

Startled graduate 25 years after dropping out, he finds he has degree

By Pat Crone
of The Free Press

When Sylvester O'Hara dropped out of the University of Western Ontario 25 years ago, he was two credits short of a degree.

Seven years ago he became eligible for it, anyway.

But it wasn't until Tuesday that, with a tear in his eye, he finally picked it up.

O'Hara, now 48, attended Western in the 1950s and had completed three years toward his honors business degree when

he had to quit for financial reasons. At that time, requirements for a general arts degree were more structured, making him ineligible for any degree.

But in 1971, the university senate changed the arts degree requirements and O'Hara became eligible for his degree.

Last summer, after meeting with some of his former classmates, he decided he wanted to graduate and contacted the university to find out what courses he would have to take to complete his degree. He found to his surprise that he had already earned it.

"When I found out I couldn't speak for half an hour afterwards," he said.

Wiping away a tear, O'Hara said that with his present job as chief of investigations for Revenue Canada in Toronto, he shouldn't be showing emotion, "but I'm so honored."

After leaving school he became a chartered accountant. He lived in Toronto, Winnipeg, Ottawa and Victoria before returning to Toronto.

O'Hara was a halfback on the university football team, the Mustangs, from 1950 to 1953.

When he left school he had 20 credits but he needed a geography and history course for his arts degree. "I just didn't have enough money even for two credits," he said.

When he first contacted Western, he said he was very apologetic about being so late in asking about the needed courses. "I didn't even know if they would still have my records."

Then a woman asked him if he would like to graduate in October or in the centennial year and "I just couldn't believe it."

An official in the registrar's office said the changes made by the senate in 1971 make it easier for a student to get a degree. Before, there were certain courses that had to be taken to obtain one.

In O'Hara's case, he had too many professional courses in business to receive his degree in 1953. The changes allowed him to credit those courses toward the degree.