

# I

1925 - 1933

## Eighty Cents Between Us

ON A BRIGHT, WINTRY NIGHT in 1925 at the Oakwood Skating Rink in Toronto Ronald York Wilson, at age 18, spotted a young woman gliding smoothly along on speed skates, hands behind her back as she kept time with the music. He decided he must meet her. When he did he asked if he might walk her home. I was fifteen years old at the time studying in Toronto. A small town girl, an ardent skater and hockey player, I lived with my parents in Aurora some 30 miles north of Toronto. In Toronto I was staying with the Arthur Wells, old friends of my family. Their home was on Westmount Avenue in West Toronto not far from York Wilson's home at 117 Mackay Avenue. It didn't take long before we were seeing each other regularly. We were a couple of innocents but very much in love and finding great joy in just being together exchanging stories and dreams of youth.

York was working at Sampson Matthews Art Studios, then considered the best engraving house in Toronto. He was a lettering and layout artist but he and his friend, Edwin S. Smith had plans to go to the United States one day. Ed was slightly older and had been educated at Upper Canada College. He had been brought up to admire and appreciate the Old Masters and this he imparted to York. They both intended to make a living meanwhile at commercial art devoting more and more time to fine art when conditions permitted.

Meanwhile our companionship was beautiful as only young love can be and I would invite York for the weekend to my family home in Aurora. He was always welcome and my mother was impressed by his ardor and sincerity. He would make many little sketches and drawings including a drawing of my mother, reproduced in Paul Duval's definitive book York Wilson (1978).

Neither of us had much money so we walked and skated sometimes with York's younger brother, Art. If we could afford the price we saw a movie. I would sit at the Wells' dinner table hoping the phone would ring. Sometimes it did and I would blush all the way to the phone scarcely able to speak from self-consciousness as

the others listened.

York and I talked about our lives and families. He spoke of his sister, Dorothy whom he didn't care for at that time. When she had to take care of him as a toddler, she would take him to the park and sit him on a bench doing spool-work (pulling yarn through the opening in a spool, making rope-like design) for long sessions. York hated this as Dorothy went off to play with her own friends. She was seven years older than York.

York reminisced about his youth to me at length. His close friend, Reggie Leggett possessed a vivid imagination and would invent the weirdest tales. York's father sought to disillusion him about his friend's amazing tales by asking: "How many elephants does your pal Reggie have in his backyard?" Another friend was Barry Weatherstone, a tiny boy with a big St. Bernard which would lift Barry right off his feet and send him flying through the air pulling buttons off his shirt. As Barry lived alongside the famous Dufferin Race Track the two buddies would climb up on the roof of a shed in the Weatherstone yard and watch the race horses stream by. It was a thrilling spectacle.

At that time the Wilsons were living near the Race Track on St. Helen's Avenue. They had a boarder at the time, a Dutchman by the name of Boscher whom the kids named Boscher Washer. The corner grocery store on St. Helen's and Dublin Street was called Northcotts adjacent to a big coal yard, a messy attraction for kids. One day throwing a rock at another kid, York dispatched it through the window of the coal office. He raced round the block and on to his own verandah trying to look as innocent as possible. He waited for the big knock on his father's door for days indeed weeks but none came. It was a lesson he never forgot.

The Wilson home was also close to a huge biscuit factory, Christie's Biscuits, a famous Toronto landmark. Day and night everyone smelt the vanilla and joked about it. The area close to the railway was very dirty. The ice-house was on Dora Avenue and they played in it particularly in summer. The stable for the ice-house horses had a manure box and brother, Art, was often spanked for getting into it.

York's parents, Will and Maud Wilson had been born and raised in England. Will was a designer and his window displays had won him many prizes. He was well educated, a great reader particularly of the classics and could recite any part of Shakespeare. But he was of a philosophical turn of mind and not at all ambitious.

His wife, Maud York, came from a well-born family. Her father was a celebrated tea taster and had a chain of tea shops. Maud's mother had died when she was young leaving her to be raised by her aunt and uncle, the Kapernik Stowkowskys, parents of Leopold Stowkowsky, the world-famed pianist and conductor. Leo and Maud grew up as brother and sister. Leo's father was a celebrated cabinet maker to royalty.

His famous son, Leopold was fascinated by music from birth and became the organist in his parents' church at age eight. He never played with childhood friends and his obsession made him such a frail child that his family built him a gymnasium in their home. During World War I the Stowkowskys changed their name to Stocks, Russian names were not popular in England.

Will and Maud Wilson had little money when they emigrated to Canada with their baby girl, Dorothy, but appeared to live comfortably in Toronto. It intrigued York that they hung their stockings up at Christmas but received only oranges. One year Dorothy's second-hand sleigh was repainted as her Christmas present.

The Wilson children always had dogs as pets, usually mongrels with names such as Wolf and Taffy. Wolf, part collie, would try to run between York's legs when he was a toddler and would knock him flat, so he had mixed feelings about Wolf. Taffy was mostly spaniel and a great pal.

The Wilson family would walk to High Park on Sundays sometimes taking the horse-drawn streetcars which ran as far as Bloor Street and Lansdowne Avenue. This was probably about 1912. West of Lansdowne Bloor Street was not even paved, a boardwalk on Lansdowne stopped about 100 yards north of Bloor Street.

When York was about eight the family moved to 117 MacKay Avenue in the St. Clair - Dufferin area of Toronto. St. Clair Avenue was not paved then and when York started to Regal Road School, ten blocks from his home, he walked it four times a day. He would dream he found nickels and dimes on his way or in another dream that a leopard or wild animal was chasing him right into the house and out through the window.

His memories of World War I in 1914 were limited to the fact that his parents couldn't obtain butter or sugar. But he was a good student at the Regal Road School always coming third or fourth in his class. He must have been all of eight when Agnes Nickle became his first girlfriend. She lived close by on Bird Avenue and would

frequently call at the Wilson's to ask for York. This amused Will who would call out, "Your five cent girl is here again."

York went to Oakwood Collegiate and the first year his drawings so impressed his instructor that everyone was convinced York should continue in art. Vernon Gross would tear up York's drawings because they were so much better than his. York laughed it off. Vernon was his close friend and when Vernon failed to graduate York convinced his parents he should repeat his Senior Forth year too.

York went on to win debates and the prizes that accompanied them. He had an imaginative mind; given a subject he would immediately tackle it non-stop until the bell sounded. He was in fact so high spirited and full of devilment and practical jokes that he was constantly threatened with expulsion. The Principal appealed to his father to which Will replied that as long as York was among the top few students he would let the school worry about his behaviour. When the school year ended, the Principal advised York to change to another school because at Oakwood he would have so many marks against him. During the summer holidays his mother took his drawings to Toronto's famous Central Technical School and enroled him in second year; in reality indicating his career. York had had thoughts of becoming a Doctor, being greatly impressed by their family doctor, Dr. Wm. Fader.

At Central Tech the story was much the same. But more importantly York was to come under the strong discipline of the new assistant art director, Peter Haworth, fresh from England. Haworth was a rigid disciplinarian determined to have his students toe the mark. He stood for no nonsense and was quick to anger. One day he caught York and two friends in an empty classroom while skipping classes drawing from a female nude. Haworth was so incensed that he marched the three students down the hall to the Principal's office demanding they be expelled on the spot. On the way they met the Principal, Alfred Howell. "Ho, Ho, what have we here?" Howell demanded. Before Haworth could finish his angry denunciations, York with a quick glance at the unhappy faces of his friends, simply convulsed with laughter. Principal Howell relaxed and grinned, "Wilson," he said, "Your irrepressible laugh has saved you again. Go to your class."

York managed to stay on at Central Tech for the second and third years. Meanwhile the Great Depression was taking its toll in Canada and Will and Maud felt the effects. "We can't afford to

send you back another year, you must try to get a job. If you try but don't succeed we will, somehow or other, send you back to finish at Central Tech."

York lost no time in trying to help his parents. He took samples of his art work and applied for a job. His second call was at the Art Department at Brigden's Limited. The firm agreed to take him on but as he was under age at 16 his father had to sign the contract. He was to start at \$5 per (44 hour) week for the first six months. He was pleased and started to contribute to the household. He continued sketching every weekend and Thomas V. Mitchell, the Art Director at Brigdens, gave him regular criticism. Shortly afterwards, Charles Comfort moved to Toronto from the Winnipeg office of Brigdens. His comments and criticisms conflicted with Mitchell's and so York switched to Comfort. He had started as a messenger boy, cutting mats and preparing friskett paper. He soon realized that lettering men were always in short supply and so he decided to follow that route.

He was told that everything he had learned at Central Tech had to be forgotten. He copied Gowdy's book on lettering in india ink which took several months. This taught him the basis of his lettering knowledge and he worked on real lettering jobs from then on. He was eventually doing layout including figures. He also went to evening classes at the Ontario College of Art where he received criticism from Fred Finley who had studied at La Chaumière in Paris. Finley was considered an expert on life drawing.

His sense of the ridiculous and fondness for practical jokes never abated. They just became more sophisticated as he grew older. In the nonsense that went on at Brigdens, he was one of the main culprits. To illustrate, one of his artist friends always kept a few raisins on his desk. York thought it would be fun to put a few raisin-look-alike pieces of rubber cement among them. Another trick was to put soap chips in galoshes, which, with their dampness, produced more and more foam as the victim strode along. One day after lunch, an artist came back with a smart new hat, just bought from Applegath's Hat Shop. During the afternoon the hat was spirited away from its hook and a little stuffing inserted under the inside leather band. On putting the hat on that evening, the proud owner looked very confused when the hat was too tight and sat high on his head. A catastrophe almost happened when one artist, Bob Mulholland received a stiff note apparently from Mr. Fred Brigden. It expressed deep dissatisfaction with Mulholland's work. York was

busy and had forgotten about it when suddenly Bob Mulholland went tearing past his desk at great speed - on his way to see Mr. Brigden. York dashed after him and, catching him on the stairs said, "Bob, I wrote that note, very funny, ha ha!" Bob stared and said, "I don't care who wrote it. He can't talk to me that way." It wasn't until the third try, when York grabbed him just outside Brigden's door, that Bob finally realized that the boss hadn't written the note. Though he never had much interest in sports, York had taken boxing lessons when he was young, maybe he needed to - in self defence.

York was still under contract when he resigned because Brigdens wouldn't pay him \$18 a week, offering only \$15. Of course Brigdens blackballed him with every other engraving house in the city for breaking his contract and he couldn't get a job. He devised an idea to call on every store on Yonge Street and got enough work to last for six months. By which time the engraving houses had forgotten Brigden's blackballing.

Sampson Matthews was the best studio in Toronto at that time and having prepared a book of samples, York called and made an appointment. He met C.A.G. (Chuck) Matthews for about five minutes and got a job starting immediately. Here he met Franklin Carmichael, the art director who kept on making York do jobs over and over again which didn't give him much confidence in his lettering. A.J. Casson was second in command and later at Carmichael's death became Art Director. It is interesting that Carmichael eventually became famous as a member of the Group of Seven and Casson as the eighth member of the Group of Seven.

After working for Sampson Matthews for six months York decided he was ready to go to the United States. The firm was shocked, no one had ever quit before. Mr. Sampson told York that he was making a big mistake, that many artists had tried going to the States only to come back asking for their old jobs. York told him he would never want his old job back. Mr. Matthews reacted completely differently. He wrote a testimonial on the firm's letterhead reading, "I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this man to anyone whom-so-ever..." The fact that he hadn't asked for a recommendation impressed York even more; they became life-long friends.

York always gave his pal Ed Smith credit for having aroused his interest in the Old Masters. He haunted libraries studying the reproductions and reading all he could find by the great art

authorities of the day, such as Herbert Read and John Sloan. And so the day finally came in 1928 when York and Ed left for Detroit and we said sad goodbyes.

I missed York but realized he had to establish himself and gain experience in his chosen field. I took a job at Canadian National Telegraphs working with direct lines to the stockbrokers' offices. The department manager was named Miss Shortt, pleasant and business like and we got along well. The other operators were much older than I. The youngest was 27 which seemed so old to me. She told me about her love affair with a customs officer at the border. Their visits were usually on weekends with the affair much more advanced than anything I had ever heard of. It was quite an eye opener for me. I had a few casual boyfriends during York's absence but none were as interesting as York Wilson. My father was living in California at the time and I enjoyed a happy holiday with him. Returning to join my mother in Aurora I again moved to Toronto to study and work.

I stayed with my aunt and uncle who lived off Danforth Avenue and I worked for the Toronto Daily Star on King Street. Mr. Tate was the manager devoting considerable time to enforcing the newspaper's strict rule of not employing married women, thus leaving more opportunities for men.

Around this time, probably in 1932, York and I met again and he began visiting me at my Aunt Ethel's home. He captivated my aunt and was made welcome. This was a very different man, who returned to Toronto because of the depression. He had had worldly experiences in Detroit and had lost some of his boyish charm. He had many girlfriends and had known some pretty tough male characters. Now he was one of the best commercial artists in Toronto, the major part of his work being the fine art used in advertising. I noticed he had a few affectations such as calling most women "darling" but he was still the same, earnest young man when it came to painting and the values in life. His health had suffered for he played hard and worked hard. He might well have burned himself out early as many of the brightest artists had done if he hadn't had a steadying influence.

On arriving in Detroit, Ed and York had taken a room together as they had only \$100 each. The next morning they were out looking for work. At the first stop York was told he could start in two weeks but he said his money wouldn't last that long. The art director kindly supplied him with a list of possible studios. Meinzingers was his

next stop and there he was told he could start work in about ten days, his reply was the same. Mr. Meinzinger said in that case he could design a few Christmas cards for General Motors immediately. York asked what kind of reproduction and Mr. Meinzinger replied, "Any kind." York went back to his room and designed several cards; he took them back the next morning and was asked how much he wanted. He said \$50, the agreed payment for a week. Mr. Meinzinger called a stenographer to make out the cheque, handed it to York and promptly tore up the designs saying, "Now you won't look for any other work, will you?"

York promptly returned to Toronto, the firm assuring him that it would let him know when he should start. His second day back in Toronto brought him a telegram instructing him to start work at Meinzingers the next morning at eight o'clock.

He was right on the job next morning in Detroit - to tackle his first job, a twenty-four sheet poster (billboard) with the lettering "PONTIAC." The art director told him, "Forget everything you thought was lettering in Canada. It's too old fashioned." He learned the next day that he would alternate with the art director and they would compose a layout, get it okayed by General Motors in the same building and complete a used car ad which would appear in the morning. It would take until midnight to complete the job and the fact that they punched the time clock each morning made it a long day. He also had a client who came in on Saturdays and he designed and finished a silkscreen poster for him.

York stayed with Meinzingers at \$50 a week for about a year. Then he suddenly discovered that he had been redoing the work of a man who was making \$65 a week. He quit in disgust only to find difficulty getting another job. It took about two weeks, a long time. His next stop was at Reid Smith Studios at \$65 a week where he stayed for a year and a half. This would have entitled him to a paid vacation but, as he explained in later years, that was soon forgotten. Ed Smith was also working for Reid Smith Studios. He had been in Toledo at \$75 a week but had soon given up the job because the city was so dirty. York did mostly layouts and watercolour illustrations but that work ended very quickly with the 1929 stockmarket crash.

York told me about his life in Detroit. Some of their co-workers lived across the river in Windsor often smuggling goods into Canada and liquor back into the United States where prohibition reigned. When he first joined a group of poker players he was asked if he had played much poker. He said, no, very little. It had been his bad

luck to win on his first night whereupon his questioner, poking York's chest violently with every word threatened, "Don't say you haven't played much when you have. It might not be too healthy." York and Ed soon gathered that some of these characters belonged to the underworld.

Windsor friends often asked him to help bring presents across the border. It was Christmas and they gave him a "big mamma" doll to smuggle into Canada. He put it inside his shirt and trousers. At the customs they were told to get out of the car and as York bent over, the doll cried "M-a-m-m-a." The customs officer startled said, "What was that?" York immediately made a few similar noises whistling and explained that was what it was. He and Ed Smith, along with their friends, often went riding early in the morning and some of the horses were polo ponies. These were entrusted to them because they were experienced riders. They would stage impromptu polo matches.

York's return to Toronto was after the big stockmarket crash and he had a hard time finding a job. Eventually he formed his own business with Wesley Flinn - the Flinn Wilson studios on Front Street West. It was York's job to bring in the work, making arrangements with the client as well as doing his share while Wes remained in the studio. It was an amicable arrangement. There were other art studios in the building which included the Russian artist André Lapine. He was an expert on painting furs and lace and did a lot of work for Eatons Catalogue. He was also a painter and exhibited with Malloneys Art Gallery and the various art societies. York enjoyed the company of this older artist and occasionally was invited to André's home near the Humber River for dinner. André was an ardent gardener and York would often find him in the garden on arrival. After dinner André would play the piano. Later André was at Brigdens Engraving house.

The Flinn Wilson Studios had a joint bank account with a very small balance. Although York brought in most of the work he didn't have many responsibilities and didn't mind sharing it with Wes who had a girlfriend, Carolyn Davidson, whom he eventually married. Carolyn's father was Dean of Emanuel College at the University of Toronto. Wes was slow and exact in speech, with a slight lisp. He later taught at Toronto's Western Technical School when L.A.C. Panton was the principal. Alec Panton was stiff, officious and unbending, had the nasty habit of talking down to his colleagues while blinking his eyes, balancing on his toes and

dangling his cigarette from his mouth with the longest ash which seemed to defy gravity. Waiting for the ash to fall had an unnerving mesmerizing effect. He was not popular with his staff and earned the nickname "Lacy" Panton behind his back.

R. York Wilson first exhibited with the Canadian Society of Graphic Arts (CSGA) at its Eighth Show in 1931. This juried exhibition accepted four works: an etching, F.S.; an etching of York's father Bill; a chalk drawing, Reverie and a water colour, Three Heads. The same year he sent two water colours - The Ward and Richmond and York (Toronto Streets painted from the roof of Brigdens Ltd.) to the Royal Canadian Academy (RCA), opening in Toronto, later travelling to the Montreal Museum of Fine Art's (MMFA) Annual Spring Show. A selection was invited from there to the National Gallery of Canada (NG) in Ottawa which included The Ward. The N.G. wrote to say that it would buy The Ward if the artist would lower the \$45 price. The aspiring young artist refused. I think he was sorry later as it took twelve years more before a work was purchased by the N.G. thereby losing the distinction of being the youngest to be accepted.

York's visits to see me at my Aunt Ethel's home became almost nightly in the spring and summer of 1933. One evening in July he arrived quite excited and wanted to see me immediately. I was upstairs cleaning my white shoes and he called for me to come down immediately as it was urgent. As I reached the bottom of the stairs he asked, "Will you marry me?" I was taken aback but quick to respond, "Yes, but can't you ask me better than that?"

"I'm not very good at this," he muttered and got down on his knees making a lengthier proposal which was delightful and we both laughed.

We decided to get married in the fall. York started dissolving his three year old partnership with Wesley Flinn because their joint business would not support a wife.

A few nights later York said, "Let's not wait till fall. Let's get married right away." He had no money and I had only my \$12 a week job at the Toronto Daily Star for these were depression times. I half agreed realizing that we would have to live apart - he with his parents, and I with my aunt. In parting that evening we agreed to meet at the City Hall the next day to get the licence. I think we both wondered if the other would turn up. We did and, surprised at our audacity, we wandered around the old City Hall looking for the marriage licence bureau. Suddenly a guard whom we hadn't noticed

as we passed said, "It's down this way." We said, "What's down this way?" and he replied, "The marriage licence bureau, of course." We wondered how he knew and we all laughed. We found we had to wait three days. I suppose this allows for people to think it over sensibly.

That evening we went to my church on Danforth Avenue to arrange for a small ceremony three days later, July 13th. The minister was kindly and helpful, he asked many questions to make us really think about this serious step. Next we invited York's parents, his brother Art (as best man), my mother in Aurora and my aunt and uncle to partake in our little ceremony.

Two of York's closest friends, Ethel and Fred King, recently married themselves, made an intriguing offer. They would spend the night with Ethel's parents and gave York the key to their apartment. York's parents drove us there after the ceremony, stopping en route for me to buy a toothbrush. We discovered that we had 80 cents between us.

York opened the door of the Kings' apartment and carried me across the threshold where, to our amazement a path of rose petals led all the way to the bedroom. Next morning I went to work at the Star as usual, removing my wedding ring before entering the building and York went out to search for work.