A fearless Thomson paper
Backs away from debate
by Jock Ferguson

Pembroke is a small lumber town in the upper Ottawa Valley which, like many similar towns and cities in Canada, is blessed with a Thomson newspaper. The Pembroke Observer has a local boy for its publisher and editor, W.H. Higginson. In conjunction with Pembroke’s newly elected mayor, Henry Brown, Higginson has decided not to do anymore reporting on one of the biggest stories ever to hit the town’s 16,000 people.

For the last nine months the Observer has carried charges and counter-charges in a dispute between the Pembroke Medical Society and one doctor - Norman Sutherland. The two hospitals in town have laid charges of medical mismanagement against Dr. Sutherland, saying he had overstepped his limits in the care of some of his patients.

Last Spring in the first round of charges, the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons suspended Dr. Sutherland from practice for three months. This led to a group supporting Dr. Sutherland forming "Action For Improved Medical Services" to try to get better health care in Pembroke. They said they wanted the patient to come first in medical priorities rather than the needs of the physicians, as they claim is the case. The medical reform group also suspects that the medical establishment is trying to run Dr. Sutherland out of town because in less than four years in Pembroke he has established the area's largest medical practice.

The performance of the Observer in the dispute has been suspect although it appeared at the outset that it was trying to do an honest job. Like most Thomson newspapers, the Observer is little more than a Chamber of Commerce boosterism sheet more concerned with its bank balance than journalism that unravels the complexities of local politics and business activities. During the early part of the dispute publisher Higginson refused to carry a rebuttal by Dr. Sutherland to charges made by one Pembroke hospital which the paper carried in full. Higginson said Dr. Sutherland's reply was libelous. In response the doctor had a flyer printed and distributed. No libel suit was issued and the impact of the flyer was immense. A petition was signed by over 4,000 people indicating their support for Dr. Sutherland.

Later the Observer carried a banner headline indicating that a report by the College of Physicians and Surgeons said that medical care in Pembroke was good. Higginson had been shown the front page of the report which began politely but then proceeded to castigate the medical establishment for the quality of health care they were delivering. Higginson had been used by the hospitals
to create a false impression of the report and then three days later, when the full text came and its real evaluation became common knowledge, Pembroke residents became incensed.

After that, the Observer became more clearly the voice of the Pembroke Medical Society and provided it with ready access to its pages while giving the citizens' protest group much less prominent play. The final stage in the Observer's handling of the controversy came January 31 when Higginson issued his paper's policy of not touching the story again. In a policy statement in the Observer he said, "Everyone concerned has been using the news media to carry on a personal vendetta and I'm convinced that nothing is to be gained by continuing to carry the story. This dispute has been going on for several months and as of this moment nothing new can be reported." He went on to say, "the battle has produced only one accomplishment, to degrade this community in the eyes of thousands of Canadians. Until both sides have something concrete to announce this paper will no longer publish charges and counter-charges."