

Steps in the rights direction: 365 human rights celebrations and tragedies that inspired Canada and the world

January 27, 1959

Supreme Court rules against Premier Duplessis for punishing Jehovah's Witness

Years ago, many people regarded the Witnesses of Jehovah as a radical Christian sect, especially in Quebec, where they were very critical of the Roman Catholic church. During World War II, Quebecors banned Jehovah's Witnesses as an organization and imprisoned Witnesses practicing their beliefs. After the war, Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis did everything in his power to put a stop to this group. In 1945, provincial authorities carried out large scale arrests of young Witness men and women as they broke local by-laws by handing out their magazines. Montreal restaurateur Frank Roncarelli gave legal assurances for each arrest and by November 12, 1946, he had posted about 380 sureties. Later that month, Premier Duplessis, who also served as Quebec's attorney general, ordered the head of the Quebec Liquor Commission, Edouard Archambault, to revoke the liquor license at Roncarelli's restaurant Quaff. This was despite the fact that Roncarelli and his father had held the license for 34 years.

Since Roncarelli was clearly being punished for supporting the Witnesses, the message was clear that other supporters would suffer.

Without a liquor license, Roncarelli lost his business, which prompted him to personally sue the premier. He not only won more than \$8,000 in damages, but on January 27, 1959 the Supreme Court of Canada upheld that decision and upped the award by \$25,000. Some judges used harsh words, one describing Duplessis of "gross abuse of legal power." With legal expenses, the premier was ordered to pay \$46,132 personally. Roncarelli moved to the United States to work for a highway construction company. He died on September 26, 1981 in Groton, Connecticut.

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April 19, 1907

Tom Longboat wins Boston Marathon and breaks record by five minutes

In 1999 MacLean's magazine named Tom Longboat the top Canadian sports figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario on June 4, 1887, Thomas "Tom" Longboat was spotted at a young age for his running abilities. In 1906 Longboat broke the Canadian record by two and a half minutes for a ten-mile race in Toronto. He would end up breaking every Canadian record for distances of a mile or longer. On April 19, 1907, not yet 20, Longboat ran the Boston Marathon. In reporting the race, the New York Times referred to "unfavourable conditions" which were in fact rain, sleet and cold winds. For the first five miles Longboat stayed behind the leaders. Then, one by one, he overtook them. He finished with a time of two hours, 24 minutes and 20 seconds, almost five minutes faster than the previous record and more than two and a half minutes ahead of anyone else.

Longboat wasn't able to compete the following year, as he had been deemed professional, but he continued to race, attracting many fans and much media attention. In 1916 Longboat enlisted in the Army and became a messenger in France. He returned home to find that his wife Lauretta had remarried due to an incorrect report she'd received that he was dead.

Eventually, he married Martha Sliversmith and they had four children. Longboat worked at various jobs during the Depression, eventually working almost 20 years for the City of Toronto. Longboat died on January 9, 1949. At the 100th anniversary of the Boston Marathon, Longboat's 87-year-old daughter, Phyllis Winnie and other aboriginal Canadians turned up to honour his legacy.

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May 12, 1820

Florence Nightingale, nurse and mathematician, is born in Florence, Italy

Her British parents were touring Europe when Florence Nightingale was born in Florence, Italy on May 12, 1820. Early on, the girl showed her father's bent for mathematics, to the dismay of her mother, who considered it unladylike. Fortunately, Mrs. Nightingale relented enough to allow her daughter a math tutor. As a young woman, Nightingale also took an interest in social issues and believed she had a calling from God. Against the family's strong objections, she took up nursing, a career regarded then as drawing uneducated, coarse, promiscuous and even drunken women. After studying nursing in hospitals around Europe, she arrived in 1854 in what is now Istanbul during the Crimean war. There, she took on the task of improving conditions so horrible that more soldiers were dying in the hospitals than on the battlefield. As a woman, she had to fight for her goals, and did so with her math skills, charting statistics that proved better sanitary conditions would lead to saving lives. Indeed, her improvements to medical facilities dropped soldiers' hospital mortality rate from 50 to 2.2%. When the war finished, she took her quest for improving hospital conditions to London, where her efforts caught the attention of Queen Victoria and the British prime minister. Nightingale became the first woman elected a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society. Bedridden in later years due to an illness she'd contracted in Crimea, Nightingale turned her energy to writing. She published 200 books, reports and pamphlets before her death at the age of 90 on August 13, 1910.

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August 28, 1963

Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his “I have a dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial

When U.S. President John F. Kennedy proposed the Civil Rights Bill to Congress, Southern representatives blocked it. To build political pressure for the bill, civil rights leaders staged a march on Washington on August 28, 1963 that drew over 250,000 people. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the key speakers on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Although it is hard to discern from the film, one account states that after delivering his prepared speech, King was about to sit down when gospel singer Mahalia Jackson called out, “Tell them about your dream, Martin!” What is certain is that King then delivered his “I have a dream” speech, which became so famous that many say it still defines the civil rights movement.

“I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,” King said. He ended with his wish to let “freedom ring” throughout the United States. And when it does, he said, Americans “...will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’”

Although President Kennedy was assassinated less than three months later – before the bill was passed – President Johnson ushered the bill into being on July 2, 1964, thus fulfilling a dream nurtured by both Kennedy and King.

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September 14, 1936

Dorothea Palmer arrested for distributing information on birth control

In the early 1900s, Canadian women had no access to information about birth control. Most religious and medical leaders even opposed making information about it available. Dorothea Palmer, born in England in 1908 before immigrating to Canada, was instrumental in gaining reproductive rights for women. Palmer worked for the Parents' Information Bureau in Kitchener, Ontario, where her job involved visiting the homes of poor women. She took on the initiative of informing these women about birth control, even though she knew that doing so was illegal.

Palmer was arrested on September 14, 1936 in Eastview, an Ottawa suburb, as she left the home of a family with many children. She was criminally charged with disseminating information about birth control. Her trial, which dragged on from October to March of 1937, entailed 19 days of testimony, four days of arguments and 40 witnesses. In the end, the judge acquitted Palmer, saying she was providing information for the "public good." The Crown appealed the judgment, but a few months later, Ontario's chief justice and two associate judges dismissed the appeal. Although the case was an important step towards giving women information about their reproductive rights, real change took decades. It was 1969 when dissemination and advertising about birth control was taken out of the criminal code.