RA Stamp Club and of the Ottawa Philatelic Society. He was a member of many other philatelic organizations in Canada and the United States, including the British North America Philatelic Society, la Fédération

québécoise de philatélie, la Société d'histoire postale du Québec, the Philatelic Specialists Society of Canada, the American Topical Association, the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors, and many more.

A national level philatelic judge for over two decades, he became, in 1992, an internationally accredited philatelic literature judge. He had looked forward to judging at CAPEX 96, the World Philatelic Exhibition, held shortly after his death in Toronto. He was the only philatelic literature judge to have performed these duties in all three of Canada's National Philatelic Literature Exhibitions (1991, 1993 and 1995).

Ralph was a gifted man of exceptional talent, who gave so much and had so much more still to give. He was so willing to share his love of Canadian and world philately with others. His knowledge of philately was encyclopedic; his collecting habits catholic; and his love of the hobby's literature and history academic.

His "Stamps" column in *The Ottawa Citizen*, which he took over from Ian Kimmerly in 1983, was his pride and joy. It was not his first love, however. In the 1940s he had written a weekly sports column for *The Dauphin Herald*. Although he was devastated when his "Stamps" column



went from a weekly column to one every three weeks, he soldiered on. He never wavered from the guidelines he penned on how to write stamp columns for non-philatelic publications. That steadfastness earned him, in 1992, a Large Silver award at PHILITEX in New York. This was, and still is, the highest award ever received for stamp column writing. Only two others, an American and a Peruvian, have equaled that level of competence. Many writers, including yours truly, now follow the Mitchener Maxims of stamp column writing.

In 1987 he was honoured by the RPSC with the Geldert medal for his writings in *The Canadian Philatelist* which were published under his own name and the R. Molar pseudonym

Truman Capote once said that, for him, 'the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the inner music that

words make." That was also the way with Ralph. He felt it was one of his tasks to impart the beauty of words and literature. He loved words; he loved to understand their meaning; and he loved to make puns out of them. He was particularly proud of his trilingual pun "Café Ole."

His award winning stamp exhibits flowed from other events in his life. His trip to Africa for UNESCO in the sixties was the basis for his collection of Ethiopian postal markings during the Italian Occupation. His love of Hockey gave him the impetus to put together a topical collection on the subject. Not wanting to compete with the late Colin Bayley, but loving the philately of the Ottawa area, he dropped active collecting of Bytown Postal History in favour of that of Ottawa and Hull. He was an avid researcher, and formed a substantial collection of Canada Post First Day replacement covers. I don't know where his interest in teeth came from, but his exhibit entitled "Roots, Necks and Crowns: A tongue-in Cheek Look at Teeth and Dentistry" was perhaps rooted, if you will pardon the pun, in his own experience with false teeth. He has also left an immense amount of research on the early years of Canadian philately, and its collectors and dealers. He leaves an extensive collection of early Canadian philatelic literature.

I would like to close by paraphrasing Winston Churchill who, on his 75th birthday, talked about passing on in words somewhat reminiscent of the following: Ralph is ready to meet his maker. Whether his Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of listening to Ralph's jokes and puns is another matter. But then, we have it on good evidence in the Bible that laughter is allowed in Heaven. How much more there will be now that Ralph has decided to move.