



**FROM GRAMMAR SCHOOL TO COLLEGIATE INSTITUTE
THE CONTINUING JOURNEY OF THE WISE OLD OWL AND ITS
CONNECTION TO SEVERAL SCHOOL BUILDINGS**

H. David Vuckson

The origins of Collingwood Collegiate Institute (C.C.I.) go back to 1857 with the opening of Collingwood's "Grammar School", a term borrowed from England and used to define privileged secondary education as distinct from elementary schools. Classes were held wherever accommodation could be found: in rooms in various hotels, in homes, and on the second floor of a building on the Northern Railway Station grounds that also served as the Fire Hall, the Town Hall, and the Loyal Orange Lodge Hall, hence the old joke: **Q:** "Why did the boy take a long ladder to school? **A:** "Because he wanted to go to *high school*".

The first purpose-built high school building was a brick structure with a north-south footprint facing onto Hume St. at the corner of the northern section of Ste. Marie St. Erected in 1874, its landmark Victorian era tower and front entrance faced directly up the southern section of Ste. Marie St. Over the main

entrance was a masonry plaque in a semi-circular shape like a geometry protractor with the words "COLLINGWOOD HIGH SCHOOL 1874" below which was the school motto in Latin, "*SAPERE AUDE*" (Dare To Be Wise) just above the school symbol of The Wise Old Owl. The history book *Reflections* has a photo of the entrance and plaque on pg. 273. The opening lines of the C.C.I. School Song: "*In days of yore, ere Noah built the ark; someone left some bricks near the old Town Park...*" refer not to Central Park two blocks away, but to Leach's Park which was on the corner of Hume and Hurontario Street, an area that in later years was part of the "Boys" school yard.

William Williams was Head Master/Principal from 1873 to 1901 and Modern Language Master, the term Headmaster being abolished in 1893. It was Williams and Dr. A. R. Stephen who chose the Latin motto for the school in 1873 and under Williams' leadership the school achieved renown for the excellence of its teaching staff and the scholastic achievements of its students many of whom, after graduation, went on to successful careers. [*"Last verse of all to our graduates we sing, they're all chock-full of wisdom and they know most everything..."*] Students came from all over Ontario and even from other provinces to pay for the privilege of being educated at C.C.I. in Languages, Classics, Mathematics, Science, Commercial and Drawing. In 1886 the *Collegiate Institute Times* reported that "*...Collingwood stands first in the Province. We*

are happy to be in a position to present such a flattering report to our students and friends...Careful teaching and energetic work, combined with a good system are the great factors of success in our school. Read the record of past years and the report for this year and judge for yourselves. For the last nine years this gives a grand total of Six Hundred and Ninety-Five, or an average of seventy-seven yearly, teachers who have passed from Collingwood Institute, and who are now holding prominent positions. This does not include the University matriculants. We know of no other school that can show as favorable a record." At the time of this report, student fees were \$3.25 from September to January, and \$5.25 from January to July. Fees varied throughout the years until they were abolished effective January 1, 1916.

In 1879 the Collingwood High School achieved the higher status of a "Collegiate Institute", the first school in Simcoe County to be so designated, signifying the enrolment of sixty or more classical students and a minimum of four teachers. That year an addition to the rear of the original 1874 building enabled more students to be accommodated. In 1895 local architect Fred T. Hodgson was commissioned by the town's School Board to design a brick gymnasium which was constructed as a separate building behind the main building in an east-west direction and connected to it with an enclosed, unimpressive-looking wooden corridor which faced out onto the northern

part of Ste. Marie St.; nevertheless, this connecting structure must have been a blessing during a snow storm. The school colours of Black & Gold, or Black and Yellow (both terms have been used) were chosen during the first few years of the 20th Century. Many decades ago, a teacher (who shall remain nameless) at C.C.I. who was a heavy smoker was said by one student to have “patriotic teeth” because his teeth were black and yellow, the school colours.

We now fast forward to December 21, 1923: after nearly fifty years, the school building was tired and showing its age and was crowded with 300 students. That day some of the students were having a rehearsal for the annual Commencement Exercises in the Grand Opera House when some frantic activity broke out at the Ste. Marie St. Fire Hall behind the Opera House (the fire bell was in a tower directly adjacent to the Opera House’s north wall). While The Glee Club was singing a parody of a popular song of the time in which they hoped that someone would set a match to the decrepit old school, one of their schoolmates rushed in to say that the Collegiate actually was on fire at that very moment. There was once a theory that a bird may have carried a lighted cigarette butt into the tower; whatever the cause, when the students rushed from the Opera House to the school they saw flames coming from the tower, the middle of the main building and also from the gymnasium. While the main building was totally gutted with just the brick

walls left standing, the gymnasium building appears to have fared somewhat better because photos show it still standing in 1925 when William Williams laid the corner stone for the new C.C.I. The gymnasium may have been used to store construction materials during the building process until it had to make way for the new school. [Similarly, the Balcarris mansion was still standing for a time while the new C.C.I. at Cameron St. was in the early stage of construction in the early 1950's.]

When classes resumed in January 1924, students gathered in rented facilities on the two upper floors of the C. Stephens Building directly south of the Town Hall and although they were without their Hume St. gymnasium, they still got plenty of cardio-vascular exercise climbing stairs in this building. That summer a young teacher in her mid-20's named Marian Leslie Clark (b. January 20, 1899) stepped off the train to begin a 40 year teaching career at C.C.I. which also included a short stint as Acting Principal from March to June 1944 when the incumbent had to resign due to ill health. Late of Sarnia Collegiate Institute and Technical School ("S.C.I.T.S.") during the 1923-24 schoolyear and a graduate of University College at the University of Toronto with an M.A. in Physics, she eventually became affectionately known as "Ma Clark" although it was not wise to address her that way. The 1921 U of T Yearbook said of her, "*...If ambition, a decided will of her own, and four years*

spent in the pursuit of physics have aught to do with success, Marian's future is assured". In the 1925-26 schoolyear at C.C.I. she was designated "Mathematics Master". She was still teaching Math at C.C.I. on Cameron St. in my time there in the early 1960's. Teacher John Freudeman came to C.C.I. at that time and years later recounted "the abject awe and fear that surrounded Ma Clark—this extended not only to the students but also the staff". Miss Clark reached retirement age in 1964 and when a special assembly was held to honour her retirement, the guest speaker was Lachlan McAllister who had been a student in her very first class in those rented rooms downtown in September 1924.

The contract for building the new C.C.I. was awarded to the firm of G. H. Thomas & Son from Galt, Ontario. The final cost including furnishing the building: \$140,000.00. The new school opened on January 6th 1926 with 11 teachers and 700 students and, very fittingly, the masonry plaque from above the entrance to the old school had been salvaged and was placed in a proud position high on the Hume St. façade of the new school, almost at roof level, with the Wise Old Owl facing south as it had done on the old building but perched much higher this time. There were two opening ceremonies that January day. In the afternoon the Formal Opening and Address by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario was followed by the "Presentation and Unfurling of the Flag" (British Union Jack) by

Mrs. Donald McKay (Sr.), Regent of the Admiral Collingwood Chapter of the I.O.D.E. (Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire). At the evening ceremony my grandmother's younger sister Miss Vetta O'Brien, Regent of the Major E. L. Knight Chapter of the I.O.D.E., presented pictures of the then-reigning British Monarchs King George V and Queen Mary. [Thirty years later I was present when Aunt Vetta presented a new Union Jack flag to Victoria Public School on Maple St. on behalf of the I.O. D.E.] Both 1926 opening ceremonies at C.C.I. ended with the proclamation, "God Save The King".

Collingwood now had a collegiate building that was the last word in school design for its day. The coal bunkers were strategically placed underneath the large front porch at the Hume St. main entrance on the semi-circular driveway—a great convenience for frequent coal deliveries with a coal chute on either side of the front steps. Countless class photos were taken on that front porch and its steps over three quarters of a century. Just inside that main entrance there was a mosaic on the floor with the letters C-C-I in green on a white background. Facilities included student lockers, electric bells to signal the beginning and end of classes, electric ventilation devices at the window wall in each classroom, and on the north side of the building an auditorium on the second floor with wooden theatre seats on a sloping floor, a stage with footlights and a projection booth at the back of the room. It had four enormous

windows to let in the natural light; the windows also had heavy green drapes that could be closed when required. Between the stage and the first row of theatre seats there was a large level expanse of gleaming hardwood floor where the school orchestra could practice and perform.

Underneath the auditorium extending all the way to the basement/ground level was a gymnasium with adjacent change rooms and showers. It had five enormous windows to let in the natural light. A narrow balcony with two entrances off the main floor corridor on the south wall of the gym was handy for watching basketball games. The gym had a dark wooden floor with the lines for basketball painted on it. In 1960-61 when I was in Grade 8 when it was Senior Public School, the gym floor was now cement, painted battleship grey, with cracks and ridges, and with the lines for basketball painted on the cement. I mentioned this at home and my mother who had entered C.C.I. when it was brand new in 1926 was incredulous. She said in her day it was a wooden floor (this is confirmed by old photos taken as late as 1957) so on parents' night my mom looked into the gym for herself, saw the cement floor and asked Miss Mildred Cole, the art teacher, what became of the wooden floor. The answer was that the 1925 floor had rotted out, perhaps from a high water table in the ground, and it was simply replaced with long lasting cement. I suspect this was done for economic reasons: money was tight and pouring

cement is cheaper than laying and maintaining a hardwood floor but it is not ideal for sports activities.

[The new C.C.I. on Cameron St. was not without its gym floor troubles either. Exams were written in the gym, requiring the moving of a multitude of desks from classrooms to the gym. Greg Titus told us that someone forgot to have the students wear their running shoes when writing those exams and that the shuffling of hundreds of pairs of street shoes resulted in the gym floor finish being damaged and in need of refinishing, an expense the local School Board had not expected to have to deal with so soon.]

During the Hume St. Collegiate years, Track & Field sporting events were, of necessity, held at Exhibition (now Central) Park where there was a track, since the Hume St. building did not have space for a sports field and a track although there was room to play baseball in the yards to the east and west of the school and preferably as far away from the windows as possible. Sometimes an energetic batter would hit the ball with enough force to drive it onto the school roof and some lucky student got to go up the small stairway opposite the entrance doors of the auditorium that led to the projection booth and to the (flat) roof to retrieve the ball.

As the decades rolled by, the 1925 Hume St. Collegiate was getting short of space, especially by the early 1950's when the

school board's boundaries were widely extended to other communities in Nottawasaga and Sunnidale townships. Students were bused into Collingwood from as far away as Creemore, the buses dubbed the "farmer's express" by some. C.C.I. became a "District Collegiate" (C.D.C.I.). Adding pressure to the growing enrolment in the town schools was the mushrooming elementary school population from the postwar baby boom starting to work its way through the three public schools and St. Mary's Separate School and it turned out that all of the town's schools were hard pressed to find space for everyone. At that time Catholic elementary students attended St. Mary's School at the north-west corner of Ontario and St. Paul Streets (demolished in 1974). Upon graduation from Grade 8 they then attended C.C.I. This was long before Collingwood had a Catholic High School. To absorb some of this overflow of humanity in the post-war era, in the early 1950's the Victory Village Community Centre (long-gone) on the lane adjacent to the Joseph Lawrence House was converted into two classrooms and students from the south end of town, myself included, attended there for at least one year (I was in Grade 1) while the new modern high school farther up the street was under construction.

A large site with plenty of room for future expansion was chosen on what was then the south edge of town on Hurontario St. between Cameron and Campbell Streets., the

site of a Victorian-era mansion called “Balcarris”, the home of the prosperous Lindsay family in the 19th Century. The Lindsay mansion gave way to a new million dollar state-of-the-art C.D.C.I. opening in late March 1954. By 1960 more space was needed and a number of additions and revisions were constructed from that time onward.

The Hume St. Collegiate now re-invented itself and began a new chapter in September 1954 as Senior Public School, holding Grades 6, 7 and 8 for the entire town (except St. Mary’s), taking the pressure off of and leaving King George, Victoria and Connaught Schools with classes up to just Grade 5. Probably at this time, the 1874 masonry plaque with the Wise Old Owl on the façade was covered over with wood (because the building was no longer a Collegiate) and remained so until the building was demolished in September 2005 during which time the plaque was newly “discovered” after being out of sight and forgotten for fifty-one years. Photos of the building being demolished show the central portion of the Hume St. façade still intact with the plaque still covered with wood painted white—the Wise Old Owl was still hibernating there while the east end of the structure containing my Grade 6 (Sadie McIntyre) and 7 (Edna Roberts) classrooms was being chewed up by the jaws of the excavator. Fortunately the plaque was carefully removed and saved for some future use. It was in the news in early October 2016 when it was found lying among the

weeds on the former school property and salvaged yet again. The Wise Old Owl part is not intact; I suspect that when it was covered over in 1954, some of the owl had to be hacked off to make the wooden cover fit tightly. This precious piece of Collingwood history which is being preserved is a direct link with the original 1874 building and with the legacy of those who pioneered secondary education in Collingwood so long ago. A modern version of the Wise Old Owl in the colours of black and gold very appropriately adorns the east wall of C.C.I. where it faces Hurontario St. and also the north wall of the Office wing facing onto Cameron St. In more recent times (since at least the 1980's) the logo of the sedate Wise Old Owl representing traditional academic achievement has been joined by a young aggressive cousin, the Fighting Owl with its talons bared ready to pounce on its prey representing athletics, especially football.

Florence Currie's Grade 8 class at Senior Public had the privilege of ringing the electric bells from the school Office to signal the end of class at lunchtime. I had my turn at going to the Office about 11:45 a.m. to sound the lunch bells throughout the school. Our beloved Principal at the time was Hugh George Russell Davidson (1904-1961). He was a kindly man and when he died from a heart attack at age 57 in September 1961, not long after I had moved on to C.C.I. I felt I had lost a friend. By contrast, our new Principal on Cameron St. in September 1961

was John C. McIntyre (we had a very different name for him) who was not popular with the students and some parents as well. According to the 1993 book *In Days Of Yore* he enjoyed “his ability to do whatever he wanted without interference from a bureaucracy” and wisely took early retirement in 1969 before the new Simcoe County School Board took over from the local School Board in the expectation that the new County Board “would prevent him from acting in an autonomous manner that he was used to”.

In the Senior Public years we benefitted from the facilities left behind by C.C.I. in 1954. The basement, in addition to the gymnasium was the location of the “Industrial Arts” rooms, more commonly called “Shop” (designated “Manual Training” in 1925). Here Larry Holbrook taught the boys to make things out of wood and metal and to use tools safely so that we had some idea of what we were doing when we reached the metal and wood shops in Grade 9 on Cameron St. staffed by Roy Ridley and W. A. Stephens, respectively. These shops were in the original main wing of the 1954 building—the massive Technical Wing was not added until 1963. From time to time Mr. Holbrook would bellow “**DEMONSTRATION!!!**” and we had to instantly drop whatever we were doing *or else* and gather to watch him demonstrate some procedure. He had a disciplinary thing, military style, called “Shop Deficiency Marks”, a demerit point scheme where he kept a record of misdemeanors. One of

the boys asked him “What happens when one uses up all their Shop Deficiency Marks?” and his reply was “**Bye-Bye!**” The girls had Mildred Cole’s sister Zelma for Home Economics on the second floor in the north-west corner of the building where they learned the basics of baking peach pies. Curiously, on the north wall near this corner of the building there was a door that opened out into mid-air. It may have originally been intended for a fire escape exit but there was no fire escape there—just air; the only member of C.C.I. who could have stepped out of that door and survived was the Wise Old Owl himself. (The building is reported to have been “full of asbestos” which was common fireproofing in the 20th Century and consequently, it did not have multiple outdoor fire escapes like the older school buildings.) The basement also contained at the east end the room for the dreaded art class with Miss Mildred Cole.

In the Senior Public years our musical education was in the hands of Vernon Melrose Perry (November 11 1902-June 18 1992) from Meaford. Born the son of a farmer in Euphrasia Township, Grey County, he followed his father’s profession for many years before becoming a music teacher in the Meaford Public School. He also played in the Meaford Citizens Band and conducted the Stanley Knight Glee Club. I clearly remember that he had his initials “VP” in gold on his belt buckle. His wife Margaret Myrtle McDougall (1905-1997) was his pianist. Mrs. Perry always accompanied him to Collingwood and we could

always tell when she was in Senior Public School because the scent of her perfume quite heavily permeated the corridors. We referred to her as “the perfume lady”. On one occasion when Mrs. Perry was sick on a music day, we knew something was wrong even before we were told she was not there because the aroma of her perfume was missing. That day I filled in to play the piano for us to practice “Silent Night”.

In the interests of harmony, one day Mr. Perry stood in the school corridor at the start of the morning and listened to all the classrooms singing God Save The Queen, each class singing in a different key [!] determined by each teacher blowing on their pitch pipe. This simultaneous and discordant assault on his ears and on the Monarchy was not acceptable and prompted him to advise all teachers that all classes should henceforth sing God Save The Queen in the same key.

Music lessons and practice were usually held in the spacious auditorium and sometimes included listening to recorded music—in particular at a time when 1950’s rock and roll was the music of choice for our age group, we were introduced to classical music through a recording of Rossini’s *William Tell Overture* and its four themes: dawn, the storm, the pastoral calm, and the boisterous finale which most students instantly recognized as the *Lone Ranger Theme*. This was a revelation to most of us that a theme we heard weekly on television (and our

parents had heard on radio) was actually composed in 1829 by a now-long-dead European.

Following his retirement Vernon Perry traded in his key signatures and lines and spaces for the profession of “Gentleman” and he so recorded himself on the Voters List in the mid 1970’s. Vernon and Margaret both lived into their 90’s, no doubt due, in part, to their earlier years of fresh air and healthy food on the farm. They gave us an education in the basics of written music and conducted countless school choirs for concerts and music festivals over the years—special memories in a special building for us oldtimers. To me, Senior Public School was always “the old High School”, the building a direct link to the original building of 1874 on the same site with the Wise Old Owl on the façade proclaiming this as a place of learning even during the years the owl was slumbering under a sheet of wood. The building was also a link with my ancestors as three generations of my family attended classes in both buildings on that site. As a piano tuner for the Simcoe County Board of Education I was delighted to be sent to Senior Public School in the 1970’s to tune the auditorium piano that Mrs. Perry used to play for us. I also had played that same piano for my first public performance during a Christmas assembly.

One aspect of the 1925 building on Hume St. that did not continue on in its original use after 1954 was the Guidance

Office. It was at the west end of the second floor, up a short staircase. The opaque glass in the door was lettered “**GUIDANCE**”. A similar room at the east end of the second floor was the office of the school custodian, Johnnie Hogan, or, as one of my teachers described it, “Mr. Hogan’s hideaway”.

For some years after 1954 a crest/shield with the Wise Old Owl remained on the wall of the Auditorium to the left of the stage proscenium although it was lost when the room was finally repainted some years after C.C.I. had vacated the building. The old C.C.I. on Hume St. re-invented itself one more time in 1981 when it became Admiral Collingwood Public School with Kindergarten through Grade 8. It closed as a school in 2001 to be replaced by a new school in the south end of town. After much protest, the building was demolished in 2005. The mosaic from inside the Hume St. entrance was chipped out before the building came down and was then reconstructed and displayed during C.C.I.’s Reunion at the time of Collingwood’s Sesquicentennial in 2008. The semi-circular plaque from 1874, I am told, is in safe storage at C.C.I.

When C.C.I. moved up to Cameron St. in 1954 the typewriters from the typing classroom were taken along—an assortment of heavy cast-iron workhorses by Underwood, Remington, Royal and Smith-Corona. Two years in a row I found myself at the same desk with the same typewriter, a Royal weighing 30 lbs.,

manufactured in 1950. In the spring of 1964 it was announced that we were getting all new typewriters and students could, if desired, purchase the typewriter from their desk for \$35.00 which I gladly did. All of the classroom typewriters had blank keyboards (we learned to type from a chart above the blackboard) and were therefore useless to the general public. These machines were indestructible; I still have mine more than 53 years after I bought it from the school and it still gets occasional use (new ribbon installed in 2016). Countless students must have learned on it since it was new in 1950 before I came to it in “Sparky” Anderson’s class in 1962-63/Marion Russell’s class in 1963-64. The day the new Underwood-Olivetti typewriters arrived each old machine was lifted out of the well in the desk and replaced with a new one. When I was handed my new one, I placed it in the desk and pressed the Tab key; the carriage travelled the length of the typewriter and instead of stopping, kept on going right off the machine and onto the floor. In the words of Jane Austin, this was “a wretched beginning” and confirmation of the old saying, *“They don’t make them like they used to”*. The “Old High School” on Hume St. is long-gone but my 68-year-old Royal typewriter lives on, still functioning and is a precious souvenir from the 1925 building as well as from the current building.

The historic masonry plaque proclaiming “COLLINGWOOD HIGH SCHOOL 1874”, etc. has, to date, seen almost one hundred and

forty-four years pass by--an amazing journey for the Wise Old Owl. The tradition of learning and of preparing young people for life continues on at C.C.I. in the 21st Century.

Oh it's glorious, simply glorious; we're here to make the C.C.I. victorious;

We'll tell the world with shouts uproarious; we represent the good old C.C.I.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C. David graduated from Grade 13 at C.C.I. in ancient times in 1966.