

Neil MacEachern



When Neil MacEachern entered the White Star Barber Shop on King Street one day he looked like any elderly patron looking for a trim. However, once he sat down it became clear MacEachern was no ordinary man.

The four gentlemen already waiting in the shop agreed that MacEachern should go first even though he was the last to arrive. All of them happened to be former pupils of MacEachern - one of Waterloo's most prominent educators. "That's respect," shop owner Bruce Martz recalled later.

MacEachern began his teaching career as a young man in 1913 in a school not far from his home near Mount Forest, Ontario. He grew up on a farm with five sisters, four of whom were also teachers. He taught at country schools for two years, making about \$245 a year. During the first year, MacEachern said he "had to wait (to get paid) until the fellow up the hill sold his pigs so that he could pay his taxes."

Despite the hardships, MacEachern remembered the early days with much fondness. "There were 70 students in an eight grade schoolroom but you didn't think of this as a hardship. It was a job you loved."

He attended the Toronto Normal School in 1916 to get his formal teaching certification and eventually found his way to Waterloo in 1925, where he took the post of principal at Central School. He remained there until a transfer to Alexandra School in 1931, and then on to MacGregor School in 1952. During his time at Alexandra, he reached out to help the people who were struggling during the Great Depression. As the president of the Young Men's Club, MacEachern was involved in handing out food hampers to the poor at Christmas. When he advertised a teaching position during those lean years, he often received as many as six hundred applications.

A favourite annual event was a field day for Waterloo students held at Waterloo Park between the years 1925 and 1969. MacEachern's school often won the athletic competition. "It was a big day," he recalled once. "Everyone marched through the town to the park wearing their school colours."

Upon his retirement in 1959, MacEachern was remembered as the first person to establish an "opportunity class" in Waterloo for children who were having difficulty learning. That initiative was the forerunner to the school board's large special education department. He is also recognized as the pioneer of the first Home and School Association; a group that helped parents connect to the school and become more involved in their children's education.

After retiring he continued to be involved in the system, acting as a trustee on the Waterloo County Board of Education. In 1967 he was awarded the Centennial Medal for his distinguished service to the education system in Ontario. Locally, he was honoured when a new school in Waterloo's Lakeshore Village neighborhood was named after him. N.A. MacEachern Public School was opened amidst much fanfare in 1974, complete with a time capsule that holds MacEachern's biography and photograph.

He held many executive positions within the provincial teachers' union and trustees associations. However, MacEachern's legacy rests mainly with the hundreds of pupils he affected. It is fitting that the children in the Lakeshore neighborhood were the ones who ultimately chose the name for their new school in 1974. Reflecting on his long career as a principal, Neil MacEachern said once that he always taught one class every year right up to his retirement. "I enjoyed working as much with children as I did with teachers."

Photo courtesy of Charles Belair and Neil MacEachern.