

# Two crusaders at the Connaught

**T**HE STORY STILL has the power to shock.

In the early 1900s, in spite of a cure that had been found, tens of thousands of children throughout Toronto were dying from diphtheria. Almost every one of these deaths could have been prevented with the injection of a massive dose of a serum costing only \$25 but in those days, \$25 was a month's pay for most working men.

In countless homes where two children were suffering from the disease, parents with almost no money had to choose which of their two children would be allowed to live.

In 1913, at the height of the latest epidemic, a young Toronto doctor, John Fitzgerald, rented a stable behind a house on Barton Ave. and filled the stalls with horses whose blood could be safely extracted to produce the new antitoxin that could cure diphtheria. And it was there that he began his struggle to make this serum freely available to

... That small beginning in a barn near the corner of Bloor and Bathurst Sts. led to the founding in Toronto of one of Canada's most internationally famous institutions, the Connaught Laboratories. In the 1910s, a handsome Georgian-style building on the University of Toronto campus became the first permanent home of the Connaught Laboratories, and the building has now been named the Fitzgerald Building in honor of the young doctor who had founded it. It is a rare accolade, for only a few buildings in the long history of the university have ever been named after a modern-day Canadian. But only a small part of the full story of the Connaught laboratories has ever been told. To everyone involved in the project, it has always been the story of two men: Fitzgerald and the young student Robert Detries who came to join him in his work.

In the 1940s, Detries, who succeeded Fitzgerald at Connaught, headed a secret project that saved the lives of countless thousands of children throughout North America. When the story of that project broke in the press in 1954, Detries was awarded one of the medical world's most prestigious awards, and former U.S. president,

Harry S. Truman, came to the ceremony to personally thank him. A long overdue tribute to Fitzgerald and Detries and to many of the men and women who played a part in the story

## Historical Toronto

Donald Jones



of Connaught was published this week. Titled *Within Reach Of Everyone: A History Of The University Of Toronto School Of Hygiene And The Connaught Laboratories* by Paul A. Bator and Dr. Andrew J. Rhodes (Canadian Public Health Association, 1990), it begins with the now legendary events in the life of Fitzgerald.

He was born in Drayton, Ont., on Dec. 3, 1882. After graduating from the University of Toronto with a medical degree, he continued his studies in Europe, and it was the importance of the work being conducted in laboratories such as the Pasteur Institute in Paris that made the deepest impression on him.

On his return to Toronto, when a new epidemic of diphtheria struck the city, he decided to set up his own small laboratory where he could produce more quantities of the antitoxin that would prevent some of the senseless deaths.

His work quickly won the support of the faculty at the University of Toronto and he was provided with an antitoxin laboratory in the hygiene department in the Faculty of Medicine. Within a few

months, enthusiastic new supporters within the Ontario government announced that the antitoxin would now be freely available to everyone.

When war broke out in Europe, he began producing vast quantities of an antitoxin for troops dying from tetanus.

In 1915, a wealthy Torontonian benefactor, Col. Albert E. Gooderham, offered to donate enough money to establish a major new laboratory centre. His only request was that it be named after the greatly admired new Governor-General of Canada, the Duke of Connaught. Fitzgerald agreed and his laboratory became the Connaught Laboratories.

By 1927, it had become so internationally recognized that the directors of the Rockefeller Foundation offered to donate enough funds to build a major new home for the laboratories on the university campus, just west of the corner of University Ave. and College St., on Taddle Creek Rd.

When this handsome red brick, Georgian-style building was opened, it housed not only the Connaught Laboratories it also became the home of a second major institution, the School of Hygiene, that Fitzgerald had also founded and that he now also headed.

For years, Fitzgerald had realized that in addition to the education of medical doctors, another institution was sorely needed to train medical graduates for the increasingly important new field of "public health."

In 1914, the first doctor to receive a



**CONNAUGHT LABORATORIES'** first permanent home, renamed the Fitzgerald Building and located on Taddle Creek Road.

diploma in a new "public health" course at the university was Robert Detries. Fitzgerald, impressed by his dedication, persuaded him to join him in his work at Connaught. The two men quickly became friends and lifetime associates.

When Fitzgerald died in 1940, it was the still largely unknown but immensely important Detries who succeeded him in his work. Detries was a native Torontonian, born on July 25, 1883 and was a popular figure on the university campus ever since his days as an undergraduate.

In his class yearbook, these prophetic words appeared — "To have God for a friend is to have one who will never spare himself if he can be of help to others." But it was not until almost the end of his career that he became known to most Canadians.

In the 1940s, when an international search began for a vaccine to end the epidemic of poliomyelitis that were crippling thousands of children, one of the major but less-publicized research grants was a donation to the Connaught Laboratories by the National Foundation For Infantile Paralysis — better known as The March Of Dimes.

The reasons behind the strange secrecy that surrounded this grant was a feeling among many of the directors of the foundation that there could be resentment if it was known that a large amount of money raised in the U.S. was being given to a "foreign" laboratory in Canada.

It was not until 1954, when the now famous Dr. Jonas Salk developed a

successful vaccine for poliomyelitis, that it was finally announced that the vast majority of the polio virus used in the successful tests of close to a million children had been produced at the Connaught laboratories on the campus of the University of Toronto. Detries alone had headed the entire project. It had been an extraordinarily complex operation but was an unqualified success. And it was also announced that he now would receive one of the medical world's most prestigious awards, the Lasker Award.

At the august ceremonial dinner, former U.S. president Harry S. Truman arrived to personally express the thanks of his country. The Lasker award is a rare and much prized honor, and this was the first time it had been awarded to a Canadian. The award climaxed Detries' career who was now in his 60s. The following year he reached retirement age and left his work at the laboratory and the school to be continued by his colleagues. On Dec. 25, 1975 he died at his home at 186 Dawlish Ave. at the age of 86.

There is so much more to the story. It is the Connaught laboratories that produced all of the world's first supplies of insulin. In their book,

authors Bator and Rhodes carry the history of Connaught and the school to 1955, the year of Detries' retirement.

It is now hoped that a second volume will soon complete the story of these two still largely unknown institutions that have brought such international fame not only to Toronto, but to the country itself.



**CEREMONIAL DINNER:** Former U.S. president Harry S. Truman, left, and Dr. Robert Detries.

FROM WITHIN REACH OF EVERYONE