

Burton C. Matthews



He was president of two universities with a resume twelve pages long, but if you asked Burt Matthews what he did for a living, he'd tell you he "worked at the university."

Matthews was a respected soil scientist who made his way through the academic ranks to become president of both the Universities of Waterloo and Guelph. In addition to his many accomplishments, Matthews is often remembered as a kind man who treated everyone with respect.

"He treated people beautifully. It didn't matter who you were," a friend said after his death in 2004. "He had more people loyal to him than anybody I ever saw."

Matthews never forgot his humble beginnings as the eldest of three boys growing up in Kerwood, Ontario near London. Throughout his illustrious career he remembered that his first duty was the education of young people. "As faculty, our primary role is to help students learn," he said once. "If a professor wants to do only research, he should be in a research institution."

During his tenures at both Waterloo and Guelph, Matthews worked hard to make university education possible for all students who wanted it, regardless of their financial situation. "One of the reasons he wanted expansion at the University of Waterloo and the University of Guelph was to open education to Canadians from all walks of life."

Matthews himself attended the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph beginning at age 16. Technically too young to attend the school, Matthews was accepted after his local MP wrote him a letter of support.

He received his MSc. from the University of Missouri and a PhD in soil chemistry from Cornell University. He returned to the Ontario Agricultural College in 1952 where he taught before being appointed vice-president academic of the University of Guelph in 1966.

In 1970, he left Guelph to become the second president of the University of Waterloo, a post he held until 1981. According to a written history of the university, the "tall, good-looking" Matthews who "had a pleasant word for everybody" cut an impressive figure on campus.

"Matthews arrived at a time when student power unrest was at its height in North American universities, and when Waterloo was becoming just big enough to need written policies on everything from salary processes to the structure of its own governing bodies."

He left Waterloo in 1981 after being asked by then Premier Bill Davis to chair the Ontario Council on University Affairs. In 1983 he returned to academia as the president of the University of Guelph, retiring in 1988.

“As well as being skilled at listening and consulting, Burt Matthews was equally talented at guiding the decision-making process and laid the university’s administrative foundation for the next quarter-century.”

Burton Matthews, who was married and had two sons, received many awards during his lifetime, including honorary degrees from the Universities of Sherbrooke, Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier. In 1991, the University of Waterloo named its new faculty of applied health sciences in his honour.

“Burt touched many lives and shaped many minds. He was a quiet leader – a man who challenged us, brought out the best in everyone he met and pushed us to levels we would not have otherwise achieved.”

Photo courtesy of University of Waterloo Library; Marjorie Barber