

Hall of Fame reconnects American family with Aurora roots



By Brock Weir

When the late hockey pioneer Harold "Hap" Holmes was inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, his portion of the induction ceremony was particularly poignant.

Despite his contributions to the early days of Canada's National Sport, including winning the Stanley Cup on four different hockey teams, there was no one with living memory of him, or his family, on hand to accept the award on his behalf.

It certainly wasn't due to lack of effort. The trail of Holmeses who came from Aurora had run cold, despite the best efforts of both the Hall of Fame and the Aurora Historical Society. Now, nearly a year since his induction was announced at Aurora Council, that trail became warm again through a chance Google search.

"My wife stumbled upon it when she was doing research on genealogy," says Bill Holmes, one of seven grandchildren descended from Hap, who now lives in Ohio with his family.

From there, the family made contact back to Aurora and now plans are underway to have some additional recognition for Hap and his family when the Class of 2014 is formally inducted in November.

Unfortunately, Hap did not live to meet his grandson, but when Bill was in elementary school, he had an early introduction to his famous forebear at the age of 11 when Hap was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1972.

"All of this has piqued my interest into knowing more," he says.

What he knows is this: In later life, Hap had a particular interest in the Cleveland Barons hockey team. After his death, Hap's only son used to take his own children to their games and mysteriously there were always seats set aside for Hap.

This was an early introduction to the kids of their grandfather's contributions to the sport.

"I didn't recognize it at that time, but my dad and family got a little extra attention at hockey games," says Bill with a laugh. "Then it all came together."

From stories passed down the line, he also came to know of his grandfather as a "classic entrepreneur and a huge risk taker."

“He was a man who had a vision and he chased it with everything he had,” says Bill. “He was all-in. His last endeavour was when he sold the franchise and ownership in the arena here in Cleveland, and he put his money together to start a papaya farm down in Florida. That was a very risky proposition and he ended up losing it all.

“It was a tragic end to that investment, but our family's story has actually been that his intention was to start a hockey league in Australia. That was his newest vision. He was trying to convert the money he had into a little more to start a League there. He had seen how [hockey] was taking off here and he sensed there was some interest. I don't know whether it was a pipe dream, or how deep his knowledge or contacts went, but he was pretty confident it was going to be successful.”

Interest in the sport that made Hap famous skipped a generation. His son had little interest in hockey beyond being a spectator, but his grandsons took it up in earnest, participating on streets, on ponds, hockey camps back in Canada, and in Bill's case, seriously considering playing in college. His own college did not, in the end, have a hockey program, but he continued in various leagues through his 40s.

“It is a great sport to begin with, but having that connection with my grandfather made me really proud,” he says. “To have that in your blood made it so much more special to me.”

With the connection to Aurora now warm again, the family is also looking deeper into their own roots. Bill says he wants to know just what it was in Aurora that made Hap and his brother Art, who made a name for himself as an engineer, but also as a broadcaster for the BBC and CBC during the Second World War, stand out from the crowd.

“Something there allowed two young guys to have tremendous success in both having dreams and chasing them, and being experts in the fields they chose,” says Bill. “[Hap] was a real man's man from every indication of how he lived his life. For me, I like that entrepreneurial risk taker concept of who he was. He certainly left a huge legacy and it is inspiring for us as a family.”