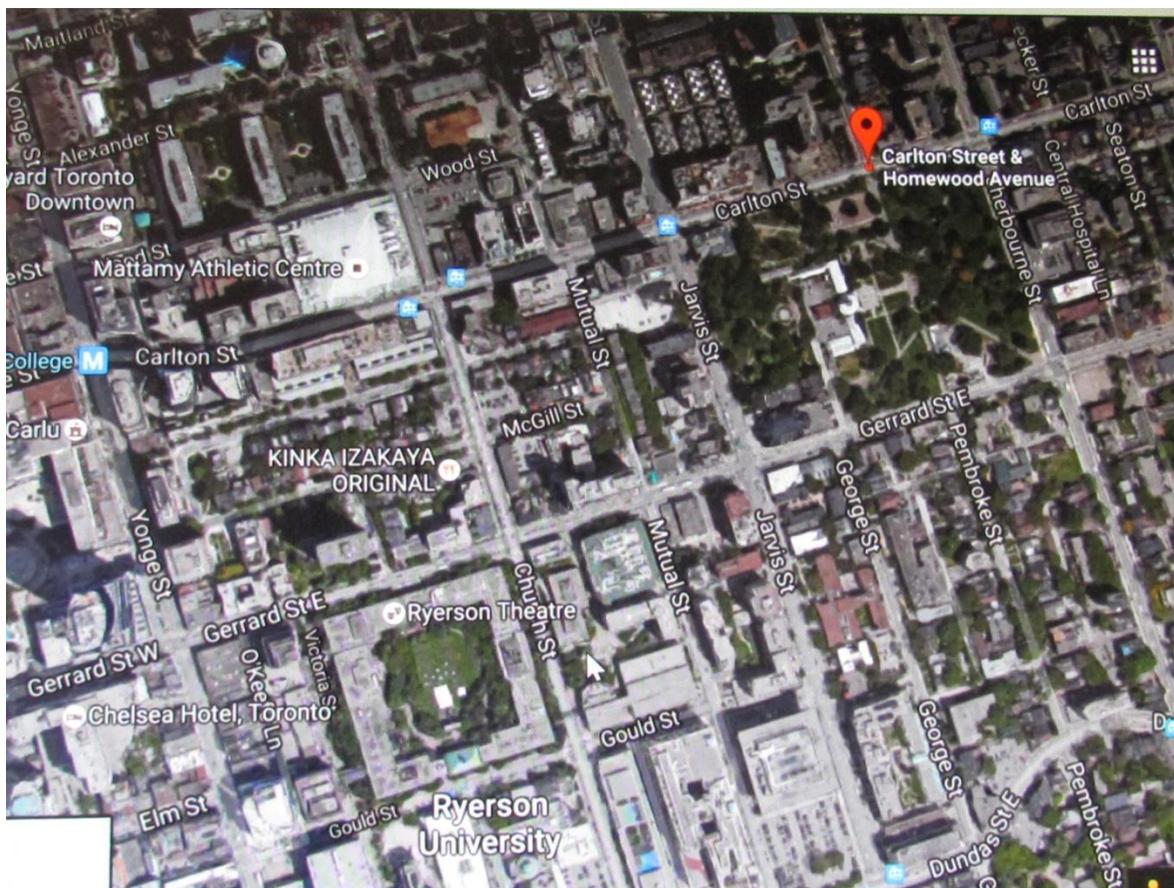


## Big Tom's Tragic Legacy by Ernie Bies August 1, 2016



Big Tom had just led the Tau Epsilon Nu fraternity team to victory in a beer drinking contest. A big jovial fellow, Tom stood more than six feet tall and tipped the scales at over 300 pounds. He was not a heavy drinker but had a capacity to consume a lot and still function. Waving off the protests of the fraternity members, he said he needed some fresh air and staggered out into the January night. One of the frat brothers kept an eye on him as he made his way down the street knowing that they had relieved him of his keys. Somehow, Tom found his car and his spare key. Before anyone could stop him he took off at high speed southbound on Homewood Ave., miraculously crossing Carlton St. unscathed. He drove into Allan Gardens, a downtown botanical park, and continued in a straight line along the pedestrian walkway approaching Gerrard St. E. without turning or slowing down. Big Tom had probably lost consciousness so he did not see the eastbound car that struck him and pushed him into the path of a westbound car. It took hours and several firemen to extricate his lifeless body from the mangled wreckage of his Vauxhall. He was just a few blocks from Ryerson.

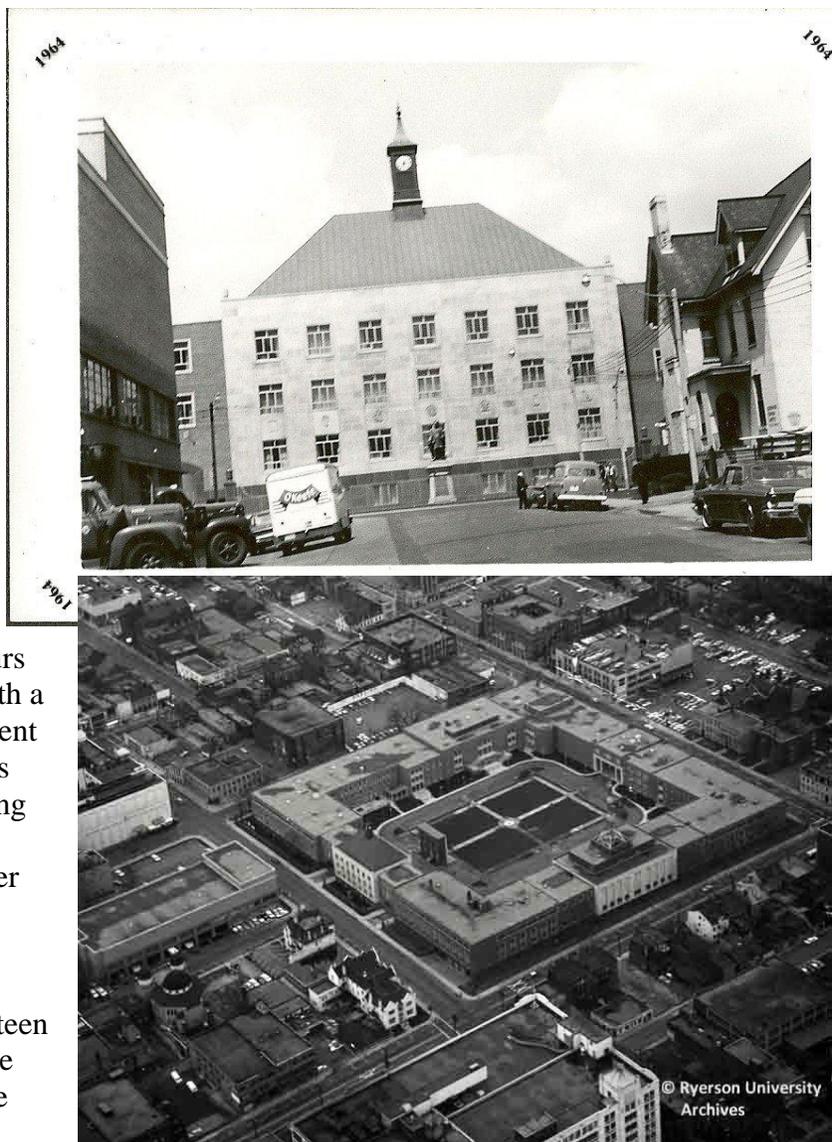


The subsequent autopsy revealed that he had a blood alcohol content of 20 parts per thousand which was more than 2.5 times the current impairment limit. A person in this condition would have difficulty walking and if he fell, would feel no pain even if he injured himself. He would be

dazed, confused and disoriented with little comprehension of where he was or what he was doing. He would be prone to passing out suddenly and then would have difficulty waking up.

To comprehend the inevitability of this tragedy, one must understand the beer culture of the 1960s and the party atmosphere it generated.

Young college men, many away from home for the first time, were experiencing new found freedom in the big city and needed little encouragement to party all night. Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, located on Gould Street in downtown Toronto, was directly across the street from the O'Keefe Brewery and bottling works. This plant, and its predecessors, had stood for more than one hundred years at this location. It was common practice for students to take tours of the brewery which ended with a free sample in the lounge. Student residences and fraternity houses were equipped with beer vending machines supplied by the breweries. Full page ads for beer could be found in campus newspapers and breweries sponsored floats in college parades. This was the era of fifteen cent draft, drinking contests like chugalug and boat races, Purple Jesus and Toga parties.



There were more than 400 brewery and distillery salesmen in the province and they competed for sales by sponsoring countless sports teams, events and almost any excuse for a party.

Professional athletes were hired as representatives in the summer to tour small town bars buying rounds and providing free samples.

There were five fraternal organizations at Ryerson in the 1960s: Rho Alpha Kappa, Tau Epsilon Nu (the Jock frat), Delta Sigma Phi, Gamma Epsilon Tau and Theta Kappa Chi. While the movie *Animal House* may have been an exaggeration of the party atmosphere at frat houses it was not too far from the mark. A beer salesman had approached one of the fraternities in December of

1964 to promote his product. A Sports Night and Dance was proposed for Friday, January 22, 1965. This was just a cover for the real event, an endurance beer drinking contest. Rho Alpha Kappa, Tau Epsilon Nu and Delta Sigma Phi took up the challenge with eighteen contestants representing their houses and trying to win the beer barrel shaped trophy that was supplied by the brewery.

Big Tom led the Tau team to victory downing a couple of dozen brews in the process, and was still mobile after the seven hour contest, though he was feeling no pain. In the early hours of Saturday, January 23, 1965, he just wanted to go home.

His boyhood friend, Art Brown, remembers Tom Dasovich as a gentle giant with a competitive



nature. Although not a drinker himself Tom worked as a server at the Algoden Hotel in Elliot Lake and had little trouble keeping rowdy customers in line. Born in 1939 to Thomas Sr. and Barbara he was very proud of his Croatian heritage. His father worked underground in the mines and Tom, his brother Ivan and sister Joanne lived in Virginiatown, Kearns, Kirkland Lake, Sault Ste. Marie and finally Elliot Lake. Tom was enrolled in Journalism at Ryerson



Polytechnical Institute and wanted to be a sportswriter on graduation in the spring of 1965. He excelled in many sports but football was his favorite. Playing for the Ryerson Rams until the team folded in 1964, he was good enough to be scouted and signed to a tryout with the Hamilton Tiger Cats of the Canadian Football League. All of his dreams lay ahead until that tragic night in January 1965.

There were many ramifications of his death. Ryerson immediately distanced itself from the fraternities. Fifty years later they still aren't officially recognized by the University and are not permitted to advertise on campus although the reasons given today are because of their exclusive membership policies and sexist nature. The salesman who sponsored the beer drinking contest was fired immediately for participating in activities contrary to company policy. His immediate boss, the district sales manager, was suspended and asked to resign because he was expected to be more familiar with the salesman's activities. The company was fined \$2,000 for conducting an advertising campaign without approval of the Provincial Liquor Control Board. An inquest held on February 23, 1965 did not name the company and absolved the two other drivers involved in the accident of any blame but came down hard on the side of stricter control of alcohol sales on campuses. The coroner's jury recommended that brewery and distillery salesmen be prohibited from canvassing and promoting sales of alcoholic beverages at any educational institution or student residence. They also banned beer vending machines from student residences. The beer company tightened up its requirements for future promotional events.

O'Keefe's shut down their downtown plant in 1966 and sold the buildings and land to Ryerson for \$3.5 million. The old bottling plant was renovated and is now the home of the Ryerson School of Image Arts. The mansion of founder Eugene O'Keefe, which stands on the corner of Gould St. and Bond, is now a student residence and is named O'Keefe House.

In the fall of 1965 the fraternities did some significant image mending by revamping their inter-fraternity council and focussing more on public service than partying. A new constitution was drafted to deal with any fraternity that might get out of line following the difficulties of the previous winter. More than 150 canvassers were provided to raise money for the Heart Fund and a fund raising raffle was held for the United Way campaign

The story of Tau Epsilon Nu (T.E.N.) and its connection to Ryerson did not end with the 1965



tragedy. The brothers kept in touch over the years and about ten years ago one of them remembered that they had started a building fund in the early 1960s with a \$5,000 deposit at a local financial institution. They discovered it had now grown to \$30,000 and decided to bequeath it to Ryerson. In honour of the ten founding members of Tau back in 1954 they used the original \$5,000 to sponsor ten seats at the Mattamy Athletic Centre, Ryerson's sports facility which is housed in the old Maple Leaf Gardens. The remainder was used to sponsor a study room on the seventh floor

of the Student Learning Centre at Gould St. and Yonge, a few doors from the site of the old Steele's Tavern, a favourite watering hole for Ryerson students over the years.

Big Tom's tragic death had some long lasting positive effects on student life at Ryerson and other institutions of higher learning although few people will know the history. The new rules for drinking on campus probably saved many lives since then.

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