

Paul Wilson: Harry Frost died young – his hotel lives on

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The Royal Connaught opened on June 5, 1916 and everyone there knew who deserved all the credit. On that day they presented Harry L. Frost with this tray. His grandson has it today. (Paul Wilson/ CBC)

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 Contributor

It used to be the warehouse and catalogue centre for Simpsons-Sears. When I was going to Ryerson in the '70s, I had a part-time job in there moving boxes around.

In the world of condo conversions, it doesn't get much bigger than the million-square-foot Merchandise Building in downtown Toronto, near Jarvis and Dundas.



A postcard view of the million-dollar Connaught. It was Hamilton's tallest building. (Local History & Archives/ Hamilton Public Library)

Some 40 years later, I'm back. The concierge lets me and I take the elevator right up to the 10th floor. A dapper fellow – tweed jacket, pocket puff, buckle shoes – welcomes me in.

This is Harry Louis Frost II. In a few months, he will be 85. He is the grandson of the first Harry Louis Frost.

And Harry I is important for something he did nearly a century ago. Pretty much all by himself, he gave Hamilton the Royal Connaught Hotel.

Tallest building in the city

It opened in 1916. It cost a million dollars and, at 12 storeys, was the city's tallest building. For generations, it was the place – banquets, balls, conventions. When prime ministers came to town, the Connaught was where you'd see them.



Harry L. Frost wasn't born in Hamilton, but his ambitions for this city were many.
(Local History & Archives/ Hamilton Public Library)

No PMs lately. The Incredible Hulk did stop by five years ago to film in the hotel's ghostly lobby. The doors have been locked for nearly a decade.

Now, finally, there's hope. Two Hamilton developers with passion for the project and the means to pull it off – Rudi Spallacci and Ted Valeri – announced last week that they are going to convert the Connaught to condos. I think it's OK to believe they will pull this off.

[The website](#) went up last week, a pretty one. And Harry Frost is mentioned in passing. That's good, but he deserves more.

So Hamilton's most exciting condo conversion has us talking to Harry Frost's grandson, who likes condo conversions enough to have bought himself a big unit in the old Simpsons-Sears building.

Even his e-mail address

Harry Louis Frost II really does use that number after his name. He uses it professionally, he uses it in his e-mail address.

"I'm honoured," he explains.



Harry and Clara Mae Frost lived at Markholme, which still stands at the southwest corner of James and Markland.
(Art by Bobby Atkinson)

Harry I was born in Ohio, started work at 15 and was soon a travelling salesman for Jones National Fence. By his early 20s, he had come north to Hamilton and the Frost Wire Fence Company was born.

He was hugely generous to his employees. Harry II produces a cane, with an inscription from 1909. It was given to his grandfather by grateful staff. That year he had rented a railcar and taken them all on a holiday to California.

Harry I lived with wife Clare Mae at Markholme, a handsome house that still stands at the southwest corner of James and Markland.

He had a dream

Harry pushed for the formation of the Hamilton Board of Trade, now the Chamber of Commerce. He had this to say at the first meeting:

"I am not selfish, but I have a dream of a city larger and better. I see new hotels, more parks and boulevards..."



The old Simpsons-Sears catalogue centre in downtown Toronto became one of the largest condo conversion projects around. (Merchandise Building Collection)

And by the spring of 1914, they were breaking sod for the new hotel. It opened on June 5, 1916, and great throngs traipsed through. There were 244 rooms, up-to-date elevators, telephones, brass beds.

One prominent businessman had this to say about the opening of the Connaught: "It was practically a one-man job, and was put through by the sheer nerve, enthusiasm and energy of Harry Frost."

But just three years later, not yet 45, Harry Frost was dead. "He was in New York on business," his grandson explains. "At the time, troops were coming back from Europe. And they brought the Spanish influenza with them. Thousands died. He got it and died in hospital there." That was March 7, 1919.

Grandma moved into The Connaught

So Harry II never laid eyes on his grandfather. But he did know his grandmother, Clara Mae. She stayed on at Markholme for a time, then moved into a corner suite at the Royal Connaught.



Harry Louis Frost II grew up in Hamilton, but these days divides his time between Toronto, Georgian Bay and London, England. (Paul Wilson/ CBC)

As a boy, Harry II visited on Sundays, and they had lunch downstairs. Grandmother lived there some 20 years, right up until they took her to hospital for her final days. "They wheeled her out with a mickey of rum and a pillow," he says. "I was standing there by the gurney."

Harry II did most of his growing up in Hamilton, and went to school at Hillfield. He eventually ended up in the financial and management-consulting end of things. He's been married to Faye for 60 years.

They have a daughter and a son. They named the boy Richard Derek. But when he had a son three years ago, Harry II suggested the family tradition be maintained. And it has been. So the pattern is every other generation – the line of Harrys goes on.

Harry II divides his time between a flat in the tony Knightsbridge district of central London, a country place by Georgian Bay (where he still skis) and the condo in downtown Toronto.

Harry's silver tray

At the condo, Harry II keeps a large silver tray. It was presented to his grandfather on opening day at the Connaught. He remembers lending it to the hotel for a year, to be placed in a display case for the 75th anniversary.



Presenting Harry Louis Frost III, with his dad. (Frost family)

Harry recalls going to Hamilton and meeting somebody in the lobby of the Connaught not long before it closed. It was a disappointing sight. He hasn't been back to Hamilton since.

But he is excited by the plans to make the Connaught live and shine again. The project is supposed to be complete in 2015. What if someone asked Harry II to cut the ribbon?

"I would do that," he says. "And I would probably ask if I could have young Harry Frost III help me with the job."

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