



*Sir Harry Oakes*

## SIR HARRY OAKES (1874-1943)

The name of Sir Harry Oakes is a familiar one in Niagara Falls. He was a philanthropist who contributed to many charities and worthy institutions and his name is perpetuated in the many public works which he made possible. Oakes Garden Theatre, Oakes Drive, Oak Hall, and Oakes Park all honour this dynamic individual who left a profound mark on our city in the short time that he was a resident.

Harry Oakes was born on December 23, 1874 to William Pitt Oakes and Edith Nancy Lewis, in Sangerville, Maine. During his childhood, his family moved to Foxcroft, Maine where Harry attended Foxcroft Academy with his brother, Louis. He came to Canada as a prospector and mining engineer in 1911 and discovered the Lakeshore Mine near Kirkland Lake, Ontario, in 1912. Although he experienced many difficulties in securing the financing to mine his find, he eventually uncovered one of the largest gold deposits in Canada. Soon, Harry Oakes, and everyone else involved in the Lakeshore Mine, was a very wealthy man. He married Eunice MacIntyre on June 30, 1923, settled in Niagara Falls sometime in the early 1920's, and became a Canadian citizen in 1924.

On July 15, 1924, Harry Oakes purchased the Clark Hill estate, located on a high bank overlooking the Dufferin Islands from Walter Schoellkopf, of Niagara Falls electric power fame. He hired the renowned architectural firm of Findlay and Foulis to design a 37-room Tudor style mansion. The house incorporated portions of the historic Clark Hill house and took four years to complete. The Oakes family moved into the house in 1928 and lived there for 6 years.

During the time that he lived in Niagara Falls, Harry Oakes undertook a number of public works projects which deliberately created jobs in the depressed economy of Niagara Falls. The individuals who were hired by Oakes were given a shovel and set to work; they were paid \$2.00 for a half a day of work. His generosity also led to the development of many familiar public grounds in the city. In September, 1930, he deeded sixteen acres of farm land at the corner of Morrison Street and Stanley Avenue for the establishment of an athletic field, to the City of Niagara Falls. At a cost of \$20,000, the city built a football field, baseball diamond, and track, and the athletic grounds were opened in the summer of 1931. The area was named Oakes Park, in honour of Harry Oakes, and its facilities are still used by city residents. Oakes deeded the land for Oakes Park to the city on condition that the publicly owned Poplar Park remain a children's playground. If Poplar Park was ever closed, then the donated land would revert back to the Oakes family. However, in 1954, when the site of Poplar Park was determined to be the best site for the new Greater Niagara General Hospital, the Oakes family changed the provision.

After the second Clifton Hotel was destroyed by fire on December 31, 1932, Harry Oakes purchased the Clifton property and the adjacent Lafayette Hotel. Oakes had the Lafayette Hotel demolished and then presented both properties to the Niagara Parks Commission, of which he was a Commissioner. In exchange for these properties, he was granted a small plot of land on the hill above Queen Victoria Park. The Commission planned an amphitheatre and garden for the location, and began work in 1935. The Oakes Garden Theatre was opened on September 18, 1937. Over the years, the Garden Theatre has been the site of many concerts, and the gardens remain a showcase of beautiful horticulture and elegant architecture.

Harry Oakes initiated the restoration of the original route of the Portage Road, which had

been changed in 1883 when the Canada Southern Railway was built. This road, which is now known as Oakes Drive, passes in front of the Loretto Centre, and was completed in 1935 as a public works project. Many area institutions benefitted from Oakes' philanthropy. He and his wife gave generous donations to the Greater Niagara General Hospital, the Boy Scouts and other worthy organizations. They also purchased x-ray equipment for the Niagara Peninsula Sanatorium and deeded land and contributed money towards the development of Oakes Park in Fort Erie.

Harry Oakes was one of the most wealthy men in Canada, and as a result he was also one of her main taxpayers. As a protest to what he considered to be unfairly high taxes (nearly 85% of his gold mine revenues), he left Canada with his wife and five children, moving to England in 1934, and finally settling in Nassau, Bahamas in 1935. His considerable holdings in Canada were administered by the local firm of Welland Securities. His departure generated much controversy and criticism from individuals who felt that Oakes' actions indicated that he had little loyalty for the land which had made him rich. In 1939, Oakes was made a baronet by King George VI, and received the title of Sir Harry Oakes.

During the early hours of July 8, 1943, Sir Harry was struck over the head and set on fire in his home in the Bahamas. Oakes' son-in-law, Alfred de Marigny, was accused of the murder, tried and eventually acquitted. Unfortunately, the investigation had been clumsily carried out, and much of the evidence was carelessly destroyed or overlooked. As a result, no one was ever apprehended for the murder of Sir Harry Oakes, and the case remains open, though neglected.

Oak Hall, the house which Oakes had built in Niagara Falls, was used as a convalescent hospital for the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. Sir Harry Oakes' eldest son, Sir Sidney Oakes and his wife resided in Oak Hall for several years in the 1950's, before returning to the Bahamas. Oak Hall was sold by the Oakes family to the Niagara Parks Commission on May 25, 1952. In 1964, the Commission furnished five rooms of the house and opened it to the public. In 1980, they decided to convert Oak Hall into an administrative headquarters, and its offices were moved from Queen Victoria Park on October 24, 1982. Oak Hall currently houses 23 offices, meeting and storage rooms. Displays of Niagara Falls art, and the furnished rooms are still open to the public. Oak Hall is located on Portage Road, half way between Niagara Falls and Chippawa, directly opposite Marineland.

Though his residence in this city was of short duration, Oakes will always be remembered as a benefactor of the city, and his generous actions have ensured that his name will always be a familiar one in Niagara Falls.

