



**Richard Bedford Bennett.** Born in Hopewell Hill, New Brunswick on July 3, 1870, he was of Loyalist stock on his father's side. His Great Grandfather, Benjamin Bennett, came to New Brunswick via Nova Scotia where his father migrated from Rhode Island in 1778. Bennett grew up in New Brunswick where he attended both public and high schools. He received a law degree from Dalhousie University in Halifax in 1893 at the age of twenty-three.

Before entering law school, he was a teacher in Douglstown, New Brunswick at the ripe age of eighteen. His entry into the law was unconventional compared with today's standards. He began his legal studies in Chatham, New Brunswick, with prominent lawyer Lemuel John Tweedie, who encouraged the young Bennett to enroll at Dalhousie.

After practicing law in New Brunswick – as well as an early attempt at politics – he was lured to Calgary by another prominent lawyer, James Lougheed. Lougheed, who was impressed with Bennett after visiting Halifax in 1896, initially had difficulty convincing him to come west. After realizing his prospects for wealth and advancement were limited in New Brunswick, Bennett decided to accept the junior partnership with Lougheed in Calgary. Arriving in mid-January 1897, he stepped off the train into temperatures reaching -40 degrees. As Louis Knafla noted, “[he] came west to pursue his fortune, not the weather.”<sup>1</sup>

Once in Calgary, Bennett acquired many prominent client companies, such as Canadian Pacific Railway, Hudson's Bay Company, and the Royal Bank of Canada. He purchased stock in several companies, including Alberta Pacific Grain and Elevator, the Calgary *Albertan*, Calgary Power, and Canada Cement.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to his business acumen, Bennett also dabbled extensively in politics. One year after migrating west he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of the North-West Territories and reelected in 1902. When Alberta became a province, Bennett became the first leader of the Alberta Conservative Party and won a seat in the legislature in 1909.

In 1911, he made the switch to federal politics and was elected to the House of Commons that same year. Following a falling out with Prime Minister Robert Borden over the Union Government and conscription during World War I, Bennett did not stand for reelection in 1917. Despite not representing a seat in the Commons under Prime Minister Arthur Meighen, Bennett was appointed Minister of Justice. The Conservative Party was returned to power in 1925 until losing shortly after in 1926. During this short mandate, Bennett was Minister of Finance.

In 1927, Bennett became party leader at the Conservative leadership convention. Approximately three years later, he became Canada's 11<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister and remained in that position until 1935. His political legacy is ultimately tied to the Great Depression, and horse-powered vehicles known as “Bennett Buggies”.

An article from 2015 in the *Globe and Mail* suggests that it is time to rehabilitate R.B. Bennett. If not for the economic hard times Bennett would be considered a good Prime Minister. It was the Great Depression that overshadowed his intellectual and institutional achievements.

If Bennett's political legacy is closely linked to "Bennett Buggies" and the Great Depression, his legal legacy is closely linked to the battles he fought against his partner, James Lougheed, which I will come to shortly.

His photographic memory, his knowledge of the law, and his relentless determination did not help Bennett inside the courtroom. Looking at statistics for the period 1893 to 1913, Bennett was only successful 25% of the time at trial and 39% of the time at appeal.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, despite his business proficiency, his worst courtroom work involved contracts, warranties, bankruptcy, negligence, workmen's compensation, and provincial laws, rules, and regulations. In fact, his best record – 83% for – was for actions involving theft.<sup>4</sup>

But his legal legacy in the province of Alberta came in August 1922 when Lougheed filed a lawsuit against his partner of twenty-five years. Without getting into too much detail, the animosity between the two was considerable, and it came to a head after Lougheed moved to put the assets of the partnership into receivership while Bennett was in England. Bennett sued for damages in the amount of \$50,000 claiming Lougheed's conduct was unbecoming of a barrister and solicitor. Bennett had the assets, except Lougheed personal items, tied up in receivership for years. So much so that a court order was required to access client files.<sup>5</sup>

Lougheed's new practice never reached the prominence of his partnership with Bennett. He passed away in Ottawa on November 2, 1925.

Bennett's firm – now Bennett Jones LLP – went on to become a successful national firm with international connections. After leaving politics, Bennett moved to Mickleham, England. He was made a knight of the British Realm taking the title Viscount Bennett of Mickleham, Calgary, and Hopewell. He died on June 26, 1947, in a bathtub on his estate in the South of England.

<sup>1</sup> Louis A. Knafla, "Frontier Lawyers: Origins of the Alberta Law, 1882-1914," in *Just Works: Lawyers in Alberta, 1907-2007* ed. Michael Payne (Toronto: Irwin Law Inc., 2007), pg. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Louis A. Knafla, "Richard 'Bonfire' Bennett: The Legal Practice of a Prairie Corporate Lawyer, 1898-1913," in *Beyond the Law: Lawyers and Business in Canada, 1830-1930. Essays in the History of Canadian Law, Volume IV* ed. Carol Wilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pg. 325.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 330.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 331.

<sup>5</sup> Everett Bunnell, "The Great Alberta Legal Rift: Lougheed v. Bennett," in *Just Works: Lawyers in Alberta, 1907-2007* ed. Michael Payne (Toronto: Irwin Law Inc., 2007), pg. 30.