

Wilder Graves Penfield

MD, OM, CC, FRS

1891-1976

Text by Kate Williams
and Wilder G. Penfield III



Physician and Humanist

"Brain surgery is a terrible profession. If I did not feel it will become very different in my lifetime, I should hate it." Wilder Penfield, in a letter to his mother, 1921.

Montreal's first neurosurgeon, who was described in his time as one of the greatest Canadians, was actually born at the edge of the American frontier in 1891 and moved to Quebec during the late 1920s. It was in 1929 that he purchased property in East Bolton on Sargent's Bay, Lake Memphremagog.

Growing up in Wisconsin, Wilder Penfield absorbed an early love for the outdoors from his estranged father, who died when he was 11. In 1904, his mother Jean Jefferson learned of the newly-established Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University and determined that her son should try for it. To qualify, Penfield had to be an all-round scholar athlete and he therefore prepared diligently, focusing especially on football and boxing, and attending Princeton University.

On his first train trip east, Penfield met and became friends with William Chester, another mid-westerner heading for Princeton. Decades later, Priscilla, Penfield's younger daughter, would marry William Chester Jr. Today Chester descendants are frequent residents of Austin, having shared the family property over many generations and in all seasons.



Penfield playing football at Princeton.

In June 1917, Penfield married Helen Kermott, with whom he had fallen in love when they were both in their mid-teens. She was a girl from his hometown of Hudson, Wisconsin, whose father and grandfather were both doctors. Their enduring marriage, which lasted until Penfield's death in 1976, was a partnership that served as a foundation for his success.

It was at Princeton that Penfield decided on a career in medicine, following his own father and grandfather, because, as he later said, "it seemed the most direct way to make the world a better place in which to live." Winning the Rhodes scholarship led him to Oxford; subsequent travels and training took him to Spain, Germany, New York and finally, in 1928, to Montreal. As his skills in neurosurgery were honed during many years of study and practice, he pursued his dream of a neurological institute, one that would bring together under one roof neurosurgeons, neurologists and other scientists dedicated to brain research, with world-class treatment for patients as the overarching goal. This he eventually achieved, with the help of colleagues and visionary donors from Quebec, other Canadian provinces and the U.S.A. In 1934 the Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) opened with Penfield as its first director. This was also the year in which he became

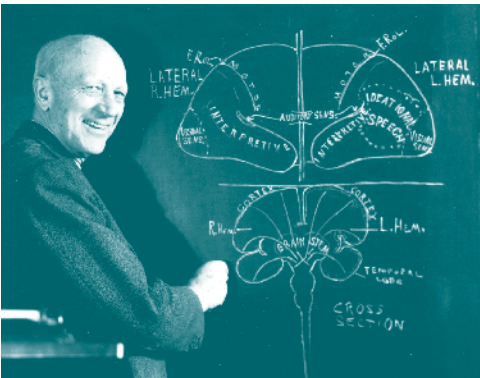


The newlyweds in Paris, as volunteers for the Red Cross.

a Canadian citizen. The first of its kind in the world, the MNI evolved into an outstanding centre for research, teaching and patient care, and attracted medical students, pure scientists and faculty from around the globe. Its international pre-eminence continues today.

In the 1950s, as the Institute expanded, Penfield focused on treating intractable epilepsy. While patients were fully conscious, though under local anesthesia, he opened their skulls and tried to pinpoint the source of their epilepsy, successfully removing it in many cases. The “Montreal Procedure,” as it became known, enabled Penfield and his colleagues to map different areas of the brain and to learn their related functions. Patients came to the MNI from far and wide, and honours and fame poured in. Schools were named after Penfield, and a major artery in Montreal became *avenue du Docteur-Penfield*. His work and his name have been referenced in novels, books and films.

In 1961, at the age of 70, Penfield retired from neurosurgery. He took up writing for a broader public and published two novels, two collections of essays (one devoted to the topic of second careers, the other on science, the arts and the spirit), and a semi-autobiographical history of the Institute, *No Man Alone*. With Helen he traveled to China, then a country rarely seen by Westerners. There he presented Mao Zedong with a film about another idealistic Montreal doctor, Norman Bethune, who is still revered for his work in that country. They also visited many other parts of the world, meeting with medical colleagues and distinguished figures such as the Dalai Lama and Jawaharlal Nehru.



“This is how I see it...”

In 1965, he became the first president of the Vanier Institute of the Family, which was under the sponsorship of governor general George Vanier and his wife. The Institute’s purpose was to study and encourage the family unit as a lynchpin of modern society and to stimulate public discussion of its influence. The Penfields’ own extended family, whose members gathered every summer on the Sargent’s Bay property they called “Magog Meadows”, was to him a source of pride, but also of bafflement as he struggled to understand the young people and to make sense of that turbulent era.

Toward the end of his life, Penfield’s interest in philosophical issues deepened as he grappled with ultimate questions relating to creative thought, judgement, language and behaviour, always seeking a scientific basis for the soul. Only a few months before his death, he tried to interpret the relationship of of mind to body and spirit by painting three images on a boulder located down the hill from his writing cabin. The Greek word for ‘spirit’, the Aesculapian torch, and a human brain with a question mark were linked by lines, which seemed to imply a connection. But then at the age of 84, on his last visit to Magog Meadows, he made his way back to the rock and severed the links with strokes of black paint, as if to answer his own question.



Mind, body, spirit—linked, or separate?

Wilder Penfield died on April 5, 1976, his wife Helen a year later; their ashes were buried on the family property. In his biography *Something Hidden*, grandson Jefferson Lewis wrote: “He was a scientist who was not afraid to make bold hypotheses...When his career in medicine came to an end, he used his fame as a weapon to fight on other fronts for what he believed in...Yet, despite the range of his many interests, he was not so much a Renaissance man as a Victorian activist: constantly in search of causes, impelled by the urge to intervene, the need to serve a greater good, the conviction that he had something to contribute.”



Sussex House, where Wilder and Helen made their home.

Early years in East Bolton (now Austin)

The tragic 1915 torpedoing of the passenger ferry SS *Sussex* by a German U-boat was to affect Penfield's life significantly, and eventually helped bring him to the Austin area.

He had interrupted his studies in Oxford to travel to war-torn France in order to work for the Red Cross, and was on the ferry when it was attacked in the English Channel. Injured, but one of the fortunate few who were rescued, he was transported back to England. There he convalesced at the home of Sir William Osler, who coincidentally had begun his career teaching at McGill University in Montreal and who went on to be considered one of the fathers of modern medicine. The Oslers' hospitality profoundly influenced the young man who never forgot the experience.

Years later Penfield was awarded financial compensation by the German government for the attack on the SS *Sussex*. With the unexpected windfall, he and Helen had the funds they needed to acquire a place in the country.

In March 1929, six months after their arrival in Montreal, Helen read an advertisement in the newspaper: "Manning Farm for sale on Sargent's Bay, Lake Memphremagog." That summer she and Wilder decided to spend time camping in the area. Toward the end of August they were taken for a ride in a friend's motor boat up into Sargent's Bay. Landing on one of the few sandy beaches, they learned that it was shared by two farms, one of them the Manning property mentioned in the advertisement, and both of them apparently in decline.

It was love at first sight, and within six months—thanks to the SS *Sussex* indemnity money—Wilder and Helen were the happy owners of two dilapidated farmhouses, a barn, a ramshackle summer cottage, and almost a square mile of acreage with wonderful views over hills, meadows and water.

For the first few years the Penfields tried to make a go of the farms, relying on the help of Erick Jackson, a local farmer. "With 60 sheep and 18 cows the farm will pay for itself," Wilder wrote optimistically to his mother, but this ambition proved unrealistic.

And so Magog Meadows became instead a much-needed retreat, a place where they could spend time outdoors, sailing, horseback riding, playing tennis—a magnet for family, friends and medical colleagues. The old milk-separator house was converted into a writing cabin where the doctor spent most mornings writing and reflecting before turning to more physical pursuits. Nearby he created a columned walkway, leading to a scaled-down version of the Greek *tholos* at Delphi, a place for thinking and solitude. The family still gathers there regularly.



Penfield's writing cabin.



The walkway and the tholos.



Penfield and crew sailing the Astrocyte on Lake Memphremagog.

With other Austin residents such as Eric and Gordon Fisher and Sydney Lyman, the Sargent's Bay Yacht Club (SBYC) was formed, and weekly races kept the local amateur sailors busy in competition. The club continues to flourish today.

Reminiscence

by Wendy Penfield, third generation.

"It was on their farm on Lake Memphremagog in the Eastern Townships that my grandparents planted most of the seeds that grew into family tradition. Each of the four Penfield children had a cottage on the property. My parents and brother and I spent our summers in the converted barn a short distance from the Big House.

When we were children our country kingdom had no limits. Fences were only for cows; the world was ours to explore. We were free, unfettered by schoolwork and time tables. Yet right next door lived a couple for whom an ordered universe was precious...We watched their strange, regulated life with curiosity... Routine was important to them both, even in the country, or perhaps especially there, where one day could otherwise drift dreamily into the next. Breakfast was at 8 a.m. sharp with the CBC news. Lunch was at 12:30, sometimes served from their wonderful picnic hamper on the beach. Dinner, at 7 p.m., was always a formal meal, even on Sunday, the maid's night off, when they'd have cornflakes and cream. On other nights there was sherry in the cut-glass decanter, candlelight, amber glass, salad served on the Greek pottery plates, sometimes apple pie with sour cream and brown sugar, demitasses of coffee by the fire."

Extract from "Penfield Remembered",
The Review, 1982

Dividing their time between city and country, the Penfield family, which by now included four children, would often take the train from Montreal to South Bolton, where in winter the farmer would collect them in a horsedrawn sleigh. In January 1934, Helen contracted pneumonia while at the farm, and for several weeks her life hung in the balance. With roads blocked by snow and temperatures plunging, it was impossible to move the patient. Doctors and nurses from Magog consulted with medical specialists from the Montreal General Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital. Wilder's colleague at the MNI, Dr. William Cone, chartered a plane and landed on the frozen lake. He struggled up through deep snowdrifts from Sargent's Bay, took blood samples from Helen, and rushed them back to the city by air. Eventually, after 19 days of fever and delirium, Helen's condition improved enough for her to be transported by covered 'bobsled' to the South Bolton train station. The Penfields never again stayed at Sussex House during the winter.

Beyond Medicine

The Second Career was the fourth book of Wilder's second career. In the title essay he argued strongly against mandatory retirement as a waste of human potential. Fellow author Farley Mowat quipped that the book had inspired him to dabble in brain surgery. But the goal of Wilder's second career was an amplification of his first—to be a persuader, to motivate people to do what was best for the world.

For Wilder, medicine was above politics. In 1939, informally representing Canada, he joined a team of five doctors from Britain and the U.S. on a mission to share medical discoveries and technology with the Soviet Union. During the long bureaucratic delays prior to the trip he took a crash course in Russian tutored by his daughter Ruthmary. Four years later—and even more controversial—was his decision to share expertise with China, then led by Chiang Kai-shek, and still at war with Japan.

Wilder believed the family to be the core element of human civilization and so he took very seriously his role as head-of-family and as President of the Vanier Institute.



The annual trip to the Granby Zoo with the grandchildren in 1956. The two authors of this text are standing next to Helen.

An early believer in the theory that the brains of children would be strengthened if they were brought up multilingually, he was unsure only whether they could keep the languages separated in their minds. Luckily he had some test subjects at hand. Two of his children spoke English to their parents, German to the German governess at home, and then at the ages of three and four, French at school. He described in *The Second Career* how in the nursery with the governess it

seemed to the children quite natural that the word for dog was 'hund.' At school it was 'chien' and when they were with their parents it was 'dog.' There was no confusion, no extra effort, no foreign accents. The change in environment was sufficient to change the way of expression.

For Wilder himself, acquiring new-language competence demanded much effort, yet never resulted in mastery. Still, he never gave up his dream, which was not of one universal language, but rather of an approach to universal understanding.

Wilder believed strongly in moral instruction. Mostly he trusted mothers to inculcate values in their children, but on summer Sundays at the farm he began selecting significant Bible passages and discussing with the family their meaning and relevance.

To this day, that tradition is carried on by Penfield descendants. While the Bible is no longer the principal springboard for discussion, greater inclusiveness, insight or empathy is always the goal. And the idealism that Wilder catalyzed is a big part of the family's cohesiveness.

Wilder and Helen Penfield Nature Reserve

In the early 1990s, members of the second generation of the Penfield family donated a large part of the two original farms to McGill University, thus establishing the Wilder and Helen Penfield Nature Reserve. Here, on Greene Bay, a research lab has been set up by the internationally renowned McGill Limnology Research Centre, which studies Quebec fresh-water lakes and rivers in collaboration with other Quebec universities.

The family also formed the Meadowlark Beach Association to act as stewards of the Nature Reserve and to collect membership dues for the maintenance of the roads, meadows and beaches shared by Wilder and Helen's descendants.



Helen et Wilder à Magog Meadows, dans les dernières années de leur vie

In Wilder Penfield's own words...

"For Helen and me, Magog Meadows was a sequence of purposeful dreams that did come true. It was of course the ever-changing adventure of a growing family on the shores of a Highland Lake. It helped to make us feel ourselves Canadians. It was meant, from the beginning, to be a home which would call you all back to join us as the years passed, generation after generation. And, as it turned out, it proved to be an important anchor that held us here even when Philadelphia and Cambridge and Oxford had just proposed exciting fresh professional challenges in other settings.

Strange fortune it was, that placed the Sussex indemnity money in our hands in September 1928 just as we came to Montreal...

I like to think that these Eastern Township hills can make no greater contribution to the nation's good than to produce families and clans that are sport-loving, rugged, strong and thoughtful. In the long view, it is only through successful family life that mankind can hope to succeed in his [sic] project, the evolution of a better society."

Wilder Penfield, in a letter to his daughter Ruthmary Penfield Lewis, December 3, 1975.



Meadowlark 85th anniversary

Penfield descendants and their families on Lake Memphremagog in July 2014. This week-long celebration marked the 85th anniversary of the purchase of the Austin property by Wilder and Helen Penfield. Such gatherings, called Meadowlarks, take place every five years. As of summer 2015, there are more than fifty direct descendants.



Main Sources

Communications Dept., Montreal Neurological Institute,
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Penfield family archives

Lewis, Jefferson, *Something Hidden, A Biography of Wilder Penfield*, published by Doubleday & Company (Toronto/New York, 1981)

Penfield, W. G., *No Man Alone, A Neurosurgeon's Life*, published by Little, Brown and Company (Boston, 1977)

Penfield, W. G., "The Neurophysiology of Speech and Some Educational Consequences" in *The Second Career*, published by Little, Brown, and Company (Boston/Toronto, 1963, pp. 121-122)

Penfield, Wendy, "Penfield Remembered," *The Review*, 1982, pp 26-27

Thanks

The Austin *Conseil local du patrimoine* wishes to thank Kate Williams and Wilder Graves Penfield III for the hours of time and effort they devoted to the text of this publication and the selection of archival photographs.

Thanks also to Sandra McPherson, Communications Director, MNI.

Thanks to the Municipality of Austin for its ongoing financial support for this series of historical brochures.

Text: Kate Williams, Wilder Graves Penfield III

Editorial Committee: Madeleine Saint-Pierre, Anne Wonham, Lisette Maillé

Photos: Montreal Neurological Institute; Family archives; Anne Wonham

ISBN 978-2-923381-19-0

Legal Deposit: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2015

Legal Deposit: Library and Archives Canada, 2015

Produced by the Austin *Conseil local du patrimoine*, September 2015
Available on line at www.municipalite.austin.qc.ca

Graphic design: Mathieu Godbout, dga, Comma Imagination

Printing: M. Leblanc, Imprimerie