

BROCK'S BANTER: When one record closes...

By Brock Weir

I feel the need to be somewhat circumspect this week, a feeling I don't often have.

You see, I had a lovely column written this week about a subject I feel particularly passionate about, but after considering my own personal track record, I've come to the conclusion that it might be safer to hold it for a week.

Take, for instance, a column I wrote in early 2013 when I pledged to renew my one-man campaign to secure Canadian-born actor ? and Second World War veteran ? Conrad Bain (of ?Maude? and ?Diff'rent Strokes? fame) a place on Canada's Walk of Fame.

Less than a week later, to paraphrase Mrs. Findlay, God got him.

Fast forward to the July 29, 2015 edition of The Auroran when I wrote a column entitled ?Nobody Promised You A Rose Garden? on the future of the Mavrinac lands. The ink on that installment was barely dry when it was announced country singer Lynn Anderson, who shot to fame with the song, ?I Never Promised You A Rose Garden? had died on July 30.

So, as not to tempt fate and be on the safe side, I will hold my column on Queen Elizabeth II until next week; instead focusing on the woman whose record is set to be confined to the history books next week by the same.

Lately, as news stories and retrospectives of the record-set-to-be-broken continue to flood in, my mind increasingly goes back to lazy afternoons I used to spend at my grandmother's house in Etobicoke. In a little sitting area she had in her bedroom, I used to perch at the foot of a chair with fraying upholstery (a ?chaise lounge,? as it was called in that particular household) leafing through The Country Life Book of The Silver Jubilee, which had pride of place on an adjacent white marble table.

What caught my attention at the time was not just The Queen and Prince Philip, who were, of course, the primary focus of that book, but the family tree on the back pages, illustrating the monarchs from Queen Victoria all the way down the line to the present Prince of Wales.

The sheer length of Queen Victoria's 63 year, 200+ days was a statistic I personally found intriguing.

For a kid of five or six years, that time span alone is staggering enough, but to be in the job that long was astounding.

It was a sense that only grew as I got older.

How cool it would be, I thought, to have lived through at least a portion of the longest-reign in history.

At that time, and given the longevity of people of the day, Victoria was, for the vast majority of people ? whether in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand ? very likely the only monarch they had ever known.

It certainly put Victoria's personal achievement into perspective.

The more I read about her, the more interested I became. Eventually, this same grandmother gave me a copy of a front page from The Globe and Mail dated Wednesday, January 23, 1901.

This was not an ordinary day in any corner of what was once the British Empire. The paper, then simply called ?The Globe?, featured an elaborately detailed woodcut of Queen Victoria, wearing a small crown, a white lace mantilla, dripping in jewels and chivalric orders ? but, notably, the portrait was thickly bordered in two inches of black.

The headline was simple ? ?1837 ? The Victorian Era Has Ended ? 1901.?

Below that, it carried the text of a telegram sent to Ottawa from the new monarch, her son King Edward VII: ?Osborne, 6.45 p.m. ? My beloved mother has just passed away, surrounded by her children and grandchildren.?

By the time 6.45 p.m. rolled around, Victoria had reigned for an astounding 63 years, 216 days. It was a record, and one Victoria herself bested just a few years previously, trumping the 59-year record of her own grandfather, the notable George III.

Over that nearly 64-year period, the world changed in exceptional ways.

At the time of Victoria's accession in 1837, news of the death of her predecessor, and uncle, William IV, took over two months to reach British North America. Fast-forwarding to the end of her reign, her own demise was transmitted to the Dominions in just a minute or two, thanks to innovations that completely transformed the way people communicated.

In 1837, the Industrial Revolution was, for all intents and purposes, a veritable storm in a teacup compared to the full-blown revolutionary storm it was by 1901, making the way people lived and worked almost completely unrecognizable.

By the time she assumed the throne, practical passenger travel enabled by the fledgling locomotive was still a few years away, photography had yet to be invented (or, accessible at the very least), and electricity was still quite an unknown phenomenon. By the end of her reign, an era to which she lent her name, automobiles were on the road, photographic portraits were commonplace, and homes around the empire were illuminated by Edison's lightbulb.

As of this writing, there are only five verified women left in the world, who were alive at the end of Victoria's reign, the youngest of whom is a 115-year-old woman in Japan who was just five months old when the Victorian Era drew to a close.

Living memories of this time are certainly a thing of the past, that is why I am particularly looking forward to the Celebration of the Queen's Reign set to take place next Wednesday, September 9, at Diamond Jubilee Park on John West Way at 2 p.m.

Not only will it be a very special one-off community celebration commemorating a very singular woman and her remarkable and continuing reign as Queen of Canada, but it will also be an opportunity to reflect how we, as a society, have evolved and changed over the last 63 years and 200+ days that Elizabeth II has been steering this ship, and the ships of state of 15 other Commonwealth Realms.

While Elizabeth II has been one steadfast mark of continuity, we have come a long way since that unforgettable footage of her was shot descending the steps of her plane in mourning black to meet her destiny in 1952.

It's not only a celebration of her, it's a celebration of us, our achievements, and I hope to see you there!

ON A FINAL NOTE?

This week, I would like to end with a special shout-out to my brother, Jeff Weir. The elder Weir celebrated his 40th birthday as this week's Auroran went to press. Happy Birthday, Jeff, and here's to the next 40!