

A farmer's silver collection at the Soo Line Historical Museum in Weyburn, Saskatchewan.

By Dorothea Burstyn



Charles Wilson's farmhouse in Weyburn and one of its interiors

Charles Wilson, a lifelong bachelor, had two loves in his life: the animals he raised and antique silver which he started to collect when only 18 years old. A sick calf would be brought to his bedroom to be watched during the night and that same bedroom as well as all other rooms were crammed chock-full with antique silver.

Like every new collector Charles might have started modest with vesta cases, and silver-plated items for the table. A revolving butter dish, toast racks, cruets and egg cruets might have been used at his breakfast table. For more festive occasions the silver-plated epergne with rose-colored fluted dishes and a tantalus with decanters might be brought out. But what would a bachelor's interest be in several sets of curling tongs, evening bags, scent and perfume bottles or dresser sets.

Like so many other collectors his taste in silver must have somewhat matured and then Georgian silver was purchased. The collection



contains several boxed Georgian and Victorian coffee and tea sets, a wonderful Georgian soup tureen, several pairs of candlesticks, candelabras, candlesnuffers on trays, wax jacks and chambersticks, salvers and trays, a large collection of serving pieces all made by good makers and of good to excellent quality. Lovely are the two Scottish provincial toddy ladles with carved handles. Outliers are a small collection of Russian enamelled spoons. And a touch of the exotic is provided by a coconut cup and a large menu holder made of two horns set in silver, made around 1870 in Calcutta, India. And Charles must have had an interest in history as his collection of Canadian and US Marine dress swords document. An outstanding piece is the Qu'Appelle Treaty Medal. Qu'Appelle is a small village east of Regina. Each of the seventeen chiefs who signed the treaty received a medal, a black top-hat, and a black frock.

Charles came to Weyburn as a child with his parents from England. His parents operated a hotel first, but soon began farming. Charles took over the farm and made it his life's work. A few months before his death he took ill and died in Weyburn Special Care Home in 1995. At this time, he also decided to keep his collection together by donating it to the Soo Line Historical Museum.



One must applaud the Soo Line Historical Museum for doing an excellent job at displaying the Wilson collection. The showcases are fabulous, and the arrangement of various objects seems to be well thought-out. The Soo Line Historical Museum is managed by the Weyburn Chamber of Commerce. Larry Heggs, the former manager of the Chamber of Commerce, contacted me re more publicity for this museum. A video showcasing the museum had been done already. Here John Shelley, Charles' great nephew, talked about his uncle and his donation to the museum. The Silver Society suggested an appraiser. Now the collection contains 5000 pieces, at the time of the donation doubles had been sold already but it was felt that more curating had to be done, above all the signage of the various exhibits needed to be improved. Unfortunately, during covid time all these good intentions came to nothing.

A heart-felt bravo must go to Charles Wilson. Weyburn, never a busy hub of antique silver selling and buying, and before the Internet with hundreds of websites offering interesting silver, it took considerable effort to collect antique silver. Charles travelled sometimes to shows, other than that he had to rely on catalogues, and contacts to auctioneers to build this remarkable collection.