

## **THOMAS ROY McLEAN**

### **The Early Years**

Thomas Roy McLean ("Tommy" as he was known to family and friends), the youngest of three children, was born in Edmonton on April 29, 1912. His father, Leroy McLean, owned and operated a blacksmith's shop and the family lived in South Edmonton.

In 1916 Tommy's parents bought land approximately forty miles south of Edmonton near the small town of Hay Lakes. They built a house and out buildings and started to farm. Tommy grew up on the farm and attended a one-room school near Hay Lakes up to the eighth grade. Like many young men of the day, Tommy did not find school satisfying or rewarding. His report cards repeatedly stated that he was a bright boy but not motivated. Not surprisingly, he left school during the eighth grade to study on his own. He had an interest in electricity and radio and he found these pursuits more interesting than the formal school life. He was delighted to learn how radios worked - how they could somehow magically catch the radio waves which were flying through the air and bring music and conversation into your home.

Tommy used to joke that he only spent 12 days in grade eight and "that was the biggest mistake I ever made". The punch line was that he "shouldn't have gone at all". While the local school did not provide an educational challenge for him, in the 1920s Tommy began his life-long quest for knowledge and training - primarily through self-study and correspondence courses. His first formal step was an enrollment in the National Radio Institute, a correspondence school based in Washington, D.C. Tommy continued to live on the farm but he worked at various jobs in, and around, the community to support his studies. His parents, realizing how serious he was, were very supportive of his endeavors.

The NRI courses proved interesting and challenging. Included with the course material were many "hands on" items - wire, coils, and other materials required for various projects. Tommy began his career in radio by hand-winding coils in order to produce small crystal sets - the most basic of all radio receivers.

### **From Radios to Butter Churns**

By 1933, Tommy had completed all the NRI radio courses. He wrote the final exam and was awarded a diploma as a Certified Radio-Trician indicating a specialization in advanced radio servicing and merchandising. Tommy continued his education by keeping pace with developments in radio technology. He attended radio schools in Edmonton and Calgary which were sponsored by the large companies manufacturing radios.

During the Depression Tommy found little business repairing radios - very few people even owned a radio! He used to have fun by hooking up his radios to the barbed-wire telephone systems that were starting to develop in the community. Local farmers were amazed at being able to pick-up fabled radio programs on their rudimentary telephones. He continued to help his family on and off the farm. He supplemented his income by building and selling crystal sets and small radios.

In 1938, Tommy married Helen Leicht, a girl from Hay Lakes (Helen's father operated the town's butcher shop). The following year, Tommy started a full-time job working in the Hay Lakes Creamery. It was not his job of preference, but Tommy took advantage of the situation and learned (and ultimately qualified for) many of the jobs associated with the business such as grading and testing cream, making butter, and grading eggs.

The creamery job was demanding - requiring many hours of overtime during peak seasons. Nevertheless, Tommy persevered and over the next nine years Tommy worked in creameries in Alberta and Saskatchewan. He came to Athabasca with a job in the creamery on April 9, 1941. He worked at various jobs at the creamery until October 15, 1947.

During Tommy's years working in the creamery he continued his education by studying the electrical trade on weekends and evenings and achieved "Journeyman" status from the Electrical Safety Branch of the Province of Alberta. He kept his hand in the radio business doing repairs and supplemented his income with electrical wiring jobs around the town on weekends and his days off. He used to laugh about how he carried his supplies around town in a wheelbarrow! During this time he also studied and became licensed by the Province of Alberta as a Projectionist so he could work evenings and weekends at the theatre.

### **Business in Athabasca**

By October 15, 1947, only two weeks before his son Wayne was born, Tommy felt he had enough work to open his own shop and he left the creamery. With his wife Helen he opened "Radio Electric Service" (P.O. Box 328 Athabasca) on main street directly opposite the creamery. The business was assisted by a personal loan from local businessman Richard Hall. Tommy borrowed \$1,500.00 (quite a sum in 1947) and Richard simply said: "pay me back when you can". Tommy's intuition was right. The business of selling radios and electrical appliances (especially lamps) just after the war proved to be a winning combination. The loan was paid back within three months!

In the 1950s Tommy's training and education kept pace with developments in electronics and he became a certified television technician. When Edmonton's first television station (CFRN) came on the air in 1953, Tommy was ready. He had already erected an antenna on a seventy foot tower in the yard of his home. He also did some work for CFRN by visiting various sites in the area and measuring the strength of the television signal.

The early days of television were quite exciting in the McLean household. The children remember squinting at the set trying to sort out who was Jack Benny. And, the World Series season was always popular. In those days all the games were played during the daylight hours. The McLeans often had a full house for "pot luck" lunch as neighbours would come over to watch the game.

The business continued to expand from its original base of sales and service for radios and small appliances. The 1950s and early 1960s brought electricity to the rural areas surrounding Athabasca. That provided a lot of work to the electrical

contracting side of the business. However, it also gave a boost to sales and appliance servicing. With more electricity in the area more people wanted appliances and with the old "tube-type" radios and televisions there was always a lot of repair business.

The continuing electrification of the area, and general increase in affluence, also brought an increase in the number of refrigerators in service. Tommy once again expanded the business by qualifying as a air conditioning and refrigeration technician.

The building housing the business (built sometime around 1913) was the former site of the Athabasca Pharmacy which was owned by Fred Mills. Mills sold the building to Tommy and Helen and constructed a new and larger drug store on the lot just to the North (that building is now occupied by Granny's Pantry Bulk Foods). Soon after the purchase, the McLeans started modifying the building. With Steve Kaspersky acting as the general contractor, the barbershop which was operated by Steve Wasel was removed, large display windows were installed, and the door was moved to the south side to make a better entrance to the store. The back of the store was redeveloped many times over the years as the business grew - eventually ending up with two levels for storage and appliance servicing.

In the 1950s the name of the business was changed to McLean's Electric, but by the early 1960s the business had expanded to include giftware, china, and jewelry so the name was once again changed to McLean's Electric and Jewelry. When the business was incorporated the name was finally changed to McLean's (Athabasca) Ltd. "McLean's" still occupies the building purchased by Tommy and Helen.

## **Corinne and Wayne**

Tommy and Helen had two children: Helen Corinne (Cori) McLean was born on December 28, 1943 and Wayne Thomas Roy McLean followed four years later on October 28, 1947. Both children obtained their early schooling in Athabasca.

Upon graduation, Corinne took her nurses training at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. After receiving her diploma as a Registered Nurse, Corinne continued with post-graduate courses from the University and specialized in operating room nursing. She was married to Peter Chapman a broadcaster with CFRN in Edmonton in September of 1965. Shortly thereafter Corinne and Peter moved to Toronto. She obtained work at the Toronto Western Hospital and was on the medical team that performed Canada's first heart transplant. Today Corinne has three children and is still in the medical field. She is currently the Administrative Director in Program management at the Credit Valley Hospital in Mississauga, Ontario.

Wayne worked weekends and summers for the business helping his uncle Herman on various wiring projects and the installation of TV antennas in the area. After graduation from high school he enrolled at the University of Alberta but left after one year to attend the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton in a course leading to a Diploma in Architectural Technology. After graduation from N.A.I.T. Wayne returned to the U of A to take a Bachelors of Commerce and then, in 1973, he graduated with a Masters of Business Administration.