



VICTORIA PUBLIC SCHOOL—THE GRAND OLD LADY OF MAPLE STREET

By H. David Vuckson

This story contains my reminiscences of being a student at Victoria Public School on Maple St. in the years 1952-1958. For the “hard” facts of the history of the building(s) I am indebted to Su Murdoch Historical Consulting of Barrie.

Collingwood’s largest ornate brick schoolhouse of the Victorian era—“Centre Ward School” to give it its original name—was built in 1884, replacing an earlier building on Pine St. that is now known as Schoolhouse Lane. Standing majestically on a 1.5 acre site (6 lots) on Maple Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets, Centre Ward School hosted countless thousands of Collingwood children during its more than 80 years of existence (the main building) while the Annex, still standing, saw approximately 107 years of use. The name was changed to “Victoria” School in 1911.

Designed by architect Marshall B. Aylsworth, Huron St. (who also designed the East Ward/Connaught School the same year), the building had space for 12 classrooms (six on each floor), each with a large wooden post in the centre to support the second floor and massive

roof above. After the addition of “The Annex” in 1894 designed by architect F. W. Bryan, the two buildings together had a total of 16 classrooms. At some time in later years, one room on the ground floor of the main building facing out onto Maple Street was divided up to accommodate the school office and a music room.

Considering that Collingwood did not have municipal waterworks until the first mains were laid in 1889, Central School did not have running water and photos taken in its earliest years show a water well pump in the boys yard on the Sixth St. side and another pump in the girls yard on the Fifth St. side. The absence of running water also means that the basement washrooms remembered by those of us who attended this school did not exist in the early years. This also means that the thousands of students, my grandmother included, who attended Central School at some time in its first twenty-seven years of existence, had to use large outhouses on the west side of the property *year-round*. These must have been a challenge on a cold, blustery, winter’s day. Incredible as it may seem to us in 2017, the use of the outhouses continued until the end of the first decade of the 20th Century. In October 1909 a Provincial Health Inspector found that the two 12’ x 16’ brick outhouses were inadequate and very unsanitary [!] and recommended installing washrooms under the school by deepening the basement. This was done in the period 1910-11 creating the washrooms that we were required to visit before going outside for recess. A teacher stood guard and made sure that no one went outside without first going downstairs. This may have been intended to curtail the incidents of a student raising their hand in class and saying, “May I please be excused from the room?”--to which the teacher would reply, “Is it necessary?” and the student would invariably say, “Yes”.

Another important function of those two water pumps in the school yard and one that, fortunately, never had to be used, was as a source of water for fire protection. Given the absence of water mains and fire hydrants in the early years, these pumps would have been indispensable for use by the bucket brigade that was needed to keep filling the “tub” of the hand-pumped fire engine so that the volunteer firemen frantically pumping the handles of the engine could produce a stream of water from a fire hose.

The main building and the Annex were both originally heated with wood-burning stoves, perhaps not very successfully although I’m sure the man who supplied the cordwood was delighted to have the school as a customer. An early photo shows massive stacks of firewood at the west end of the main building near the boys’ outhouse. To improve upon this situation, a portion of the cellar was excavated in 1897 to create space for a boiler room under the west side of the main building to supply steam heat for the two buildings. At some point in time, both basements were connected by an underground passageway to facilitate steam pipes, etc. for the Annex. One must wonder how many coal mines-worth of coal were consumed in that boiler room over its lifetime. The heat loss in the winter must have been horrendous considering the multitude of large single-pane windows and the high ceilings combined with central Ontario winters. The chimney from the boiler room was in the wall between two of the classrooms on the west side of the main building and I well remember the blackboard in my Grade 4 classroom being warm against that wall from the heat that was on its way to the sky. The steam radiators in each classroom had small chrome-plated humidifiers looking like miniature torpedoes mounted on one end near the top and they allowed steam to escape into the

room to help humidify the dry winter air. The coal bunkers were constructed on the south-west side of the main building and on coal delivery days, two men with a truck and a motorized conveyor belt would unload coal to keep us warm. There was a door from the boys' basement washroom that opened into the boiler room and occasionally one of us would open it to peek in and Mr. Stoodley, the custodian, would yell at us.

Central/Victoria School had two bells. The main one on the roof originally sat in great splendour in an ornate 25' tall bell tower. Isabel Griffin records that the bell was brought from the earlier Centre Ward School on Pine Street where it had also served as a town bell to announce the time of day. Other information from School Board Minutes indicates that there was a motion in April 1889 to allow the Property Committee to "remove bell from Central School to East Ward School and buy a new bell for Central" although this apparently did not happen, for the Central/Victoria bell now on display at The Museum on St. Paul St. clearly bears the date 1857 (the year before the Pine St. school opened) confirming Isabel Griffin's notes. The bell tower itself had an imposing steeply pitched roof giving the structure a very majestic look. The fancy bell tower was still there in 1907 however, a photo from July 1918 shows that the tower had disappeared by at least that time. After that, the bell was not covered. [The East Ward (Connaught) School, built the same year also had a bell tower, a much more modest one than Central, and it, too, disappeared in later years, leaving just the base of the tower and the bell sitting exposed to the elements.]

The roof bell was used to call us to school in the morning, at the end of morning and afternoon recess, and to call us back after lunch and after

a fire drill. This bell called three generations of my family to Central/Victoria school: my grandmother was just two years old when Central School opened and my mother was born the year after its name was changed to Victoria. I started Kindergarten there in September 1952.

When Victoria School was demolished in the late 1960's, the roof bell was saved and for many years has been mounted outside The Museum above a masonry plaque that states: "VICTORIA PUBLIC SCHOOL A.D. 1884". When we visit Collingwood I like to strike the (now stationary) bell with my knuckles and the sound takes me back 65 years.

Victoria School's other bell was a huge brass gong mounted on the west wall of the main floor hallway outside Mrs. Wright's classroom. It had a pull rope for its clapper, and a cable disappeared up through the ceiling connected to a pull lever on the wall in the second floor hallway outside Mrs. Taylor's classroom. This gong could be heard throughout the main building and was used to signal the start of recess, lunchtime, the end of classes in the afternoon, and fire drills. Since Centre Ward/Victoria and East Ward/Connaught were designed by the same architect in the same year (1884) both schools had one of these wall-mounted gongs. The remaining base and a portion of the strike mechanism of the gong at Connaught were photographed by Su Murdoch, Historical Consulting on April 21, 2009. It is assumed that the Victoria School Annex had a similar gong.

A Fire Drill was signaled by three quick rings of the brass gong. We were timed to see how many minutes it took, in orderly fashion, to evacuate the school. There were three fire escapes; two were of the usual metal stair type attached to the side of the building and accessed

through a classroom window in the space between the main building and the Annex, one for each building. The third fire escape was a sloping metal tube accessed from doors in my Grade 2 classroom (Hazel Allen, teacher) on the second floor on the Maple Street side. It was scary and intimidating because you were going to slide down two floors to the ground and all you could see was “the light at the end of the tunnel”, so when we practiced using this fire escape, the “big [fearless] boys from Grade 5” came to show us how it was done.

An oddity about the school was the east wall of the Annex and the west wall of the main building. The red-orange bricks of both buildings were painted white where the two walls faced each other. This was done from an early time and it is surmised that, with the buildings being so close together (there wasn't room for anything else between them once the two side-by-side fire escapes were installed), the main building shaded the Annex from the natural light in the morning, and the Annex shaded the main building from the natural light in the afternoon with the result that teachers must have found there wasn't sufficient light in their classrooms at any time of day but especially on gray, gloomy winter days. The primitive electric lighting of the early 20th Century would not have helped this situation either. The closeness of the two buildings actually defeated the concept of large windows to let in the natural light so the white paint brightened things up. By the middle of the 20th Century the white paint had faded to grey and also by then there was more efficient indoor lighting to overcome the shading effect the two buildings had on each other. Evidence of the painted walls can be seen in the bottom-left photo on pg. 135 of Christine Cowley's book, *Butchers, Bakers...* Also visible in that photo is the tube fire escape.

Near the bottom of the tube fire escape was the school flagpole from which flew two flags: the Union Jack and, below it, the flag of Elmer the Safety Elephant. Our teachers taught us Elmer's safety rhyme: *"Stop Look and Listen, before you cross the street; use your eyes and use your ears, before you use your feet"*. We should bring Elmer back to teach this very practical advice to pedestrians of all ages today who are busy playing with their phones while crossing the street, all the while seemingly oblivious to traffic and their own mortality.

Another bit of classroom memorization related to what our mothers were supposed to be doing on different days of the week was the following: *"On Sunday hear the church bells ring, on Monday wash the clothes; on Tuesday get the ironing done, on Wednesday Mother sews; on Thursday go a-calling, on Friday clean and sweep; and Saturday is baking day and thus we close the week"*. We were never told what dire consequences would follow our mothers all the days of their life if they did the laundry on a day other than Monday. I do know of an elderly lady who followed this long-standing Monday tradition. When she moved into a townhouse complex in town circa 1980 and was assigned Tuesday as her laundry day, this caused her much distress as she always washed on Monday which indicates that long-established habits are not easily changed.

Classrooms in Victoria School, like thousands of classrooms across the country, had the multi-coloured pull-down Neilson's Chocolate Bar map of The Dominion of Canada mounted above the blackboards. The top of the map stated, **"Neilson's, The Best Chocolate Bars in Canada."** and the bottom of the map proclaimed, **"Neilson's JERSEY MILK CHOCOLATE—The Best Milk Chocolate Made."** Each corner of the map featured a Neilson's bar: Malted Milk, Crispy Crunch, Jersey Nut, and

Jersey Milk. The map also showed the northern portion of the United States; however, a large part of Oregon and California were left out to accommodate the Malted Milk chocolate bar. This corporate invasion of Canada's classrooms and impressionable young minds was unquestioned. We students certainly considered it harmless; after all, what kid doesn't like chocolate? In today's world, this advertising in schools would be accused of contributing to childhood obesity and would be roundly and heavily condemned.

Our classrooms contained a drinking fountain near a front corner of the room and for at least some of our years there in the 1950's, each morning we lined up to receive a chocolate-coated vitamin pill. It was dispensed from a large glass jar held by a classmate (this was long before plastic jars and latex gloves), placed in our hand, and then we put it in our mouth and went to the fountain for water to swallow it. As mentioned before, what kid doesn't like chocolate? Some kids enjoyed the chocolate so much that they took several of the coated pills without the teacher knowing about it.

Another aspect of public health care in school was the vaccinations for Diphtheria, Tetanus, Polio and Smallpox we received on behalf of the Simcoe County Health Unit. Classes would line up in the ground floor hallway as we waited our turn for the needle in the Music Room. Our post-war generation was the first to receive the newly-introduced Salk Polio Vaccine which was administered on May 16th and June 13th of 1955 by the toxoid team of the County Health Unit. Some students cried and some reportedly fainted at the sight of the needle but I never personally witnessed this.

In the Kindergarten Room (south-east corner of the main building) we used gallons of “Mucilage”, a liquid glue in a small bell-shaped bottle with a red perforated rubber applicator tip, on our personal scrap books and various “art” projects, as well as “Plasticine”, a soft modelling clay that could be made into various shapes. The room contained an upright piano used by our music teacher Mary Gibson who lived down the street from my house. She taught us songs like *Three Blind Mice* and *The Farmer in The Dell*. Our Kindergarten “Band” which accompanied Mary at the piano consisted of various noisemakers. I had my eye on the big drum but my hopes were dashed when another boy got the drum. Instead, I was given two red sticks to bang together; in my teens, however, I got to drum all I wanted in the Collingwood Civic Band and even, by happenstance, as the only Grade 13 student in the C.C.I. band.

Photos of a young Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip looked down from the classroom walls and we were reminded of the glories of the British Empire, especially those of us whose mothers were members of the I.O.D.E. [Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire]. Each morning the teachers would pull a pitch pipe out of their desk, sound a note, and we would sing God Save The Queen and then recite The Lord’s Prayer before getting down to school work.

Entering the school in the morning and after lunch was done with military precision. A large loudspeaker cabinet was brought out onto the steps of both the boys and girls entrances connected to a turntable and amplifier in the school office where they had a supply of recordings of marches by John Philip Sousa. Once the needle hit the record we formed into lines and marched into the school like little soldiers. When I was in Grade 2, our classroom was on the second floor and one day

we boys were going up the south end staircase and Mrs. Wright, one of the main floor teachers, was standing at the bottom of the stairs shouting, “HALT!” over and over. Since we seven year-olds didn’t know what halt meant, we kept on going. Then she shouted, “DON’T YOU PEOPLE KNOW WHAT HALT MEANS! IT MEANS STOP!!!!!!!!!!” We had committed a very serious offence against order, discipline, rules and regulations: we were out of step with the music. Part of the reason for this “military precision”, aside from daily discipline and the fact that the Second World War had ended just seven years earlier, was to prepare us for the annual Parade of School Children on the opening day of the Great Northern Exhibition in late September. As the great day got closer we had marching practice around the school yard with the loud speaker blasting out a Sousa march while teachers carefully watched that we all kept in step. On the day of the Parade, each child was given a small Union Jack flag on a stick with a gold pointy end, and we held it over our shoulder as we marched along Hume St. to the Exhibition [now Central] Park.

Many of you will remember that every year we had to make a Temperance Poster for Miss Mildred Cole, the Art teacher who lectured us on the evils of drinking alcohol on behalf of the W. C. T. U. (Women’s Christian Temperance Union). A prize was given each year for the best poster produced. The posters usually consisted of cut-out magazine ads for whiskey, etc. with negative commentary added by the student. I dreaded the Art classes because I couldn’t then and still can’t draw a straight line with a ruler (the ruler usually moves). I could never understand why they kept trying to turn us into artists and gave us negative feedback when we didn’t match that expectation. When we “graduated” to Senior Public School, there again was Miss Cole and the

Art class in the basement. There was no escaping! (The ladies will remember that at Senior Public School, Mildred Cole's sister Zelma taught Home Economics.)

Around this time in the 1950's there was a popular show on T.V. called "Learn To Draw with Jon Gnagy". Jon Gnagy (1907-1981) said at the start of each show, "If you can draw these simple forms, the ball, cone, cube and cylinder, you can draw a real picture the very first time you try". His "Learn To Draw" kits were sold by the millions and are still being made today. I received one of the kits as a Christmas gift from my Hewson cousins and it still didn't turn me into an artist.

One thing that was a joy for me was our Principal, Hugh R. Davidson (1904-1961). He was the Principal at Victoria School when I started Kindergarten in 1952. He moved on to Senior Public School about 1954, to be replaced at Victoria by John Coukell. Unlike the dreaded Art classes, I was thrilled to again have Hugh Davidson as the Principal when I moved on to Senior Public School in 1958. He was a kindly man and I had great respect for him and felt the loss when he died at age 57 from a heart attack in September 1961 just as I started attending C.C.I.

One particularly harmonious reminiscence I have of Victoria School goes back to the Fall of 1956. I was in Grade 4 and one afternoon I had gone back into the school after 4:00 p.m. to retrieve something I had forgotten and on entering the school I heard the sound of several of the female staff singing Guy Mitchell's current hit song *Singin' The Blues* coming from the ground floor Music Room. One of them was playing the piano and several voices were singing and it sounded like they were having a lot of fun doing it. The sheet music for popular songs back then was sold by Mabel Henderson at "The Little Gift Shop" next door

to Brown's Taxi stand on Hurontario St. Guy Mitchell's record had just been recorded in late September and released in October so this sheet music must have been "hot off the press" and brought to the school by one of the teachers to try out.

A social event at Victoria School in the 1950's was the Fun Fair put on by the Home and School Association which functioned for twenty years from 1949 until the school closed in 1969. Children were accompanied by a "parent or guardian" to this event held on a weekday evening. There were a number of booths set up in both the ground floor and second floor hallways. The one booth I remember was on the second floor and consisted of a large, long, tank filled with water. The child was given a stick that had a line with a weighted hook on the end and the object was to drag the hook near the bottom of the tank and hook onto a metal "fish" which was then brought to the surface and a code on the fish would indicate what prize had just been won—perhaps a red, white and blue rubber ball or some marbles.

Time marches on and by the 1960's the Grand Old Lady of Maple Street was not so grand anymore. The seventy year-old coal-fired heating system, the electrical, plumbing and ventilation systems must all have been well beyond their "best before" date and the style of public school construction had changed since the Victorian era. Expanding the two buildings was not practical and with growing population and enrolment, a new school in the south end of town was called for. This was the Cameron Street Public School opened in 1967, itself now 50 years old. The main building of Victoria School continued in use until 1969 and was then demolished. Use of The Annex continued when the R. H. Davidson Memorial School for children with learning disabilities had to move out of its original location at the former Connaught School

on Napier Street in 1969 and needed a new home. I had my first look ever inside the Annex when I was called to tune a piano there in October 1975. The Annex continued in use for educational purposes until 2001. It has been boarded up for many years now and may one day be re-purposed as part of a residential redevelopment of the former school property.

Victoria School's 1884 contemporary, Connaught School, and the 1911 King George School on Second St. in the west end have both been re-purposed for residential use and survive to this day.

.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.