

Clare Rennie Tribute

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intrigue

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October 10, 2017

When our beloved Rotary member Clare Rennie passed away in June 2016, thoughts turned to the idea of creating a lasting tribute in his memory. Everyone agreed that it should involve the Guelph Lake Rotary Forest, the wonderful project inspired by Clare.

On October 6th, 2017, on a warm sunny afternoon, many close friends, family, and colleagues gathered at the Rotary Forest to dedicate “Clare’s Lookout” – two wooden benches on a rise overlooking the entire Guelph Lake Rotary Forest, alongside a maple tree planted in Clare’s name. It’s perfect. Pleasant, unassuming, and with an expansive view of the world. Just like Clare.

With Clare’s dear wife Shirley and close friends seated on the benches, the gathering listened to heartfelt compliments about Clare from Rotarian Paul Taylor, Clare’s son Don Rennie, and Robin-Lee Norris, Chair of the Board of the Grand River Conservation Foundation. Rotarian Dave Latreille then read out Clare’s wonderful legacy story written by the talented Susan Farrelly.

Nearby the benches is a signboard introducing “Clare’s Lookout” to visitors. The wording on the poster is beautiful.



Guelph Lake Rotary Forest

Clare’s Lookout

Here from Clare’s Lookout you can see what Clare saw from the very beginning – a special place for everyone to enjoy

Dr. James Clarence (Clare) Rennie

(1926-2016)



When Clare Rennie looked out at a 40-hectare field near the shores of Guelph Lake in 2007, he didn't just see a field. He saw the future.

*From here at **Clare's Lookout**, the entire Guelph Lake Rotary Forest is in view. Envisioned by Clare, the Rotary Forest is the culmination of a long-standing relationship between the Rotary Club of Guelph, the Grand River Conservation Authority, and the Grand River Conservation Foundation.*



Trees are planted on the site year after year thanks to the help of many volunteers. When completed in 2020, 60,000 trees will have been planted – an outstanding legacy that will support many future generations.



Starting in childhood, and throughout a long and successful career in agriculture, Clare understood the value of environmental stewardship.

A Rotarian since 1999, Clare served in many roles including Club President in 2005-2006 and Chair of the Club's Charitable Foundation.



Clare's efforts brought him honours including a GRCA Watershed Award, Rotary International's Service Above Self Award, the Ontario Senior Achievement Award, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Guelph Chamber of Commerce.

Clare won many accolades, but his motivation was humble. He wanted to create a lasting natural space for the community which will be celebrated at the Club's 2020 Centenary Year, and long beyond.

From this vantage point, you can see what Clare saw from the very beginning – a special place for everyone to enjoy.

And here is the wonderful legacy story about Clare, written by Susan Farrelly and read aloud by Rotarian Dave Latreille at the get-together.

We hope that many future visitors to "Clare's Lookout" will honour him by pausing to enjoy the view and feel inspired by Clare's service, and the difference that one dedicated person can make.

Clare Rennie – Legacy Story

By Susan Farrelly

(with files from the Rennie family)

Intellectually curious, Dr. James Clarence (Clare) Rennie always saw the possibilities in new ideas and changes. An inductee into the Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame, Clare was a teacher, researcher, extension specialist and senior administrator. He served as a consultant in animal breeding systems in several countries and judged major dairy cattle shows in Mexico, Brazil, England and Japan. Clare was equally comfortable walking through a barn looking at cattle as he was in a boardroom, lecture hall or Minister's office.

Clare was a loving family man and was admired for his boundless energy and optimism. He saw the good in all people and is described as warm, engaging, gracious and supportive, with unfailing politeness and a focus on the importance of recognizing the effort of others. He was made an Honorary Fellow of the University of Guelph and awarded a Doctor of Law from Dalhousie University, the Queen's Jubilee Silver Medal, and the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario's Award for Seniors Achievement.

Born in 1926 in Blackwater, Ontario, Clare grew up on the family farm and was the second born son to John and Zella. Clare's parents worked hard to keep the farm viable. They nearly lost the farm during the Depression, but John was resourceful. They logged the substantial woodlot during the winter and ran a beef ring with the surrounding farms to earn extra money.

Clare's early schooling was in Brock Township, Ontario, where he attended Brock Public School. As a child, Clare and his older brother Ivan would hitch up the horse and wagon, or in the winter, the sleigh, and head off to the one-room schoolhouse. There was an oil-fired stove for heat at the back of the classroom and outside, was a lean-to shelter in which the horses would be tethered. Upon arrival, Ivan and Clare would dry the horse down, take some hay out of the wagon or sleigh, give it to the horse, throw a blanket over it and head into class. Clare used to say that the horses got along better than some of the students.

As a teenager, there was no money for both Ivan and Clare to continue on to post-secondary education. Clare's father said that one son could study and the other son could stay on the farm. In 1942, the country was fully engaged in the war effort and the farm had to be productive. Fortunately, Ivan did not want to go to University and Clare did. Clare would often remark that the deciding factor for him was that he didn't want to pick stones on the farm anymore.

At the age of 16, Clare was too young to attend the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC), but he applied anyway. When he was refused entry, he asked for an interview with the Dean of the



Don Rennie speaks on behalf of the Rennie family

College. With a combination of reasons and charm, Clare persuaded the Dean to take a chance and was admitted. He graduated four years later in 1947, with the highest marks in his year.

It was while attending the University of Guelph that Clare met a woman named Shirley Schnurr who worked as a secretary in the office of the Dean of the OAC. Shirley would tell the story that she and the other secretaries would enjoy meeting the students when they came in for a conversation with the Dean, as it was always fun to see if there were any spark and a chance to have a date, of which both occurred between Shirley and Clare.

After graduation, Clare worked as Assistant Agricultural Representative at Halton County and shortly after starting, he received a letter from the Deputy Minister of Agriculture, advising him that as part of a re-organization, and in recognition of his abilities, he was promoted to be the Senior Agricultural Representative in Huron County. He was to report for work in Goderich in two weeks' time. Clare had what at the time was an interesting and well-paying position, yet by nature, he was a restless intellect and wanted more. In a carefully worded and thoughtful letter, he wrote to the Deputy Minister (DM) to say that he would like to pursue further education and had identified a Masters and Ph.D. at Iowa State University. The DM was non-committal in his response but told Clare that he was supportive, and wanted to talk to him about it. He told Clare to meet him in Toronto the upcoming Saturday morning and to use the Departmental car to travel. Clare made the trip and left the meeting with the full support of the DM to pursue his graduate work in Iowa.

Clare graduated from Iowa State University in 1950 with his MSc in Animal Breeding and Dairy Science. He returned home to Shirley, the love of his life. Shortly after, Clare and Shirley were married in Guelph, on September 2, 1950. They honeymooned in Niagara Falls and Toronto, where they stayed with Shirley's sister, Ruth and her husband Don. Shirley and Don then took the train to Iowa via Chicago. Shortly afterward, they received a visit from Don's two uncles, who were in the entertainment business in California. They gave the newlyweds a car as a wedding gift. Even back then, this was an extremely generous gift from the brothers of Clare's father.

Clare commenced his Ph.D. studies in Dairy Cattle Genetics and Statistics at Iowa State University. Clare and Shirley lived in a cockroach infested apartment they were assigned as married students. It was an austere and simple place, with little or no furniture and Clare donated blood every month, with the money received going towards groceries. In Clare's research, he worked with fruit flies and Shirley was a full partner, helping her husband with determining the changes in eye colour by staring into the eyes of these tiny creatures on Petri



M.C. David Latreille, Chair
Environment/Rotary Forest Committee

dishes through big microscopes. Clare graduated in 1952 with his Ph.D., and Clare and Shirley promptly returned to Guelph, where Clare started working as a lecturer and Professor of Animal Science at the University of Guelph. They purchased their first house on Forest Hill Drive for \$9000 with some help from Shirley's parents. Being home now, this stability allowed Clare and Shirley start their family. Don was born one year later in 1953 and Cindy was born in 1957.

Clare enjoyed teaching very much and his career at the University of Guelph evolved into becoming Chair of the Department of Animal Science, Acting Dean of OAC, and Acting Dean of Research. During Clare's time at the University, he directed 17 graduate students, many of whom have advanced into leadership positions in industry and academia in Canada and internationally. He always had a close and supportive working relationship with his Ph.D. students. Clare and Shirley would often entertain them and invite them to their home for dinner. This was especially important for the international students, being so far from home.

In 1974, Clare became the Assistant Deputy Minister, Division of Education, Research and Field Advisory Services with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food. For the next 17 years, he shaped and guided the face of agricultural education and research in Ontario and, with his work on the Canadian Agricultural Research Council, he set agriculture research priorities on a national level.

Through this work, Clare commuted to Toronto and the Ministry Headquarters at Bay and Dundas. He would leave at 5:00 am in the morning to beat the traffic.

Clare's son Don shared, "The commute was difficult and it must have taken a toll on his health, but if it did we never saw it as kids. He often called me in the morning when we were just getting up – he was already in Toronto, at his desk and had probably had a couple of meetings by that point. He had enormous energy, and fortunately, he loved to drive and enjoyed the morning sunrise as he headed east along the 401. He told me that it reminded him of his own father, walking out the barns, in the dark of winter to milk the cows."

At the stage of life when Clare retired from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, many would slow down. Clare did not. Somewhat to Shirley's dismay, he sped up. For the next 15 years, he lead the Semex Alliance, CIDA project in China, focusing on the improvement of dairy herd management and milk production in China. From age 65 to 80, he 'commuted' to China 34 times, to work with farmers, industry experts from Canada and China, to build a strong and viable dairy industry for China. Hopping on and off planes in Mongolia, Hongzhou, Beijing, Xian and several other areas was a great testament to his stamina and his love of the work. Even after he retired from this work, every group of Chinese delegates that came to Guelph, met with and referred to



Paul Taylor, a former President, speaks for the Rotary Club

Clare as 'Dr. Rennie, our grandfather', a tribute to the respect he garnered from all that he worked with. Clare's work for the Chinese people was recognized in 2006 when he was awarded the "Friendship Award", China's highest honour granted by the Premier.

Clare was not all work. He relaxed at the cottage in Port Elgin and was most content chatting with his children and grandchildren, encouraging them in their studies, inquiring into their plans and asking about their ideas. Clare and his son Don spent many hours together working on projects around the cottage, and with Cindy discussing the importance of community service, life on the farm and sharing their love of travel. He was a wonderful grandfather – teaching his grandchildren how to drive to the cottage dump, helping with rigging the sailboat and teaching the basics of home maintenance and landscaping. He was infinitely patient with his grandchildren. Their noise and laughter made him happy.

Clare continued to give back to the community, and he was Chair of the Board for the Elliott Community and President of the Rotary Club of Guelph. Clare received Rotary International's highest honour, the "Service Above Self Award". Through his Rotary work, Clare's attachment to the land was evident and although in his 80's, he had a vision to improve the quality of water in Guelph Lake and to increase the amount of forest in Guelph. So was born the Rotary Forest, a 13-year volunteer-based project to reforest 100 acres of farmland. Clare was truly passionate about this – organizing, coordinating, encouraging and, planting the trees.

"Clare Rennie made The Rotary Forest a highlight of my long career," said Martin Neumann, Manager of Parks and Forestry at the City of Guelph, who worked with the Grand River Conservation Authority when Clare started the Rotary Forest Project. "It's a highlight simply because it is such an awesome project. But, really, it was Clare himself who made it so successful and rewarding. I will forever remember Clare and the forest as mutually nurturing, both for the benefit of the community."

Dave Latreille, Rotary Club of Guelph member shared, "It was an honour and a privilege to work with Clare on the Rotary Forest Project. He really wasn't interested in the credit for success and readily pointed out the contributions of others. He had an amazing way of making people feel at ease and he was genuinely interested in having their input in decisions that had to be made. I found Clare to be unassuming, but supremely capable. The more I got to know Clare, the more I admired him."

As Clare approached the age of 90, his body had weakened to a certain extent, but not his mind. His level of activity and stamina even well into his 80's was something that was admired. Clare became ill in June 2016 with pneumonia and a week later on the morning of June 23,



Robin-Lee Norris, Chair of the Board of GRCF, closes the ceremony speaking for the GRCA and GRCF

2016, he passed away.

Clare's impact has been far-reaching and his legacy continues to live on. He published 75 scientific and technical reports, some of which have been translated into Spanish, Japanese, French, and Chinese. His belief in the importance of science, research and preservation is visible today in research farms, such as Vineland and Elora, in the system of agricultural colleges in Ontario, and in the Rotary Forest of Guelph Lake. There is no doubt that Clare's greatest impact has been in the hearts and minds of those who were truly fortunate to have crossed his path.