

His dreams helped make the modern Mississauga

He is a quite-spoken, forceful man, a shade beyond middle age. He has a trim look. He is a little on the short side and wears well-tailored suits with a conservative cut. His features are unremarkable except his lips which have a way, every now and then of shaping themselves into a humorous smile. He smiles easily and when he talks his voice is somewhere between a Oxford and the B. He is an Englishman.

I met him at his office in Park Royal, the town he built which now constitutes a big segment of a bigger town — Mississauga. He works at a table type desk which was clear when I called except for a roll of plans.

There you have Leonard W. Finch — a builder-visionary.

Leonard Finch came to Canada in 1928, set up a subsidiary of an English company which was engaged in producing low cost housing over England under a new method which he developed in steel-framed houses called the steel system. He left the English organization in the hands of co-directors and became a 'landed immigrant,' bringing substantial capital and high hopes.

As a planner-developer of low cost housing estates from 1931, he intended the Trustee system to pave the way to large land developments to fill a national need in Canada, where he imagined that red tape was less of a problem than in England.

Unfortunately the requirements of C.M.H.C. and municipal govern-

ments for changes in design to comply with out-moded standards of construction, made the use of the system untenable and he sustained serious capital losses.

No Quitter

To return to England, beaten in the New World, was an unpalatable prospect. And so Leonard Finch went on to land development.

He was living at the time on the site of Fairfield Manor in the original home of General Roberts on the corner of Clarkson road and the QEW. As an experienced developer he realized that the land in the vicinity of his home was ideal for residential use — and he dreamed his dream of a satellite suburban town within Toronto Township.

The prospect was exciting and challenging, but consultations with Reeve Mary Fix and township officials made it apparent that there were many problems of municipal economics to be overcome.

Balanced assessment between housing, industrial and commercial construction was vital. It would be necessary to build a sewage disposal plant, extend water mains and provide a reservoir. Land would have to be acquired to provide for these facilities.

Leonard Finch reckoned that an initial investment of four and a half million dollars would be required.

He formed United Lands Corporation Limited with English financial friends in 1955, and as a start the company pur-

chased 900 acres. This was later increased to nearly 1,600 acres — an area which now comprises Park Royal, Sheridan Park and Sheridan Homelands.

Negotiations with the township council were long and difficult, but after an initial cash payment of \$1,150,000 to pay for the sewage plant, the water reservoir and the trunk mains, and after entering into an agreement to ensure balanced taxes to meet the ever rising cost of education, Leonard Finch was able to go ahead.

His Biggest Coup

What he has done to stimulate the growth of Mississauga would fill a volume, and his views on it would make a fascinating companion volume, but his greatest achievement as far as the town is concerned fell into his lap by accident, or so he says. It was through him that Mississauga obtained what is perhaps its greatest asset — the Sheridan Park Research Community.

He says it fell into his lap, but my own view is that he guided the fall — and very dexterously, too, too.

In the course of its operations, United Lands — Leonard Finch's company — bought a further 600 acres north of their original holdings and north of QEW. He was delighted when British American Oil took an option on 40 acres for a research centre of their own. He did not know it, but although unconnected, this gave him an 'in'

for the research community.

Just about the time the B.A. deal was being closed, he heard that the Ontario Research Foundation was moving from Queen's Park because it wished to expand operation and its existing premises were inadequate.

He called on the director of research at Queen's Park but it was hardly an encouraging visit, for he learned that the Foundation was checking out 101 sites to see which offered the best in adjacent facilities and so on.

He was none too hopeful when he saw that Erin Mills and the developers of Meadowvale were not contenders — so hot, indeed, that they both had plans and models ready to support their presentations. Leonard Finch had no plans, but he had the idea for a research community which the Ontario Research Foundation could locate.

He called Jack Darling, secretary of the Foundation and learned that the directors were meeting on the following Monday to consider the various sites regarded as 'possibles.'

It seemed likely that the choice would lie between Erin Mills, Meadowvale and another site in Oakville.

A Rush Order

That was on Thursday morning. Leonard Finch did some quick thinking. He had the land, it was fully serviced, it had all the facilities needed for a big research community — as demonstrated by BA's selection of the site

for its own research laboratories. All he needed was a model so that he could explain to the directors of the Foundation just what he had in mind.

Thursday — and the meeting was on the next Monday.

On Saturday morning, he called in the architect who was in his employ and who had a flair for model making. A model was completed for the meeting on Monday, Leonard made his presentation, and after long and careful negotiations by both the site was selected by the Ontario Research Foundation.

That was the beginning. What followed was a 'venture in imagination' between the Foundation and United Lands. It was necessary to find other participants in the community.

"For that I give thanks and credit to Dr. Misener, then director of the Foundation," Leonard Finch told me. He was wonderful and so was J. J. Darling, secretary of the Ontario Research Foundation. He was with me, mostly in his own time and without thought or hope of reward to help create what I believe to be the greatest development for Mississauga, the province of Ontario and perhaps for Canada."

The Summing Up

From the beginning Leonard Finch conceived the community as a non-profit organization and he was more than pleased when Hon. Stanley R. and I suggested that it should be set up as a Crown Corporation and operated as a provincial venture. Today the Sheridan Park Corporation has over 300 acres of landscaped grounds and eight major research

institutes, surrounding the imposing headquarters of the Ontario Research Foundation.

In the 15 years he has been in Canada, Leonard Finch has been successful. Park Royal, his dream town, is nearly complete; Sheridan Park has become famous, Sheridan Homelands is half completed.

On all counts he has been successful — but why did he come? Why did he abandon a successful career in England, a beautiful estate in Sussex and a host of friends, to start over again in Canada?

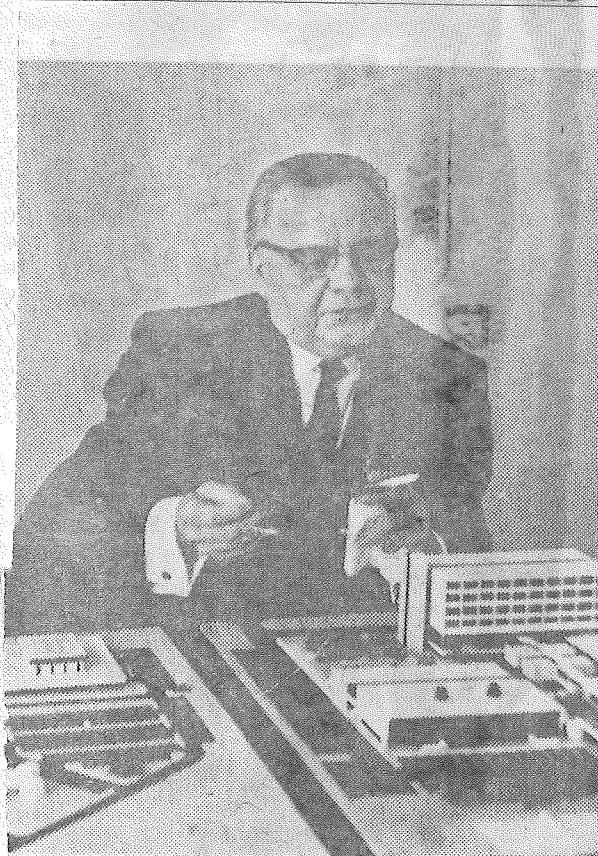
He gave me his reasons in considerable detail — good logical reasons — but basic to them all was the fact that in his wide travels — he had never encountered a country to compare with Canada. It was the land of the future.

He came with his wife and their two youngest children, Shireen and Timothy, then aged 7 and 5, in 1953.

Later he was joined by his elder son, David, now a vice-president of United Lands, and his two step-children, Patrick and Phillipa. Business has taken Patrick to Australia to live, marriage has taken Phillipa back to England but both would love to return to Canada.

How did he feel about Canada now? I asked him.

"The fifteen years have been filled with hard work, frustrations and some success. But all of it, particularly my endeavors in the development of Mississauga, have been infinitely worthwhile. Canada is truly greater than many Canadians believe — and I am proud to call it home."



LEONARD W. FINCH