

## **John Michael UHRICH (1877-1951)**

Did you know that Saskatchewan's ninth Lieutenant Governor was an Ontario-born German?



Dr. John Michael Uhrich in the official Windsor uniform of the Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan. A commissioned painting of this photograph was donated to the Saskatchewan Legislature by Dr. Uhrich's widow, Katherine. It hangs today on one of the walls of the Rotunda.

Photo credit: Saskatchewan Provincial Archives R-B4070

Saskatchewan introduced Canada's first universal and comprehensive health care program in 1962, but did you know this same Ontario-born German laid the foundation for this program already in the 1920s.

And did you know that when he died in 1951 in Regina, he was honored with a state funeral. The Regina Leader Post devoted the front page as well as three more, to tell the story of this remarkable German physician who devoted thirty selfless years of public service to Saskatchewan.

Thirty-nine files at the Saskatchewan Provincial Archives attest to the distinguished career of John Michael Uhrich as a teacher, doctor, politician, and as our ninth Lieutenant Governor. John M. Uhrich was born 07 June 1877 in Formosa, Bruce County, Ontario, not far from the shores of Lake Huron. He was the son of Ignace Uhrich, a shoemaker, and Caroline Brehler, both Germans and both Catholic. The Ignace Uhrich family appears in several Canadian censuses beginning in 1881. The family names on the census pages reveal that the Uhrichs lived in a predominantly German Catholic community.

According to information provided by Ignatz for the 1901 Census, he immigrated 1874 as a single man. He married Caroline Brehler 18 May 1875 in Bruce County, Ontario. The Brehlers lived at Midmay, a few kilometers from Formosa. Caroline's father, Ferdinand Brehler, is listed in the 1851 Census of Canada West (pre-Confederation), where he was enumerated as being single, Catholic, and born in Germany. He was born in Hesse, 15 December 1826. Census records also indicate that a second Uhrich family lived in Bruce County. Ignatz's older brother Charles, also a shoemaker, had immigrated to Canada in 1854, which explains what drew Ignatz Uhrich there in 1874.

Ignatz Uhrich was born 05 Jun 1846 in Soufflenheim, Bas Rhin, Alsace, France, only 3-4 kilometers west of the Rhine River. He was one of four brothers who fought as soldiers of the French Army during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, after which Alsace became a German territory. Likely his wartime experience prompted thoughts of emigration. He was not alone. Many Germans began immigrating to pre-Confederation Canada beginning in the 1850s.

Ignatz Uhrich and Caroline Brehler had at least 11 children between 1875 and 1901, according to entries of the relevant censuses of Bruce County. John Michael Uhrich was the second oldest. He went to school in nearby Walkerton. After graduation he became a school teacher and taught in Ontario for five years. In 1902 he enrolled in the study of medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago. To finance his studies, he worked as a school teacher in Saskatchewan's summer school program. In the fall, he would return to Chicago to resume his studies. Why Saskatchewan? John Michael's first cousin, Michael Joseph Uhrich (son of Charles), had already moved west to Winkler, Manitoba about 1901, and later further west. The 1916 Prairie Provinces Census records Michael Joseph as a grain buyer living in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. The pre-War Homestead Era (1905-1914) attracted many Ontarians to Saskatchewan. John Michael obviously developed an affinity for Saskatchewan during his summer breaks, because after graduation in 1907 as a Doctor of Medicine, he established his own medical practice at Hague, Saskatchewan in 1909. The 1916 Census lists John and his wife Katherine living in Hague, Saskatchewan with his occupation given as physician.



John Michael Uhrich, as a young man.  
Photo credit: Saskatchewan Provincial  
Archives R-B744

In 1910, John Michael Uhrich returned to Chicago where he married Katherine Tischart on 28 June. Katherine was born in 1880 in Carrick Township, Bruce County, Ontario. The 1916 Census records her as being German and Catholic. It is safe to assume John Michael and Katherine had known each other since their youth. The couple had no children. Katherine survived her husband, but no further information about Katherine was uncovered in the Uhrich files at Saskatchewan Provincial Archives.

Dr. Uhrich practiced rural family medicine in Hague for 13 years. The Archives contains his Patient Ledger from 1910 which reveal many familiar Mennonite surnames from Osler, Rosenfeld, Hepburn, Rosengart, Neuanlage, Petrofka, Blumentahal, Rheinfeld, Grunthal, Siebenfeld, etc. The majority of entries were for \$3.00 or \$5.00. As a country doctor there would have been many a night where he would have had to drive several miles with horse and buggy over muddy or frozen roads, regardless of the weather, to tend to an ailing patient. But to Dr. Uhrich, it was "all in a day's work", as he recalled in later life.

During those years in Hague, Dr. Uhrich obviously developed a reputation as a friendly, approachable, non-judgmental professional whom the people came to respect. He had proven his commitment to the community. Such was his reputation that in 1921 he was approached to run as the Liberal nomination in the Constituency of Rosthern. After much persuasion, he

accepted the nomination which he won by acclamation. He also won the election to the Legislature by acclamation. No one chose to oppose him! Dr. Uhrich went on to win every election in the Rosthern Constituency until he retired from political life in 1944.

The talents of John M. Uhrich were quickly recognized. He developed a reputation as an effortless, yet persuasive debater in the Legislature. He had a way of explaining his viewpoint without condemning, ridiculing, or criticizing any particular individual. On April 5, 1922, Dr. Uhrich was sworn in by the new Liberal Premier Charles Dunning as Provincial Secretary to the Cabinet, and in 1923 he was given the added responsibility as Minister in charge of the newly created Bureau of Public Health. He held this position for six years. Although Uhrich won re-election in 1929, the Liberals were defeated. Re-elected in 1934, this time with a majority of Liberals, Uhrich took over his former role as Minister of Health under Premier James Gardiner. Elected again in 1938, he took on the added responsibility of Minister of Public Works. Dr. Uhrich served as Minister of Health under three different Liberal Premiers, a testament to his abilities and to the trust and respect he garnered among his peers. In 1934 he was re-elected with a majority of 7,000 votes over the closest contender, setting a record for the largest majority ever received by a candidate in either a provincial or federal election in Saskatchewan.



Dr. J. M. Uhrich with the Right Honourable William Lyon Mackenzie King, tenth Prime Minister of Canada. About 1950. (cropped from original) Photo credit: Saskatchewan Provincial Archives R-A22156

Under his watch, the provincial government took on a greater role in the municipal hospital system. More hospitals were built across the province to accommodate the growing population. A proponent of preventative medicine, Uhrich began public inspection of municipal water systems and of the Saskatchewan dairy system. He instigated immunization programs for smallpox and diphtheria, and the government assumed the cost of tuberculosis treatment in Saskatchewan. A traveling Tuberculosis Clinic was established. As a result, Saskatchewan quickly had the lowest tuberculosis mortality rate in Canada. In 1934 Dr. Uhrich created a health services commission to work with municipalities to collect information on the comprehensive health care needs of the province. Saskatchewan also became a leader in the reporting, care, and control of cancer, creating a Cancer Registry already in 1932. In 1934, Dr. Uhrich re-introduced a Maternity Grant Program which paid mothers to have their babies in a hospital rather than at home, greatly reducing mortality of babies and

mothers at birth. Uhrich had particular concern for the province's poor and vulnerable populations. He made many trips into northern Saskatchewan to learn about the particular medical needs there. Many Archive photos show Dr. Uhrich in his role as Minister of Health, visiting northern communities around Cowan Lake, Green Lake, Ile a la Crosse, La Loche, and

La Plonge. Provincial programs to protect child welfare, to control venereal disease, and to promote public health education all began to grow under Dr. Uhrich's watch.

The Saskatchewan Provincial Archive files hold many of his speeches, not only in the Legislature, but at many gatherings around the province. Early in his political career, he made headlines in the March 18, 1924 edition of *The Star* (Regina). *Uhrich Passionately Defends Loyalty of Sask. Foreign Born*. In a rather lengthy address, described in the article as "perhaps the most eloquent that has been heard in the legislature for a long time", Dr. J. M. Uhrich delivered a "passionate appeal for solidarity of citizenship in Canada". He was responding to an "unwarranted and unfortunate suggestion" made at the convention of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association that "non-Anglo-Saxons, if put to the test, would not prove loyal" (i.e. loyal to Canada).

Again, in the same newspaper dated December 11, 1925: *Outstanding Speech by Dr. Uhrich on Canadian Citizenship*. In a vigorous one-hour address to the Legislature, he railed against the increasing use of the term "New Canadian" in political debate. "Canada is the land where hate should die. No feuds of faith, no spleen of race, no darkly brooding fear should find a place beneath our flag....Every Canadian citizen, however dear to him may be his own faith, serves his country well when he respects beliefs that are not his."

The Saskatchewan Provincial Archives holds copies of his official addresses, like the *Address by Provincial Secretary J M Uhrich presented to His Excellency Baron Tweedsmuir, Governor-General of Canada, on the occasion of his first visit to Regina, August 10, 1936*. And the *Address presented to His Majesty King George VI by the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan on behalf of the people of Saskatchewan, on the occasion of the visit to Regina of Their Majesties, the King and Queen, May 25, 1939*. It is clear that Dr. Uhrich understood the significance of such historical events, and his simple, un-adorned and respectful approach to his duties shone through in his writing.

Later political observers would remark that John Michael Uhrich was perhaps at his best as an orator and debater during his years in the government's Official Opposition (1929-1934). During this period, he served as the Opposition's official critic of the government's health policies. Although Dr. Uhrich was a political person, he always felt that public health care should not be a political issue. His commitment to providing wide medical care to all of the residents of Saskatchewan was never political for him. It was simply the right thing to do.

Sports featured prominently in his life. John Michael had been an active athlete in his younger student years, enjoying competitive successes in tennis, golf, soccer, football (halfback) and baseball (second base). In later life he enjoyed watching most team sports like hockey, football, and baseball games when he was able to attend. He also proved to be an enthusiastic fisherman whenever he had the opportunity. But sports were not his only interest. An avid reader all of his life, he took a deep interest in world affairs, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the arts as well. His open and friendly approach to life made him friends wherever he went

in Saskatchewan. The quiet efficiency with which he dispatched his many duties won him the respect of all members of the Legislature.

He served as patron of the Saskatchewan Boy Scouts for a number of years, and always showed an interested in their activities. He had a keen interest in young people and was always ready to help. He had an intelligent and active mind, but his first interest was always in people.

John M Uhrich was the second Roman Catholic to hold the office of Lieutenant-Governor in Saskatchewan, and in 1928, Pope Pius XI made him a Knight of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of St. Gregory the Great for his contributions to the Catholic Church, and for his dedication to medicine and a life of public service. Dr. Uhrich was a member of the Knights of Columbus, Humboldt council, and a fourth degree charter member of the Knights of Columbus of Regina.

His work as Minister of Public Health won him acclaim by the Canadian Public Health Association, which awarded him a lifetime membership in 1940. Dr. Uhrich had previously served one year as President of this association highlighting his commitment to public health. The Canadian Public Health Journal of August 1940 published an extensive report on the accomplishments of Dr. Uhrich and Saskatchewan's Ministry of Health. However, his own deteriorating health forced him to withdraw from political life in 1944. Although he himself was a doctor, he had been a pipe-smoker most of his adult life. But he gave it up and spent most of his time in retired life reading, at the same time pursuing his interests in the arts, theatre, music and literature. His contributions to Saskatchewan were widely respected, as evidenced by the fact that on March 23, 1948 the CCF Premier Tommy Douglas appointed Dr. Uhrich as Saskatchewan's ninth Lieutenant-Governor, a position he held until his death 1n 1951.

Although the appointment as Lieutenant-Governor came from the Premier, a reluctant Dr. Uhrich accepted only after the personal exhortation of Canada's Prime Minister Mackenzie King. The swearing-in ceremony was a quiet and unpretentious affair in the home of Chief Justice W. M. Martin. John Michael Uhrich was not a flamboyant or colorful public figure. His political career reflected rather a quiet dignity, a simple modesty and a spirit of friendliness and public service.

His last noteworthy speech was likely the one delivered on May 31 before his death, when he addressed the graduates of Notre Dame College at a private dinner presided over by Father Athol Murray. This was an annual affair which he never missed. He



Dr. Uhrich second from left, being sworn in as Saskatchewan's ninth Lieutenant-Governor by Chief Justice W. M. Martin, and Premier TC (Tommy) Douglas third from the right.

Photo Credit: Saskatchewan Provincial Archives R-B5292

talked to the graduates about “the need to live in faith, and decency and good fellowship, the sacredness of family life and family prayer, acceptance of obligations as well as rights,.....honesty, hard work and courage.” These were in fact the foundation of his own philosophy of life. Only five days previous, he had addressed the national convention of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire in Saskatoon.

Dr. Uhrich’s last official appearance occurred only a few days before his death, when he took the salute at the solemn Decoration Ceremony in Victoria Park in Regina. Lt.-Gov. J. M. Uhrich, 74 years old, died of coronary thrombosis at noon, Friday, June 15, 1951 in a Regina hospital.

Upon news of his death, accolades about the life of Dr. Uhrich poured in, all reported in the Regina Leader-Post. Walter Tucker, leader of the Saskatchewan Liberal Party, was quoted as saying: “Dr. Uhrich had been one of the most outstanding Ministers of Health in the history of Canada.” C.M. Fines, Saskatchewan’s Finance Minister at the time, had this to say: “His work as Minister of Health was outstanding. As the representative of his Majesty the King, His Honor filled the position with distinction.” The most glowing tribute came from Premier T.C. (Tommy) Douglas: “The memory of Lt.-Gov. J. M. Uhrich will be an inspiration to remind all that the greatest satisfaction in life comes from service to one’s fellow man.” In his service as Minister of Public Health under three different premiers, “he brought to this office his great capabilities as a doctor, a clear vision of the health needs of Saskatchewan and outstanding ability as an eloquent public speaker.” And further: “The service which he rendered as Minister of Health over a long period of years has left an indelible mark upon the public life of Saskatchewan.: Douglas went on to comment that as Lieutenant-Governor, Dr. Uhrich showed “his unfailing kindness to me and his ready co-operation on the affairs of state”. This is high praise coming from a politician who himself has often been referred to as the father of Medicare.

The story of Dr. Uhrich’s death was carried by Saskatchewan newspapers, but also by the national Globe and Mail, and by regional Ontario newspapers like the Owen Sound Sun-Times. A State Funeral honored the life of this highly accomplished German man who devoted his adult life to the service of Saskatchewan’s people. The service “For the Laying to Rest of The Honourable John Michael Uhrich, Ph.C., M.D., Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan” was held at the Holy Rosary Cathedral in Regina on Tuesday, June 19, 1951 at 10:00 am, with the Roman Catholic Archbishop Michael Cornelius O’Neill presiding.

Only one of the Uhrich files at Saskatchewan Provincial Archives hinted at the interest of the German community in the work of Dr. J. M. Uhrich. Curiously it was only a newspaper headline, clipped and pasted onto a plain white sheet of paper, without a reference to the date or to the name of the newspaper. The headline reads: *Dr. Uhrich für die lutherischen und mennonitischen Russlandflüchtlinge*. The sub-heading reads: *In glänzender Legislatur-Rede vertritt er den Grundsatz gegenseitiger Achtung zwischen Protestanten und Katholiken und*

*hebt er die Verdienste der Französisch-Canadier hervor.*<sup>1</sup> A reasonable guess would be that the newspaper in question was *Der Bote*, published in Winnipeg, but based in Rosthern, about 1930. There is no accompanying text; presumably it was contained elsewhere in the newspaper, but its inclusion in the SPA files does indicate the local German community (i.e. Rosthern) did follow their former family doctor as a public persona. The headlines indicate Dr. Uhrich's passionate defense of Canadian acceptance of newcomers.

The story of Dr. John Michael Uhrich is one of remarkable leadership and outstanding innovation in the field of public health. He was a trailblazer in this regard, laying the foundation for today's universal national medical insurance program, known as Medicare. He played an outstanding role in the development of Saskatchewan. He is a shining example of a German man who made a difference in Saskatchewan and in Canada.

Sources: Regina newspaper clippings preserved in the Uhrich files at the Saskatchewan Provincial Archives. Canadian Census records.

Afterword:

The Archive files offer no evidence that John Michael Uhrich belonged to any German clubs or associations. There are no copies of letters he many have written to the editors of German newspapers at the time. There is no evidence that he ever offered public comments on the harsh restrictions imposed on German Canadians during WWI, or on the immigration restrictions of Germans after the war. I do not know if he retained his German language. I was puzzled by these observations until I reflected on the fact that Uhrich entered public life in 1921, hardly a time for a politician to be promoting his German heritage.

Mervin (Merv) Weiss. (Thank you to Kurt Tischler for alerting me to the story of the very accomplished Dr. J. M. Uhrich.)

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: Dr. Uhrich for the Lutheran and Mennonite refugees from Russia... In brilliant speech in the Legislature, he advocates for the principle of mutual respect between Protestants and Catholics, and he emphasizes the merits of French Canadians.