

Personal Histories: John Opra – the teacher, councillor and Legion member

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John Opra leads the 2015 Revelstoke Remembrance Day ceremony

John Opra has seen a lot of changes in the 78 years he's been in Revelstoke. And among all of them, he says, the development of Revelstoke Mountain Resort stands out as the most significant.

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“Revelstoke Mountain Resort is probably the most significant of all the changes that has occurred,” said Opra. “That and the tourism that has come along with it. The whole community has changed because of the development.”

Opra, who was a Revelstoke City councilor for 23 years straight (he was first elected in 1972) admits to being one of the driving forces in “getting the ski hill done.” He also recalled being involved with getting the now famous bear statues installed at Grizzly Plaza, and the development of the Revelstoke Golf Course.

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“When we were young there was absolutely very little south of the Illecillewaet River. Up by where the hospital is now there were a few farms and that was about all,” said Opra, who grew up on Fourth Street East. “The same was true of the golf course side. There was very little at that time. We helped open some of that up and the golf course expanded from nine holes to 18.”

Being involved with city council isn't the only place Opra has seen changes in Revelstoke over the years. Beginning his teaching career in 1959 at Farwell School, Opra went on to teach at Mountain View School until the late 1960s when he was appointed the principal of Mount Begbie Elementary School. He also was principal for Selkirk and Farwell together, and then Farwell and Columbia Park together before eventually taking the role of Director of Instruction within the School District. He held that position until he retired in 1996.

“It's hard to believe. I know in my time as Director of Instruction, Mica School was closed. Then after that we closed Trout Lake School. Then Farwell closed,” said Opra, who also noted the more recent closures of Mount Begbie and Mountain View Elementary schools.

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“There's been very significant changes in the education side of it. It was a good career, I enjoyed it. I probably went through at least three generations of students and parents and teachers, which was quite interesting,” he said. "Having been in all those schools you got to meet people from all different parts of the community, not only from the central part of the community but the fringes of the community and so forth.”

Now, 20 years into his retirement, Opra is enjoying the quieter things in life. He did enjoy golfing earlier in his retirement, but can no longer do so due to health reasons. He still devotes his time to helping with the Revelstoke Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion. It's not surprising, considering Opra's been a member since he was 21 years old. His long time dedication resulted in his being appointed a lifetime member of the Royal Canadian Legion.

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“I've spent a lot of time particularly with the Remembrance Day ceremonies, which I firmly believe are vital for the community to remember the people who have volunteered to fight for their country so we know why we have our freedoms and things of that nature. And it is the one thing I will hopefully continue to do for the Legion, because I think it's so important.”