

Prince George's Memorable Mayors

by Bob Harkins



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And information about Bob Harkins prepared by Kathy Plett, CNC Library
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Videos of Forum 2000 presentations are available in local Libraries

For photos and up-to-date information visit the PG Mayors History Pages at
<http://www.city.pg.bc.ca/>

W.G.Gillett - H.G.Perry - H.Carney - H.Wilson - J.H.Johnson - R.Alward
F.Taylor - A.M.Patterson - J.Nicholson - G.Dezell - G.Bryant - J.Morrison
C.J.Gray - G.Dezell - H.Moffat - E.Mercier - J.Backhouse - C.Kinsley

Time constraints don't allow me to cover all the Mayors of Prince George so I'll concentrate on those I feel were the most memorable. In some cases my personal bias on what makes Mayors memorable will no doubt come into play and I apologize if, at times, objectivity falls by the wayside.

W.G. Gillett was the City's first Mayor. He had been a contractor in Nelson before moving here to operate a construction business. Mayor Gillett and his Council were located in a temporary City Hall. The building had been built in George Hammond's Central Fort George development by Irene Jordan who operated it as the first two-piano brothel in the northern interior. Madame Jordan's bawdy house fell on hard times with the collapse of George Hammond's townsite dream.

Irene Jordan's palace of pleasure was loaded on sleighs and teams of horses pulled it to property near Third and Victoria where it was leased by the newly incorporated City and converted into Prince George's first City Hall. This prompted Jack Daniels, publisher of the Fort George Herald, to observe in an editorial, "That bunch running City Hall have spent so much time in Irene Jordan's house of ill-repute, they must feel right at home in their new Council chambers."

In the City's first money By-law, Mayor Gillett and his Council asked the electorate for permission to build a new City Hall on Patricia Boulevard.

W.G. Gillett served two terms and holds the distinction of being the only Mayor in BC history to sign a personal note at the bank to run the City. Once during a heated Council debate, Mayor Gillett threatened to resign, but re-considered after being reminded that his resignation would have cancelled the City's loan at the bank.

In 1917, W.G. Gillett was succeeded by **Harry George Perry**, a dapper tailor by profession and an outstanding orator and politician by inclination.

After arriving in South Fort George by sternwheeler in 1912, Perry immediately threw himself into the commercial and political life of the community. He was President of the Board of Trade when the first Grand Trunk Pacific Railway train rolled into town and spoke at the opening ceremonies in 1914.

Harry Perry chaired the Prince George Incorporation Committee and served as Mayor from 1917 to 1918 and again in 1920. He left civic politics to serve with distinction in the BC Legislature as the MLA for Fort George, Speaker of the Legislature and Minister of Education.

He convinced Premier John Hart to build a highway north from Prince George through the Pine Pass to link the Peace River block with the rest of BC. In 1952, Harry Perry was also credited with having the Pacific Great Eastern Railway extended north from Quesnel - which had been its northern terminus for 40 years. Perry owned and published the Prince George Citizen for many years.

Between the two world wars, growth in the City was at a standstill with few taxpayers to carry the load. Nothing much happened. There was a horse drawn snow plough to clear the streets, and a small fire brigade - but not much else in the way of public works or protection services. Mayors during this period didn't lose any sleep over filling potholes because there were no paved streets in Prince George to worry about or any money in the City treasury to improve them.

The Mayors during this static, no-growth period were:

- **Hiram Carney** elected in 1919. Carney was a former City Clerk who was elected to the City's first School Board in 1915.
- **Henry Wilson**, an architect from England, followed Hiram Carney. Wilson designed the first City Hall on Patricia Boulevard.
- The Mayor's office was next occupied by hotel owner **J.H. Johnson** whose talk was as big as his physical presence. While others talked in the thousands, Johnson talked in the millions.
- In 1924, **Dr. Roy Alward** was elected the City's sixth Mayor. He had opened a dental practice here in 1913. Dr. Alward was a stylishly turned out bachelor who enjoyed the good life.
- Dr. Alward's successor was pool room proprietor **Fred Taylor**, who was the antithesis of the high-living dentist. Taylor - a likeable transplant from England - enjoyed fishing, hunting and curling. The quiet life of a small town had great appeal for Fred Taylor. His term as Mayor reflected this.

Prince George's longest serving Mayor held the office from 1927 to 1944. Mayor **A.M. Patterson's** 17-year term spanned the decade-long Great Depression. Mayor Patterson owned a men's clothing store on Third Avenue, which is the present Wendt and Phillips.

While serving as Mayor, Pat Patterson also chaired the School Board. His frugal fiscal policies were legendary and had the complete support of the business community. Many saw Mayor Patterson as a Scrooge-like cheapskate, however, his closeness with a buck turned out to be a blessing during the Dirty 30's. At a time when many municipalities were going into receivership, under Patterson's administration, Prince George emerged from the Depression debt-free.

Grocer **Jack Nicholson** was elected Mayor in 1945. During Mayor Nicholson's term the beginnings of a sewer system was started along First Avenue. But it was Jack Nicholson's dream that cost him the 1949 election. He wanted to replace the City's diesel electric generating plant on First Avenue with a City-owned hydro dam on the Willow River Canyon. His ambitious plan was rejected as too costly.

Jack Nicholson was defeated by Mayor **Garvin Dezell** in 1949. Mayor Dezell served until 1953 when he stepped down to devote more time to the family general contracting business. He returned to the Mayor's office in 1960 and I will discuss him in the context of that later term.

In 1953 **Gordon Bryant** succeeded Garvin Dezell. The local automobile dealer won the Mayoralty race in a cliff-hanger, the closest in Prince George's history.

Cliff Warner, editor of the Citizen in the early 50's described it as "the most exciting and controversial campaign in the 38 years which had elapsed since the City's incorporation."

The main issue was the development of low-cost power to attract industry. All 3 Mayoralty candidates agreed that the City's diesel power generating plant on First Avenue and the distribution were inefficient. However, they disagreed over the solution.

Alderman Tommy Carmichael had served as Principal of the City's Elementary School prior to opening a real estate and insurance business. Carmichael proposed that Prince George develop its own hydroelectric power by damming the Willow River Canyon. It was that same platform that had cost Jack Nicholson the election a few years before.

Retiring Mayor Garvin Dezell threw his support behind Alderman Harold Assman, the local funeral director, who advocated an elected Parks Board and early completion of the Civic Centre and the hiring of a qualified planning consultant to come up with a long-range plan for municipal development.

In line with his slogan, "Your Candidate for Progressive Administration," auto dealer Gordon Bryant pressed for the establishment of the City Manager system and promised to put running water in every home in Prince George. Bryant favoured selling the electrical utility to the BC Power Commission, which later became BC Hydro.

A Hollywood screenwriter would have been hard-pressed to come up with a more heart-stopper of an election.

For 16 hours after the polls closed, Prince George was in the technical position of having 3 Mayors. No other city in North America could make such a claim. The first ballot count resulted in a tie between Bryant and Assman. It climaxed a bitter and often acrimonious contest.

Tension mounted the morning following Election Day and reached fever by mid-afternoon as a recount got underway.

The community was rife with rumours. Dark hints came from supporters of both candidates that there had been irregularities in the counting of votes on election night.

The possibility of a contested result if Harold Assman was declared winner became apparent when candidate Bryant took steps at the beginning of the recount to assure that a record of the proceeding was kept in case the matter was taken to County Court.

Gordon Bryant, who received advice from City Barrister Frank Perry, maintained a stenographer to record all statements made by the election officials in the room where the ballots were being recounted.

The reports of improprieties at the polls and during the ballot count proved unfounded. Two and a half hours after the recount began, **Gordon Bryant** was declared the winner by a slim 7 votes margin - the smallest plurality in the City's history. It turned out that much of the confusion arose from a number of ballots being placed in the wrong boxes on election day.

Both candidates agreed that returning officer David Williams had handled a difficult situation in a dignified and efficient manner.

History records that most of the campaign promises of Mayor Gordon Bryant came to pass:

- The City Manager system became a reality;
- BC Hydro took over the City's electrical utility to provide more low cost power;
- his Council put running water in every city home;
- City firefighters were put in uniform;
- wooden sidewalks downtown were replaced by concrete;
- and outdoor privies in the City Centre became history.

Mayor **John Morrison** brought a distinguished - almost aristocratic - demeanor to the Mayor's office. Mayor Morrison's sartorial elegance reflected his ownership of Morrison's Men's Wear. During his term, he concluded the sale of the City-owned electrical utility to BC Hydro. The Coliseum was built. The bitterly fought natural gas war erupted between the locally owned Prince George Gas Company and Inland Natural Gas. At stake was the City's lucrative natural gas franchise.

The City's first woman Mayor and only the second female in BC to hold the office, was Oklahoma-born **Carrie Jane Gray** who was raised in Jasper.

Married to a railroader, Carrie Jane Gray settled in Prince George as a young bride in 1932. She was elected to Council in 1952. Six years later Carrie Jane Gray was elected Mayor. Her term was not without fireworks. An RCMP officer once had to be called to keep order in Council Chambers when the gas franchise war got out of hand during a public hearing. Carrie Jane Gray took it upon herself to learn as much about gas utilities as possible - and researched her subject at the Public Library. By the time she finished her research, she could hold her own with the experts.

At this point, I'm going to deal with the Great Gas War. It was an interesting period in the City's history that certainly consumed a lot of the time and energies of City administrations led by Mayors John Morrison and Carrie Jane Gray. Ten years ago, BC Gas, formerly Inland Natural Gas, raised the new company flag over the City at a ceremony marking the corporate name change.

Time is a great healer. In 1958, there were many Prince George residents who thought the natural gas company should have hoisted up the Jolly Roger.

That was the year the Public Utilities Commission granted Inland Natural Gas the right to supply gas to the City over the objections of Prince George voters.

The 3-year battle that preceded the PUC decision was one of the more rancorous skirmishes in civic history.

The great Gas War pitted a local company that promised cheap natural gas against a corporate monopoly. It was a classic David and Goliath confrontation. But in this instance, David lost.

The corporate Goliaths were the McMahon Brothers. Frank, a wildcat oil driller who had fought his way to the top of the ladder, headed up Westcoast Transmission, builders of the pipeline carrying each river gas to markets in the United States. His brother John McMahon was President of Inland Natural Gas, the distribution arm of Westcoast Transmission.

On the other side was the Prince George Gas Company, formed by a group of prominent local businessmen. Hubert King, QC, was the President of Prince George Gas. Directors included A.B. Moffat, founder of Northern Hardware; lumberman Martin Caine; lumber dealer John McInnis; and W.B. Milner, a Vancouver-based financier who owned Eagle Lake Sawmills at Giscome and the Prince George Citizen newspaper.

In 1956, Prince George Gas Company was granted a gas franchise to supply natural gas to the City. But the local company was forced to buy it from Inland Natural Gas instead of purchasing it directly from the Westcoast pipeline - only 4 1/2 miles away on Johnson Road in Pineview.

This middleman arrangement would have had Prince George residents paying much more than gas customers in other communities in BC. It was a transparent strategy designed to force the Prince George Gas Company out of the picture.

The Brothers McMahon were among the biggest players in the greatest boom in BC's history - wielding enormous clout with the W.A.C. Bennett government.

The Bennett-appointed Public Utilities Commission, sensitive to the political winds, ruled that the local company "must enter into an agreement with Inland Natural Gas for the supply of natural gas to Prince George."

The Great Gas War caught the attention of the national media. The Winnipeg Free Press described the situation as "the worst example of monopoly arrogance - with the big gas interests behaving like the railway companies in their monopolistic hey-day."

A Calgary Herald editorial stated, "one would think the Prince George Gas Company would have a chance to buy gas from the pipeline owned by Westcoast at a rate which would be roughly equivalent to what gas is sold for in other communities. One would think so. One would be wrong."

At this point, W.B. Milner became Chairman of the Board of the Prince George Gas Company and his newspaper, the Prince George Citizen, was his main weapon in the battle for the natural gas franchise.

Slashing front page editorials were frequent. At times the purple prose was laid on with a trowel. "The corpulent transmission company executive waxing fat on the misfortunes of the BC gas consumer, looks upon Prince George much as a sanitary inspector looks upon an outdoor privy."

That was the kind of rhetorical ink that was splashed on the front page.

The dispute was delaying gas distribution and in late 1958, City Council abandoned its fight for cheap gas in favour of early gas.

In a front page editorial, the Citizen accused Council members of "being taken in by the propaganda of Inland Natural Gas by committing the City to a 20-year contract without any control on Inland's role and arbitrary terms."

The final skirmish in the Great Gas War was fought in the streets of Prince George - or rather, under them.

Prince George Natural Gas had constructed an 85-block natural gas distribution system in the City. Armed with a Certificate of Public Necessity and Convenience from the Public Utilities Commission, Inland President John McMahon announced that the company would break up downtown streets and duplicate the system already in the ground, claiming expropriation rights under the Gas Utilities Act.

Faced with such a costly threat, City Council urged the two sides to sit down and negotiate.

A price for the system was agreed on and a condition of the sale was that the Prince George Gas Company cease all opposition to Inland.

One final shot in the Gas War was fired, in a public referendum, voters indicated they did not want Inland Natural Gas to supply the City at the rate structure it was proposing.

The vote was meaningless.

The PUB ruled that if Prince George did not sign an agreement with Inland Natural Gas it would have to do without.

Mayor Carrie Jane Gray and the Council signed.

The Great Gas War had ended.

After some of her friends deserted her over her stand on some public issues, Carrie Jane concluded that the office of Mayor was a lonely and thankless job and decided not to run again. She was re-elected as an alderman - a civic office she served with great distinction for many years.

After getting out of the job from 1950 to 1953, **Garvin Dezell** was elected Mayor again in 1960. He held a firm rein and guided the City through a boom period from 1960 to 1969 when the City was one of the fastest growing communities in the country. During Garvin Dezell's terms in office, the City grew from 4,000 to 30,000. Three pulp mills were established here during the Dezell years. His administration introduced one of the most enlightened land policies in Canada to prevent out-of-control land speculation. It was during Mayor Dezell's term that the Four Seasons Pool was built and the present City Hall was opened.

Mayor Moffat was next to wear the Mayor's Chain of Office. Harold Moffat cut his political teeth as Chairman of the School Board, a position he held for many years.

During his terms as Mayor, he brought the Canfor pulp mills and the oil refinery into the City tax base. He was the Mayor when the Barrett government came into power in BC. Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Lorimer decreed that Prince George would amalgamate with its outlying areas. A referendum was held in 1975 to determine if South Fort George, the Hart Highway, North Nechako, College Heights, Haldi Road, Western Acres and Blackburn would join the City. It passed by a very slim margin and in one giant gulp - 63 thousand acres were absorbed by the City - increasing its size 5-fold.

During Moffat's administration the Downtown Parking Commission was formed and the first downtown parkade was built. Mayor Moffat vigorously opposed the building of the present Library but was outvoted by the majority of his Council. He fought the Kelfor Pine Centre development and lost. He spearheaded the Plaza 4000 development and won. His administration purchased resident's homes in the Cache and moved most of the Cache dwellers to other areas of the City, clearing the way for extensive park and recreational development in the area.

Harold Moffat retired from office in 1979 and was succeeded by **Elmer Mercier** who was first elected to Council under a ward system that prevailed for a few years after amalgamation.

Mayor Mercier had a tough row to hoe. He became Mayor at a time when the City was slipping into a serious, extended recession.

Construction and development almost came to a standstill for much of the 1980's. Forest markets were soft and for the first time in decades more people were moving out of Prince George than were moving in. It was a bleak time at City Hall.

Mayor Mercier helped the people accept amalgamation - a process that took at least ten years before residents in the outlying areas began feeling comfortable with it. They saw Elmer Mercier as one of their own and when he was elected Mayor in 1979, it reinforced and strengthened the amalgamation process. Mayor Mercier's dream was Discovery Place, which included a Convention Centre, an Art Gallery, and a top-of-the-line Performance Theatre. Soaring estimated construction costs scared many taxpayers and the project was defeated when it was put to referendum. Mayor Mercier's dream evaporated.

Mayor Mercier was a great ambassador and travelled the province extensively to beat Prince George's drum at every opportunity.

John Backhouse, the former Chief Librarian at the Prince George Public Library, succeeded Elmer Mercier. John had served his political apprenticeship as an Alderman. I was a member of his Council and enjoyed serving on it. It was an exciting time, which saw the fulfillment of the University of Northern British Columbia dream.

It was a progressive time in the City's history with the building of many civic recreation and cultural facilities including the new Civic Centre and the Multiplex. However, as a member of Council in the late 1980's and early 1990's, my view of that era of civic history is too subjective to make a historical assessment on it. I'll leave that for others to do.

Colin Kinsley's terms as Mayor are still "a work in progress" and I'll leave it up to future historians to comment on his performance. But I'm certain it will be a very positive assessment.

Bob Harkins was a well-known local broadcaster and historian, with a unique talent for bringing history to life. [He passed away in Dec. 2000]. The main text of this speech is from a "Forum 2000" event hosted by the Prince George Millennium Committee on October 7th, 1999. Speakers included Bob Harkins, John Backhouse, Bob Headrick, and Mayor Colin Kinsley. The program was taped by Shaw Cable and is also available on video, at the College of New

Caledonia Library, Prince George Public Library, and University of Northern BC
Library

Photo courtesy of Mike Benny, CKPG