



Left: The Flag-mobile promotes our mission to educate people across the country about the history of the Canadian Red & White Maple Leaf Flag, its origin, its birthplace and it's father. Middle: Bob Harper and John Ross Matheson -Bob putting the order of Canada Medal on Mr. Matheson as he was preparing for a special event that day. Mr. Harper felt an honour and privilege to be able to put the medal around Mr. Matheson as he prepared for the event. Right: Bob Harper and John Matheson lifelong friends

JOHN ROSS MATHESON, Brockville & Canada's Flag

By Russ Disotell

In 2011 Robert Harper made John Ross Matheson a promise. As Robert's wife, Sue, nods in agreement, he explains that he didn't make this promise lightly and he still considers it a very serious commitment. The promise, elicited over dinner, was to tell the complete and true story of the birth of Canada's red maple leaf flag. It's a promise he continues to fulfil today.

In May of 1961 Bob, who was 7 at the time, met John Ross Matheson for the first time. "He came walking up our driveway on Amie St." John Ross said he had known Bob's father, who had passed away in 1957, and he was running for the Liberal Party in the Federal by-election. He was there to ask Bob's mother for her vote.

Matheson won the by-election and was soon front and centre in the search for a distinctive Canadian flag. He was an expert in heraldry and was asked by Lester B. Pearson to lead the effort for the creation of the flag. Bob, having met the Leeds MP, followed the flag debate closely and was fascinated by the entire process. As he grew older he continued to see Matheson at special occasions and

celebrations. One such event was to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Rideau Canal in 1982. Bob was the manager of the Westport Arena at the time. Matheson and Governor-General Ed Schreyer were in attendance and Bob tried to find a Canadian flag for them to sign. Matheson insisted he would sign, only if the flag was Canadian made. The last-minute search proved futile and it was decades before Harper was able to get Matheson's signature on a flag at a St. John's Ambulance dinner. They chatted about the story of the flag's genesis.

In 2008 Bob started phoning John Ross and talking about the flag's story. In 2010 Bob and Sue moved back to Brockville and shortly thereafter, at dinner with John and his wife Edith, the promise was elicited. Thus, began the journey. He set about forming the 50 Years of Our Flag Committee that same year. He points out, "We set out with six projects and we finished all six of them." Amongst them was the Official Flag Ceremony painting by local artist Phil Chadwick, that hangs at the Brockville Public Library. It includes the names of 42 persons, all supplied from memory by Matheson.

Another project was to recognize Matheson's role in the birth of the flag by naming a street after him. There was some urgency as "John was getting older and his health wasn't great and we wanted to get it done while John was alive." After some initial problems and delays with the City of Brockville, Bob approached the United Counties of Leeds & Grenville and two weeks later Jail St. South was designated John Ross Matheson Way. On May 13, 2013 Matheson, then 95, and family attended the official ceremony. "It's a perfect spot, all within walking distance of many of the milestones of his life. He was very excited," Harper says, pointing out Matheson's law office was located on Court House Avenue.

Bob continues to honour his promise and feels the work isn't finished yet. "This has involved intensive research," Harper offers, "And there are all sorts of things I didn't know." At one point two PhD's were hired to help with the research. The information uncovered is fascinating to Harper and astonishing to an average citizen. Amongst them are the facts that Matheson created the City of Brockville flag and coat of arms, was instrumental in the establishment of the Order of Canada and the Royal Heraldry Society of Canada.

The research has led Harper to the conclusion that "John Ross Matheson is the father of the Canadian Flag and Brockville is the birthplace." He realizes it has met with spirited opposition, but maintains, "That's what the facts say."

Anyone interested in learning more about John Ross Matheson, the Canadian flag's origins and Bob and Sue Harper's continuing work should go to www.canadianflageducationcentre.ca. Bob is especially proud of the video on the site. "It's the best condensed version of how things were done and has been embedded on the Canadian Encyclopedia website. LH