

# Ronald Lyman Denton, B.Sc., M.D., FRCS

**NOVEMBER 27, 1912 - MARCH 7, 2000**

The funeral service took place in Minton United Church, at the corner of Minton Hill and University Road, in Hatley Township, Stanstead County, Quebec, on Saturday May 13 at 2:30. Between 125 and 150 people were present. This is what I said at that time.

---

I was advised by my friend Garth not to try to speak at my father's funeral. This will not be the first good advice that I choose to ignore.

Ronald Denton was a very successful man - in my view because he found happiness and was able to communicate that happiness to others.

Born on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, 1912, he would have been five years old when the Russian Revolution broke out, 17 when the Great Depression started, just in time for his graduation from the High School of Montreal. He completed his Bachelor of Science in 1933, just as the situation in Europe was going into the tank.

You might ask why I link his life to these dates. I once heard him ask a group of three friends, gathered on the lawn in Hatley, when they started to believe that we would win World War II. The point is not the answer each man gave: it was that, for them, the history books had not yet been written; they were reading about these events in the newspapers, they were living through them. They did not know how things would turn out.

By 1937 he completed his degree in medicine, and was competing his residency and internships in Montreal and Boston when World War II broke out. He spent the next five years as a Surgeon Lieutenant Commander in the Canadian Navy. Finally, in 1945, when he would have been 33 years old, his life was handed back to him, and he got on with it.

How bad was it in the Depression? I once asked him why he didn't like to play bridge, despite being a competent player. He asked: "Do you know how much a movie cost back then?"  
-No.

"Twenty five cents. Do you think we had twenty five cents for a movie?"

-No?

"So we played a lot of bridge."

Many of you are aware that he was a talented vegetable gardener. He and his brother Bert assisted his father Kelsey Denton in growing a vegetable garden of about an acre in size near their home on Old Orchard Avenue, in the Notre Dame de Grace district in Montreal. Dad said that

that was where he learned his craft. He mentioned something about how growing vegetables and selling some of them helped out the family living on a teacher's salary during the Depression.

A few years ago I ran into Mr. Justice Bev Walsh of the Federal Court of Canada and his wife, then both in their eighties. They remembered dad and his family from growing up in NDG. Mrs Walsh said something then about the family style: she said "the Dentons were right with everyone and everyone was right with the Dentons." It was that family style that Dad expressed when he treated people all people as if they had good intentions toward him until proven otherwise. And it caused other people to treat him well.

But his friendliness was not the source of his happiness, it was the expression of it.

When I was younger he would take me to the hospital on Saturday mornings and set me up with his great big microscope. I would look at the round red blood cells and count the ratio of platelets to red cells or some such measure. You could see the ones damaged by cancer as easily as you can tell a rotten apple. Not every father has a neat medical lab for his kid to learn from. The red blood cell count reminds me of a time when Dr. Bob Gourdeau, his then assistant, told me the following story. Bob was visiting Dad at North Hatley, long after both had retired. Dr. Gourdeau said to me

- You know, your father chewed me out one day in a way I have never forgotten. He asked me what the blood count was on some patient and I said `oh, between 300 and 500 [ or some such number] and your father fixed me with a stare that would have driven a spike into the ground. He said to me "In a field of medicine where there are so many unknowns, we can at least be accurate about the things that permit of accuracy."

This was recounted spontaneously by Bob Gourdeau thirty or forty years after the event, and it was his way of paying respect to the scientist in Dad.

I was never a patient of my fathers, never suffering from incurable diseases of the blood. So I cannot attest to his skill as a physician directly. But I know he was good, and here's why. About ten years ago he was out in the yard listening to the tractor running, and something in how it sounded disturbed him. He called me over and I heard it and, of course, it sounded like the tractor. So he performed his usual fiddles with the carburetor, the choke, and the speed, and it still sounded wrong to him. It turned out that when the tractor had been used in a saw mill, they took two inches off the drive shaft, so that the fan was further away from the radiator. They welded it back on a degree or two off of true, with the result that there was a wobble in the driveshaft, and the wobble threw the mechanism off to the core. He heard what was wrong, and you have to remember that he was half deaf at the time, and my hearing was perfect. Subsequent autopsy of the patient confirmed the diagnosis. And that is why pistons three and four of the tractor need to be reground, because of that tiny wobble, whose effects he heard.

When I was younger on the farm I used to watch him at times of the day or at evening

when he would lean upon a rake, or smoke his pipe, standing in the view absolutely still for three, five or even ten minutes at a time. This was not the kind of man whose idea of leisure was a day in the hammock. So I would ask him sometimes: “dad, what are you doing?” He never could explain why he was standing stock still for ten minutes, listening to the view. Now that I am older I know exactly what he was doing. Indeed I think I knew even then.

He was bringing his full attention to bear on the world that surrounds us, and to the world inside of us. He was being quiet and listening for things. Whatever he found there, it made him happy. And he communicated that happiness to others.

For this we are grateful.