



R.C. Harris, Bloor Viaduct, 1935

~C. Hutsul

# The

R.C. Harris is a giant in Toronto history — **John Lorinc** explores the myth behind the legend & bridges a few historical gaps

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER HUTSUL

On September 2, 1945, almost exactly 60 years ago, Roland Caldwell Harris, the City of Toronto's long-serving works commissioner, got out of bed and collapsed, dead of a massive heart attack at age 70. An overweight cigar smoker, he'd been in faltering health for some time. Typically, though, the man who said work was his "hobby" had been pushing himself to get back in the game. And with good reason: in recent years, Harris had been embroiled in a pair of minor but widely reported management scandals that eroded his clout. But the obituary in the *Globe and Mail* the following day made no mention of that: "In his 46 years in the civic service, Mr. Harris handled millions of dollars of public funds and was esteemed for his integrity and efficiency."

# City Builder

It was a fitting send-off for a powerful but retiring mandarin who, in his 33 years as works commissioner, did more to shape this city than any municipal official before or since. Besides the landmark public works for which he's best known — the Prince Edward Viaduct and the R.C. Harris Filtration Plant — he built most of Toronto's signature bridges (Spadina Road, Mount Pleasant, Vale of Avoca), paved or constructed 700 miles of new roads and sidewalks, and expanded the city's transit infrastructure. His most important accomplishment, however, was establishing the network of water reservoirs, sewer trunks, and filtration plants that dramatically improved the city's public health standards and laid the groundwork for Toronto's ambitious outward expansion in the 1920s and 1930s. "What was done then was the very foundation of the City of Toronto," Ray Bremner, Toronto's works commissioner during the 1960s and 1970s, told me before he died last year. "Without that, a lot of what's done today wouldn't be possible. I consider R.C. Harris to be a visionary."

Yet despite his status as a city builder extraordinaire, Harris remains an enigma: he was a church-going fixture of Toronto's Orange establishment with a social conscience and an aesthetic sensibility about how public works could shape Toronto's future. It's no accident that Harris' name is far better known today than most of the blowhard mayors under whom he served. Strangely, though, he's become a

kind of empty icon — politicians pay homage to his foresight, but know little about what drove him.

His cameo as the self-important bureaucrat in Michael Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of the Lion* was a fictionalized portrait, but it still shapes our image of Harris to this day.

In the novel, he is presented as arrogant, driven, and self-absorbed, his visions of architectural grandeur blinding him to the dangers that awaited the exploited labourers building the Bloor viaduct. Early on, he watches as a gust of wind blows a nun off the unfinished span, where he'd often go at night to dream of the city's future. "Commissioner Harris at the far end stared along the mad pathway," Ondaatje writes. "This [the bridge] was his first child and it had already become a murderer."

The truth is that he was an intensely private man dedicated to his job and disdainful of self-promotion. He died without ever explaining the source of his distinctive urban imagination. However, a personal tragedy, known until only to his immediate family until today, offers an important clue about what compelled this man to build Toronto's palace of water.

The story handed down in the Harris family is that young Roly Harris learned to ride a bicycle in the hallways of Toronto's first city hall, where his widowed mother worked as a cleaner. Born in 1875 in the vil-

lage of Lansing (now downtown North York), Roly attended Jarvis Collegiate, then worked as a cub reporter for the *Toronto World* before drifting to Montreal for a few years. He came back to Toronto and found a job as a clerk in the city's property department, where he became the protégé of a veteran civil servant named Emerson Coatsworth. In 1902, on his 27th birthday, he married a young woman named Alice Ingram. The newlyweds started a family and took an apartment in new City Hall, the imposing sandstone structure at the head of Bay Street, built in 1899 by E.J. Lennox in the Romanesque Revival style. The grand project, dogged by scandal, declared the ambitions of the city at the turn of the century. Not long after they took up residence there, the Harrises watched as much of the city's downtown core went up in flames during the great fire of 1904. The destruction came within blocks of their home.

Harris turned out to be a hard-working bureaucrat who caught the attention of his political masters. In June, 1912, when he was just 37, council appointed him works commissioner, replacing a failed middle-aged bureaucrat named Charles Rust. Toronto was then a fast-growing metropolis in the throes of a period of chaotic economic expansion and social upheaval. A Bible-basher named Rev. St. Clair had taken to whipping up halls filled with ardent followers, urg-

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ing them to boycott the dens of iniquity (such as cinemas) springing up all over a staid city of churches. Traffic congestion was choking the core, the streets were mud pits, and infectious diseases plagued the poor residents of overcrowded slums. Urbanists from Britain were travelling around North America promoting the need for cleaner, more spacious suburbs to counter the blight in industrialized inner cities.

Notwithstanding its self-important headquarters, Toronto's municipal government was hamstrung by incompetent bureaucrats who seemed out of step with the times. In New York, where City Hall had been under the sway of corrupt Democratic Party machines for decades, reformers working for a think tank called the Bureau for Municipal Research (BMR) were pushing for accountable government. The year after Harris began as works commissioner, two local businessmen decided to bring these reforms to Toronto. They raised some money and hired BMR analysts to assess Toronto's civic administration, including the works department. Their meticulous study, released early in 1914, hammered the city for its inefficient practices. But they singled out Harris for the "revolutionary" improvements he'd made during his brief stint. At 39, he had been designated as the face of the municipality's future.

Harris quickly acquired a reputation as City Hall's most able fixer. In 1914, he was put in charge of modernizing Toronto's antiquated streetcar service, and later stick-handled the operation through a strike. At the time, the city was tearing up its exclusive long-term franchise agreement with the much-hated Toronto Railway Corporation, a private firm notorious for running unsafe streetcars. He oversaw its transformation into the publicly owned Toronto Transit Commission. One of his earliest projects was building the Wychwood Streetcar Barns to accommodate a westward expansion.

Soon after taking over the department, he commenced work on a series of major bridges. Though he wasn't an engineer, Harris had a keen interest in architecture and urban landscapes. He involved himself in the design details of these bridges, insisting, for example, on the use of the soaring steel arches that give the Bloor viaduct its character. Harris' bridges were graceful and ambitious, bedecked with beveled footings and ornate balustrades. His first was an elegant triple-arch span on Crawford Street

### Prince Edward (Bloor) Viaduct

over an arm of the Garrison Creek. When he pitched this \$41,000 project to the works committee on April 9, 1914, he brought along a photograph of the lovely ravine, with an image of the proposed bridge drawn onto it in ink. The Crawford Street Bridge was completed shortly before the city began the Bloor viaduct; early photographs reveal it to be a virtual prototype. It was later buried to the hilt, the victim of a ham-fisted landfill scheme.

Simultaneously, Harris rolled out an aggressive program of works improvements — everything from building sidewalks to garbage collection — as the city pressed east and north, annexing quickly developing neighbourhoods like North Toronto and Moore Park. At the same time, he resisted the development and political pressures that would have sidetracked his own agenda. That conservatism set him on a crash course with another powerful civil servant of that era, Adam Beck. The founder of Ontario Hydro, Beck had concocted a scheme in 1915 for building a network of electric railways through Toronto, ostensibly to relieve traffic congestion. In fact, his true agenda might have been generating demand for his hydro power. Though Harris is credited for equipping the Bloor viaduct with the capacity to support subway tracks, he rebuffed Beck, arguing that Toronto's traffic problems weren't severe enough to warrant rapid transit.

In 1928, Sam McBride was elected mayor, and promised to marshal Toronto's growth into a coherent development plan. A pugnacious and populist Tory, he established Toronto's first planning commission and appointed Harris as its top advisor. Scarcely a year later, Harris appeared before a joint session of the Empire Club and the Board of Trade to unveil the result. His fingerprints were all over the downtown-focused blueprint, which called for a \$19-million program of road construction, including a Parisian-style traffic



circle on University and the creation of a new north-south boulevard parallel to Bay Street leading north from Union Station. A devoted road-builder, Harris pushed for new arterials out of the downtown, including the extensions of Sherbourne Street and Mount Pleasant Road. He later backed the earliest version of the Don Valley Parkway.

Harris by then had emerged as a prominent public figure. He mingled effortlessly with the Orangemen and Masons who controlled Toronto, and was ribbed by a local satirical magazine for his weight. One newspaper profile noted his "unruffled" and "absolutely cheerful" manner and described him as "the general of an army of two thousand workers." A proud Anglican, Harris publicly embodied the puritanical social conscience that typified Toronto's ruling elite. He pushed for Depression-era make-work projects to counter mass unemployment and favoured a "bone dry Toronto" because, as he told a reporter, "I have seen scores of men, young and old...whose careers were wrecked, utterly blasted, simply through the influence of alcohol."

But he also demonstrated an independent streak: on the eve of World War I, Harris defied public opinion by trying to block the firing of a German-born works official caught up in city council's campaign to purge "enemies of the state" from the municipal administration.

He rarely balked at confronting puffed-up politicians,



## St. Clair Reservoir, Spadina & St. Clair West

nor did he shrink when he was accused of taking kickbacks, a convenient allegation for lobbyists such as those in the hire of the businessmen who wanted the entire Bloor viaduct to be built from reinforced concrete. Harris absolutely refused to be swayed from his steel-arch design. "I will pound the table," he fumed during one stormy council meeting. "I find myself thwarted at every turn."

"He could handle himself quite well," recalled Bremner, who also enjoyed a tough-as-nails reputation. "There were countless occasions when council wanted their pound of flesh from him." In the end, he almost always got his way.

The details of R.C. Harris' public career have been reasonably well documented. But little is known of his personal life. In the Toronto Archives, there's a thin biographical file about Harris, containing little more than

the basic facts: no diaries or personal correspondence have ever surfaced, nor, as of 2004, had any members of his family ever granted interviews about his life. When I started researching this story, I contacted Catherine Nasmith, a Toronto architect and conservationist who publishes an electronic newsletter on heritage issues. She agreed to post a note saying I was looking for personal information on Harris. A few weeks later, I found an email in my inbox that began, "I am RCH's grandson..."

A few weeks later, I found myself sitting in the living room of a modest East York split-level that belongs to John Harris and his wife Diane. For my visit, they'd dug up some of R.C.'s belongings — an old briefcase, some family portraits, even calipers. The briefcase, from Eaton's, had his name emblazoned in gold lettering, but it was locked. After learning so much about this giant, it felt strange and

thrilling to be holding such a personal artifact, which, John confessed, he'd once considered throwing away.

Neither John nor his sister Molly ever met their famous grandfather. But they both recalled that their father Roland Jr., and their aunt, Roland Jr.'s younger sister Catherine, didn't like Ondaatje's depiction of him (both died in the 1990s). The fictional portrait wasn't the self-effacing, idealistic, and duty-bound man they'd come to know through the stories handed down in the family.

Away from the office, Harris was a genial but stern figure who worked long hours and had a sense of occasion, collecting silver and prints of old Toronto. He taught Sunday school at St. Aidan's on Queen East. One of his students, the painter Doris McCarthy, recalls him as cordial, warm and elegant. "He wasn't stout but he wasn't thin," she told me. "I didn't confuse him with God or Santa Claus."

His family knew he had an artistic sensibility to leaven his upstanding manner. He always carried a small volume of poetry with him. John Harris keeps an undated newspaper clipping that begins: "No one would ever suspect the commissioner of works for Toronto of being a slave to the Muses nor would they ever suspect, in the course of casual business, the presence in his pocket of lines penned by a poet..." Harris, according to the story, taped a clipping of a poem he found in a 1921 newspaper to the front cover of his diary, transferring it whenever he needed a new volume: "I ask but this: Lord that I may/Do my own work in my own way/A little better day by day/I fain would leave Thee the rest/Be Thine to stay or Thine to bless;/I well can do without success..."

He was also fascinated with photography, a hobby he took up in 1899. He joined the Toronto Camera Club and became its president. The members would gather in the evenings and study photos sent by camera clubs in other cities across North America. At one such session, Harris met a gaunt mustachioed man named Arthur Goss. A photographer and painter, Goss moved in Toronto arts circles and knew some of the members of the Group of Seven. The two men became friends, and after Harris took charge of the works department, he hired Goss to serve as its official photographer. Over the years, Goss took 26,000 pictures of Toronto's works projects — images filled with labourers digging roads or balancing on the half-finished

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## Harris embodied a more humane vision, a sense that a city's public works — no matter how monumental — are ultimately there to benefit its residents as they go through the workaday routines of daily life.

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arches of the Viaduct. They stand today as a unparalleled visual record of city-building in action. Only a handful included Harris himself.

At home, Harris maintained a dark room and took hundreds of pictures of his family, especially his daughter Catherine, dressed up in period costumes. There are shots of his own father dressed as Father Time, another of Catherine as a forest nymph, his son on a hobby horse, his own mother all in black, posing sternly behind the wheel of an enormous black car. "There's a picture of my aunt Catherine dressed up as a Chinese doll, with a fan, for chrissake," recalls Molly Harris. His pre-occupation with photography so irritated Catherine that she threw out all the equipment after he died. "She was done with all that dressing-up nonsense. She thought the photography was all a waste of time."

Amidst Molly Harris' collection of family photos is one Harris took of a cute little boy named Emerson, sitting in a bathtub. The second of Roland and Alice's three children was born in the summer of 1905. It appears he was named after Harris' mentor at City Hall. But he died suddenly on January 30, 1906, at not even seven months of age. "My family never talks about stuff like that," Molly recounts. "They were very Victorian. They didn't discuss things that were sad."

Her brother John once went to the East End cemetery where the Harris family is buried, to determine what had killed Emerson. Though he didn't unearth the detail he was looking for, he told me he found burial records for hundreds of children who perished at the time from water borne illnesses. "That," John said, "is the historical context."

Earlier this year, I tracked down the death certificate. Emerson Clewlo Harris died of "erysipelas and pneumonia," just five days after coming down with the first symptoms. Also known as St. Anthony's Rose, erysipelas is an angry Strep A skin infection that is today cured easily with antibiotics. Untreated, it triggers potentially lethal secondary infections. The bacteria that causes the disease thrives in unhygienic conditions, including water, and enters the body through breaks in the skin. In Montreal, several children died in the 1880s from erysipelas brought on by 'bad' small pox vaccine.

Little Emerson Harris, in short, had become a statistic in a public health catastrophe afflicting the city's residents. In 1910, Toronto's infant mortality rate was a staggering 140 deaths per thousand live births — an indictment of the city's failure to provide sanitary conditions for its residents. Many Torontonians lived in fetid slums with overflowing outhouses and open sewers — some just blocks from City Hall, where Harrises lived. Merchants kept farm animals in backyard stables. All the fecal material drained into Lake Ontario, which was also the source of Toronto's drinking water.

Then there were the terrible water "famines." In 1911, city engineers discovered a huge tear in the 72-inch intake pipe that ran into the lake from Toronto Island. Council appointed an expert panel to find solutions. Within a year, its members recommended the construction of a \$5.3 million intake pipe, pumping station and filtration plant, to be built near Scarborough Bluffs, as well as a new mid-town reservoir. Their report was sitting on R.C. Harris' desk when he became works commissioner in June, 1912.

For a young man who'd endured the pain of losing a child to an aggressively infectious disease, the urgent task of cleaning up the city's water supply would define R.C. Harris' career — a decades-long undertaking he invested with the kind of passion and determination that hints at a deeper source of personal motivation.

The summer of 1912, his first on the job, was hot, and water shortages were creating sense of panic. Harris, suddenly on the hot seat, urged citizens not to waste water. That fall, he and George Nasmith, an engineer and public health expert, went abroad to look at what other cities were doing to modernize their water systems. Nasmith quickly concluded that Toronto had to begin chlorinating its water supply.

Harris also worked closely with the medical officer of health, Dr. Charles Hastings. The two men succeeded in persuading council to approve massive budget increases so their departments could clean up the city. Editorialists attacked council's spending habits, but Harris and Hastings held fast. Hastings' own daughter had died of typhoid from milk, and he, too, was on a "crusade," as one account noted. "In 1912," Hastings reported, "we found 8,000 unsanitary houses, 4,500 houses overcrowded as tenements... surrounded by dirty foul-smelling un-drained sta-

bles; manure heaps... evil-smelling privies." He ordered the demolition of 15,000 out-houses, established public health nursing and ordered Toronto's milk to be pasteurized.

As the official responsible for rebuilding the city's water supply, Harris had to act decisively to hold up his end of the reform campaign. He didn't think much of the expert panel's proposal for a water filtration plant on the Scarborough Bluffs, condemning it as technically unfeasible and unnecessarily expensive. In any case, he had closer location in mind: a 12.8-acre green space known as Victoria Park. This rolling expanse of grassland rising from the beach had once been an amusement park. As of 1913, it was home to a couple of sheds, a nature school and a boat house. Something about this place — though we don't know what precisely — evidently captivated Harris, who liked to reminisce about the more bucolic Toronto he'd known from his childhood.

In April, 1913, the water famine returned. During one troubled weekend, Harris himself was hunkered down at the city's faltering pumping station, helping the works team repairing the problem. The *Globe* reported that his wife hadn't seen him in days.

Over the coming months, Harris prepared his alternative vision for a new water plant. He had an aptitude for bureaucratic politics but was not a trained engineer, so he planned to defuse criticism with expert endorsements from Nasmith and Hastings.

On December 23, 1913, he unveiled "A Report of the Commissioner of Works on Additions and Extensions to the Toronto Waterworks Pumping and Distributing Plant." Addressed to Mayor Horatio Hocken and council, this historic document laid out Harris's case for solving the city's water crisis with a combined pumping and purification plant at Victoria Park, rather than the earlier proposed location at Scarborough Bluffs.

The conspicuously flowery language in the report unambiguously conveyed Harris' soaring vision and his sense of mission. "It is proposed to erect handsome buildings, which, in conjunction with the park section and the beach, would constitute one of the most beautiful areas in Toronto," he wrote. "There will be room for a fair-sized park, and the grounds lend themselves admirably to a very fine layout, so that the new plant and park may be made exceedingly attractive." Scarcely two years later, Harris bought a rambling



house on Neville Park Boulevard, just blocks from the site.

Council quickly approved Harris' Victoria Park plan, although political inertia would delay its construction for two decades. In the interim, he rebuilt sewer mains and embarked on a second mid-town water reservoir, on Wells Hill (now Sir Winston Churchill Park), at Spadina Road and St. Clair. Its ornate Italianate pump house entrances — with their distinctive yellow brick construction, brass detailing and swooping cornices — foreshadowed his design plans for the as yet unbuilt water treatment plant. By the early 1920s, thanks to the work of Harris, Nasmith and Hastings, the infant mortality rate had plummeted from 140 to 63.5 per thousand, and Toronto's public health practices came to be known as the gold standard in North American.

In 1923, council finally got around to expropriating Victoria Park, at a cost of \$370,000. It took another ten years of political wrangling before construction on the plant began, in the summer of 1932. Harris persuaded council to allocate an astronomical \$25 million for the plant, whose design he scrutinized to the most minute detail. "You watch," the Harris character in Ondaatje's novel says, "in 50 years, they're going to come here and gape at the herring bone and the copper roofs. We need excess, something to live up to. I fought tooth and nail for that herring bone."

That he managed this feat during the 1930s is a testament to his determination to build what came to be known as "the palace of water." (In the 1930s, Harris also built a new North Toronto sewage treatment plant, at the eastern edge of Leaside, to service the needs of the fast-growing residential neighbourhoods expanding up Yonge Street.)

Pumping, filtering and chlorinating 140 million gallons of lake water per day, the monumental, tiered Art Deco complex is clad in limestone with bas-relief patterns showing images of turbines and waterfalls. Inside are sky-lit wings and galleries decorated in green and beige marble, with elegant brass fixtures. John Bentley Mays, when he was *The Globe and Mail's* art critic, described its



**R.C. Harris, second from right, fought to transform Toronto's water and sewage systems in the first half of the 20th century.**

"grandiose" style as modernist Roman, characteristic of the massive public works projects launched across North America during the Depression. The plant, he wrote, is "our Greta Garbo of public architecture." Nothing remotely like it was ever again built in Toronto.

In early 1938, *The Globe and Mail* began publishing sensational and embarrassing stories about a "private banking system" that had been run quietly out of Harris' works department for years. The revelations came to light after an out-of-town motorist crashed into a guardrail and received a bill from the city for \$24.61 to cover damages. When the driver asked for a breakdown, it included a \$4.10 levy, to go into a "rotary fund" controlled by the works department.

This seemingly innocuous detail begat other tidbits. When the city controllers began investigating, they discovered the works department was quietly running a side business, providing construction services to individuals and public utilities for a 5 to 7% profit. Harris had crossed swords with many politicians in his long career. Now several aldermen, sensing weakness, demanded that he answer for this "complex financial scheme." Harris agreed to brief his political masters on how the fund worked, but insisted the

details not be repeated to the press.

In the wake of this scandal, high-level concerns about the state of Harris' works department began to circulate. In 1943, city council convened a panel of prominent businessmen to do a stem-to-stern review of the operation — everything from the state of its books to the state of its facilities. Toronto by then was a modern city. The port had been developed, and a grand railway station served the city's transportation needs. Long gone were the stinking outhouses, muddy roads and toxic water. But the man largely responsible for this transformation had become a spent force. The water treatment plant was his magnum opus, and there was nothing afterwards. On May 29, 1945, the committee released its findings, and they weren't flattering. The report painted a picture

of a weary, disorganized department staffed largely by old men. Fourteen weeks later, R.C. Harris was dead.

The *Star's* Christopher Hume, in a column written in 2002, bemoaned the fact that we no longer produce civil servants like Harris. This is true, but he was also very much a product of his time. In some ways, he can be seen as Toronto's Robert Moses, the power-hungry boy wonder who transformed New York between the 1920s and 1960s by building soaring bridges, massive parks, neighbourhood-destroying expressways, and a water system that reaches up the Hudson River. Unlike Moses, whose megalomania nearly destroyed his city, Harris embodied a more humane vision, a sense that a city's public works — no matter how monumental — are ultimately there to benefit its residents as they go through the workaday routines of daily life. How did he know? Because he'd been there. As Diane Harris said of her husband's grandfather, "Great things are done by people who are most ordinary." ↑

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