

Winfred Theodore Ritcey, the Man with the Vision

Winfred Theodore Ritcey, better known as W.T., was born in Riverport in 1878, the only son of Daniel and Anna Strum Ritcey. While he was young, due to his father's health, his family moved to the United States, where he received his education, and worked with his father in the lumber and building business. Despite a bout of typhoid fever in 1899, W.T. was ambitious and he took on a variety of positions in various industries, becoming secretary-treasurer of a large granite company, and even building his own lumber mill in Newfoundland. In 1906, he married Bessie Blake from Maine, and together they had three daughters, Mildred, Frances and Judith.

While living in Calgary, Ritcey once again experienced a bout of ill health and became reflective about his future. He felt the pull of his home province, and decided to establish an industry on the banks of the LaHave River. He envisioned an industry that would employ many men, gas engines that would help the fishermen who relied on the whims of the wind, and an enterprise that would contribute to the prosperity of Lunenburg County. Moving his family to Bridgewater, he established Acadia Gas Engines, which was to become the largest Canadian manufacturer of marine engines, producing marine and stationary engines. It was 1908, and the first factory produced 35 engines for a first year's sales volume of \$10,000. By the end of the first decade, sales had reached \$700,000 annually. The most famous engine was the single cylinder 'make and break' engine that was very popular with inshore fishermen, and was exported all over the world.

Ritcey was a shrewd businessman, and in the 1920's he even took over the local General Motors dealership and built a stone garage, installing an innovative lift system that allowed him to store automobiles over the winter months, for a fee of course! A hands-on manager, he knew every phase of the business, and even built his house just across the street from the plant. Believing in the importance of happy employees, he often treated his workers to boat trips, refreshments, entertainment and Christmas turkeys.

Always a trendsetter, W.T. owned the first closed automobile in the community, and was the first to heat his home with oil. Active in the community, he served as president of the Board of Trade, the Curling Club, and the Lunenburg County Fish and Game Protective Association. He was Mayor of the Town of Bridgewater in 1919, and was a member of the Bridgewater Kiwanis Club and Acacia Lodge. He loved outdoor sports, and was a champion tuna fisherman, even demonstrating how to catch a tuna at one of the annual water carnivals held on the LaHave River.

Illness forced W.T. to retire in 1944, and surprisingly his wife Bessie took over as President, running the company until her death in 1963, a significant achievement for a woman at that time. The company was purchased by British Grinsby Group in 1964, and was sold in 1960 to ABCO of Lunenburg. W.T. Ritcey died in 1946, and he and Bessie are buried in Brookside cemetery.