



Bruce
Cherney

EDITOR'S COMMENT

The Intrepid Road

I have no problem naming Winnipeg streets after historical figures or those who have made an outstanding contribution to the community, which is what the locally-based Intrepid Society has in mind for Portage Avenue East, a small segment of the major Winnipeg artery on the east side of Main Street.

The fans of legendary Winnipeg-born spymaster Sir William Stephenson want Portage Avenue East renamed in some way to commemorate the "Man Called Intrepid," who is claimed to have been the inspiration for Ian Fleming's famous fictional character James Bond, the British spy with the 007 "licence to kill."

Glorifying some famous person through a street name is not such an extraordinary occurrence through. Recently, Arena Road was renamed in honour of legendary Blue Bombers receiver Milt Stegall. And before that Monty "Let's Make a Deal" Hall, had a street named after him.

Winnipeg is actually filled with streets named after individuals whose pasts are now obscured by the passage of time. An historic name that quickly comes to mind is Donald Smith after whom is named Strathcona, Donald and Smith. Lord Strathcona began his career as an Hudson's Bay Company fur trader, negotiated with Louis Riel on behalf of the Canadian government during the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, served as the MP for Selkirk riding, and

progressed to become a financial contributor to the Canadian Pacific Railway during its drive to span the continent.

While much is known of William Stephenson's latter life, particularly his role for the Allies' cause as a spymaster, little had been known about his early life in Winnipeg until local writer Bill Macdonald's book, *The True Intrepid: Sir William Stephenson and the Unknown Agents*, was published in 2002. Through careful research and interviews, Macdonald was able to remove the shroud of mystery surrounding Stephenson's early years. Macdonald proved that popular books such as William Stevenson's (no relative to the spymaster) *A Man Called Intrepid* were filled with erroneous information about Stephenson's time in Winnipeg.

Macdonald found a local historian, Elly Heber, who said he wasn't even originally a Stephenson, but was born to another family and raised by the Stephensons. According to other books, Stephenson was falsely claimed to have been raised by either Scottish or Norwegian immigrants.

Derek Bedson, a Winnipegger who befriended Stephenson in New York, travelled covertly with the spymaster to Winnipeg in 1980, but learned little about his early life. It wasn't until he later met George Johnson, a former lieutenant-governor of Manitoba and former cabinet minister in the Duff Roblin government, that Stephenson's past was

clarified. It was Johnson who told Bedson that books were mistaken about Stephenson. He was an Icelandic-Canadian, Johnson related.

Johnson knew Christine Stefansson (Stephenson is an anglicized version of the Icelandic Stefansson) of Selkirk who was the sister of Stephenson's adoptive mother Kristin and had "saved a newspaper clipping from a small Icelandic paper that gave Stephenson's natural parents and gave a conflicting year of birth" from the date in other accounts.

Macdonald wrote that from this point of reference he was able to obtain a copy of the birth certificate of William Samuel Clouston Stanger, who was born on January 23, 1897. This Stanger became William Samuel Stephenson, the "Man Called Intrepid."

His real parents were Sarah Johnson, born in Iceland, and William Hunter Stanger, born in the Orkney Islands, employed as a labourer and carter at Oglivie Flour Mills. The couple moved about Point Douglas from 195 Gomez in 1895, to Higgins Street in 1896, to 180 Stephens Street in 1901 and then to 136 Angus. When the elder Stanger died of progressive muscular dystrophy in 1901, Sarah found she was unable to support her three children and left William with the Stephensons, another Icelandic-Canadian family. William was never formally adopted, but he accepted the Stephenson name as his own.

Stephenson's adoptive parent Vigfus worked as a labourer in the Brown and Rutherford lumber yard, while Kristin stayed home to raise their children — Gudlauger, Gudmindir (Mindy), Julianna, Johinna and, of course, William. Vigfus was not a descendant of the original Selkirk Settlers nor the owner of a lumber mill as claimed in previous books.

In Stephenson's earlier biographies, he was said to have attended Argyle High School which never existed in Winnipeg.

Actually, Stephenson attended Argyle Elementary School for six years, the only formal education he received.

"Ethnic background — wrong," wrote Macdonald of the previous accounts of Stephenson's early days. "Parents' names — wrong. Parent occupation — wrong. Birth date, day and year — wrong. Birth name — wrong. School didn't exist."

Macdonald surmised that the fake biographies were part of Stephenson's involvement as a spy to prevent relatives or business associates from being targets for blackmail, kidnapping or reprisals.

As Stephenson was a wealthy entrepreneur and inventor, it was plausible that such fears existed while he served as the head of the counter-intelligence organization he created, the British Security Co-ordination (BSC). But the first false birth date appears on Stephenson's 1916 enlistment papers for the First World War. Falsifying his birth date was unnecessary as Stephenson was of legal age to enlist. Whatever the reasons, this was the first of many mysterious reinventions that continued to be upheld as fact until Macdonald began his investigation.

Stephenson never denied that he was born and raised in Winnipeg, registering the fact with pride whenever asked, but why he allowed the facts of his upbringing to be so skewed is a mystery that cannot now be answered, as he died at age 93 at his retirement home in Bermuda on January 31, 1989.

There already exists in Winnipeg a public library named in his honour as well as a scholarship, so why not a street? The only difficulty with renaming Portage Avenue East is that there exists a number of businesses along its length, and their costs to cover the alteration must be taken into account. Actually, the most appropriate place for a street named in his honour would be in Point Douglas, the neighbourhood where he grew up. Perhaps change Syndicate to Stephenson?