

Introduction

Occasionally, if we're very fortunate, we meet someone who inspires us, whose way of being makes us aspire to be more than we had imagined possible. Arnold Platt had such an effect on the many whose lives he touched. I was one of those lucky people. I first met him in April 1973, in a government office in Calgary's Bowlen building, where he interviewed me for the job of research officer. He had just become Chair of the Special Advisory Committee on Communal Property and Land Use, and was hiring his office staff of two.

Newspaper stories had told me that Arnold Platt was a prominent agriculturalist, renowned for developing Rescue wheat; that he had recently been corporate secretary of the United Farmers of Alberta, a farm supply

cooperative; and that, the previous year, he had been inducted into Alberta's Agriculture Hall of Fame. In preparing for the job interview, I had discovered that all this was just a very small part of his story. There were more news stories about him, and he was included in the 1971 *Who's Who in Canada*. Clearly he was an important man, a man of influence.

Not having any connections to the agricultural, educational, or political spheres in which he travelled, I was intimidated even before I met him. That first meeting did not make me feel any more confident. During the interview, his keen eyes never left me, and he seemed to listen intently to my answers to the other interviewers' questions. But the only question he asked was, "Do you smoke?" When I replied that I sometimes smoked a pipe, he remarked that, if I hadn't taken it up seriously by then, I never would.

It seemed to be a clear signal that I would never work for him. Evidently, though, I did not know Arnold, for three weeks later I was once again in the human resources office in the Bowlen building, browsing the job postings, and the manager of the office asked me what I was doing there. I already had a job with Arnold—he had simply been too busy to call and tell me.

On May 1, 1973, I showed up for my first day of work. Arnold welcomed me, introduced me to the other staff member, the office administrator, and showed me my office. He pointed out two filing cabinets, which contained the records of the former Communal Property Board and the materials that the Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly had used in preparing its *Report on Communal Property 1972*.

Arnold had a real presence. At five foot five, it wasn't his height that created it. Nonetheless, he was noticed in a room. His shock of sometimes unruly dark hair, which curled up on the left side of his face, created an asymmetry that offset the roundness of his face. The poker face gave itself away in crinkly lines at the corners of his eyes when he smiled in acknowledgement of a friend or in admiration of a well-expressed point. His small, although not delicate, hands constantly worried his pipe, stoking, tamping, cupping, and covering it. When he assumed his position as chair at the head of the board table, he dominated the table because his

upper body filled the space; his legs were disproportionately short. His deep voice seemed intimidating at first, and he seemed to be all business. As one listened to what he had to say, one saw his concern for others' well-being and his lack of concern for his own ego. As Dean Lien, who joined the district executive as the Junior Farmers' Union of Alberta (FUA) district president shortly after Arnold became director and chair of the executive meetings, put it, "You knew he was the farmers' friend."

Arnold suggested that I come and see him in about two weeks, after I'd had the chance to acquaint myself with the contents of the filing cabinets. When we met next, he invited me to give my analysis of the way the current controversy over Hutterites' purchases of land had been influenced by what had been done. He heard me out and, apparently satisfied that I had some semblance of an understanding of the issues, he said I should get out and meet some people.

So began a mentorship made remarkable by his generosity, his wisdom, his range of knowledge, and his tolerance for the arrogant ignorance of the young and inexperienced. During one of what would become our weekly seminars, I told Arnold that I did not really think I fit the mold of the specialist, that I regarded myself as more of a generalist. After a few pulls on his pipe, he remarked a bit wistfully, "Being a specialist is easy."

He was the model of a generalist, but it took many years before I had any sense of how he had come to know so much about so many things. Arnold did not talk much about himself; he talked about ideas. Mostly his ideas were concerned with making the world better, and most often those ideas were related to particular events. One did not listen to him for long without realizing that he had been a part of those events. He had the knowledge of an insider, and yet the popular public record seldom recognizes his involvement.

As I came to know Arnold well enough to talk with him about this apparent disparity, I came to understand that he made a distinction between having power and having influence. For the public good to be realized, good people needed to have power. Such power, however, was always constrained by the compromises made necessary by having to satisfy competing interests. Effecting those compromises for the greatest

possible good required much background work by knowledgeable but disinterested and self-effacing people. Arnold chose the path of influence rather than the path of power. If that meant his contribution was seldom publicly credited or even acknowledged, then that's how it was.

How Arnold came to have that influence, and how he used it, is a good story. It's also a key to understanding the role that agriculture played in shaping Canada's political, economic, and social life. This story is set in the context of some of the greatest changes to affect North American agriculture, as it was transformed from a way of life to an industry. Arnold played a role in those changes; just as importantly, he played a role in mitigating their most damaging effects. His story invites us to think about today's paths to influence. If a person wanted to make a difference in the nation's affairs, how would she or he go about doing so? Are Arnold Platt's principles of disinterestedness and self-effacement still valid?

This book about his life won't answer those questions directly, but I hope that Arnold's story will provide occasions for considering the ways that his path can be translated to fit contemporary circumstances. Arnold's life, both public and private, was multi-faceted and so diverse as to make him a true generalist. Hardly anyone knew him in all the contexts in which he acted, so it's not surprising that few ever felt they knew him fully.

A few glimpses and impressions demonstrate the varied nature of his life. On election night in 1921, Arnold was with his father William, when William called on John Reid as Reid was milking his cows. They called to tell Reid that he had been elected as the United Farmers representative for the constituency, and that the United Farmers were forming the government. Arnold's father was Reid's campaign manager.

In the summer of 1927, Arnold drove a steel-wheeled tractor, with lugs, from the family farm at Innisfree to the new holding at Westlock and back again—more than 130 miles each way—struggling with his conscience and the sign on the bridge that said "Tractors with lugs prohibited." In the early 1930s, he ran a gaming house in a garage near the University of Alberta in Edmonton, to help finance his education.

Then, in 1938, he was the geneticist, in the greenhouse in Ottawa, who made the cross that resulted in Rescue wheat—the first sawfly-resist-

ant wheat to become commercially available. Then he drove a beat-up truck loaded with Rescue seed stock from Swift Current in Saskatchewan to the Imperial Valley in California, so he could grow two crops a year and get seeds to the farmers, who were losing more than \$20 million each year to the sawfly.

In 1953, when he had a leased, eight-section grain farm on the Blood Indian Reserve, he went into Lethbridge wearing greasy overalls for parts for the clutch on a five-ton Dodge he used on the farm. In 1955, he was at the Hotel MacDonald in Edmonton, being elected president of the Farmers' Union of Alberta. In 1959, he was spotted by the Soviet delegate, unlit pipe in his mouth, in an art gallery in Geneva, where negotiations were on for the Fourth International Wheat Agreement. Back in Edmonton, at the Board of Governor's table at the University of Alberta, he persuaded his colleagues to hire North America's leading agricultural economist as head of the new department he had just convinced them to approve.

In 1961, he was at Prime Minister Diefenbaker's office at 8:00 am on a dark wintry morning, trying to convince the prime minister that the Royal Commission on Transportation should recommend changes to grain transportation and the Crow Rates even though those changes might not be politically popular in the short term. In 1964, he drove his Chrysler around Hanna, Alberta, assessing the feasibility of expanding the United Farmers of Alberta Cooperative's operations in the area.

On a night in 1973, he drove along a back road near Mossleigh, Alberta, with his lights off, leaving a meeting protesting the establishment of another Hutterite farm in the area. As Chair of the Advisory Committee on Communal Property and Land Use, he'd just taken three hours of abuse for supporting Premier Lougheed's decision to repeal the Communal Property Act.

In 1979, chairing an inquiry at a public hearing on the construction of the Oldman River dam, he listened attentively as a young girl spoke, standing on a milk crate so she could reach the microphone. In April 1996, at a celebration of his life in the Ranchmen's Club in Calgary, Arnold's spirit was there as John Stahl of the Starland Hutterite Colony remembered him.

This book cannot tell the complete story of Arnold Platt's life. His accomplishments suggest his genius, but his genius also resides in his conviction that nothing he did was extraordinary. He considered his life so ordinary that he did not think his papers worth keeping and burned most of them before he died. The following account takes us through the major moments in Arnold Platt's life. The man of genius and the ordinary man, the public man and the private man, were one and the same—deep and reserved, yet sociable and engaging. He was delightful to know.



Arnold's grandparents' house near Innisfree in the mid-1960s. Arnold's half-sister, Ethel (Platt) Larson, in the foreground.