

## **A Highlight History of British Columbia Schools by Shirley Cuthbertson**

When Vancouver Island was declared a Crown Colony in 1849, James Douglas, Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, invited the Reverend Robert Staines, a Church of England Minister, to become both Company Chaplain and schoolmaster for children of Company officers. Shortly after his arrival, the Oblate mission delegated Father Honore Timothy Lampfrit to teach children of Roman Catholic parents. As settlers arrived, Douglas supported other schools, most of which charged fees. Girls could be sent to a school for "young ladies", but if parents could not afford it, girls stayed home.

Only two school buildings of the early colonial period still exist, Craigflower School, started by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1851, and St. Ann's Schoolhouse (1858), both in Victoria. St. Ann's is named for the Quebec Order whose members came to British Columbia to teach on the invitation of Bishop Demers. Their first register of pupils is an indication of support for education which included girls as well as boys and poor as well as rich. Their pupils included a number from well known Victoria families which were not Catholic, as well as orphans and children from working-class families.

After 1858, new settlers poured in, and the two colonies obviously needed a public school system. There was a period of competition between schools operated by private owners, and there were children who simply did not attend school at all.

Bishop Demers, in a letter in 1859, says:

"...the parents of the children want them to learn music. Can we deny them this request? **We must be up to date, and follow the present trends.**"

This willingness to adopt new subjects, and to set high standards for teaching and the quality of education may also reflect the competition for students in the fledgling city. Private individuals, Anglican and Methodist churches were all setting up schools and recruiting pupils.

Few early textbooks or school materials have survived - books were made of cheap paper, and most other things simply wore out. Schools were sparsely furnished to begin with - school supplies were considered a luxury in an economy with little cash. Things were handed down from parents to children and again to younger children. The teacher at the colonial school in Nanaimo notes several times in the register that a student was not attending because his or her parents refused to purchase the reader.

By the mid-1860's there was strong support for free "common schools", which were established with the **Common School Act** in 1865 on Vancouver Island. The argument for non-sectarian schools was led by the editors of the two leading newspapers on Vancouver Island and in New Westminster. Both men advocated free public non-sectarian education, based on the principle of equality of opportunity, and both gained public support for their positions. Amor de Cosmos, editor of the Colonist, wrote in 1865: "We are not disposed to cavil at the imperfections of the bill **so long as the two great principles - free schools and a non-sectarian system of education - are enunciated.**"

When the colonies were joined, Governor Seymour opposed free common schools, and withheld funding. Many schools had closed by 1869. The **Common School Ordinance** that year centralized control in the hands of the Governor-in-Council, with state support for education of \$500 per year per teacher. The Government had the power to create school districts, apportion grants, to appoint, certificate, inspect and dismiss teachers, and to make rules and regulations for the management of schools.

A provision of the British North America Act, Canada's document of confederation, was that education was to be the responsibility of the provincial governments. British Columbia was the only province to enter Confederation with a non-sectarian school system, which lasted until 1976. The **Public Schools Act** of 1872, which provided for education from the general revenues of the province, allowed the government to appoint a Board of Education and a Superintendent and to establish school districts. The objective of the Act was "**to give every child in the Province such knowledge as will fit him to become a useful and intelligent citizen in after years.**"

A number of settlement or rural schools appealed for assistance for their first school in 1872, just as the Act was put into action and the first Superintendent, John Jessop, started work. In the next few years he visited all the schools of the province on foot and by canoe, horseback and paddle steamer. His dreams for the provincial education system were expressed in his reports to the government. After his first tour of inspection in 1872, Jessop noted that some schools were so poorly equipped that they did not even have a globe.

From the earliest historic period, small British Columbia communities have built their own schools. B. C. is a province with many "company towns": canneries, logging camps and mines have had schools for employees' children. Workers moved, and so did whole towns as resources were depleted. Perhaps some early experience indicated to Jessop the need for children to be able to move easily from community to community, and was a factor in the first Superintendent's drive for a centralized system.

Schools were not necessarily popular with parents, let alone children. The government to find ways to force local school boards to comply with and enforce various amendments to the Public School Act which made attendance compulsory for children, who remained a useful part of the workforce into the 20th century, especially during seasonal harvesting, whether the harvest was grain or fish. Again, the Nanaimo teacher's register notes students who left school to work.

In 1874 the teaching staff were almost all untrained teachers - there were 17 men and 15 women - 14 English, 6 Scots, 2 Irish, 2 Americans and 8 Canadians. School houses were almost all of frame or wood construction, only two in 1874 were made of logs. They were heated by stoves, (in some cases fireplaces), and were sparsely furnished with benches or desks and most (but not all) with slate blackboards. Jessop provided each with a set of maps and a "terrestrial globe". School books were authorized and purchased by the Department of Education and sold through the schools to the children.

British Columbia's early schools were influenced by Eastern Canada, particularly of the Normal School established in Toronto by Egerton Ryerson, and of McGill University. Jessop advertised for teachers in the Toronto Globe and Mail:

"SCHOOL TEACHERS WANTED. -...salaries from \$50 to \$60 per month...in newly formed country districts...teachers must expect, for a time at least, more or less isolation. ...cost of board \$16 to \$25 per month.

Victoria, April 12th, 1875"

The age = grade system as we understand it was not fully implemented until 1923. Schools were ungraded at first, the children progressed individually and learned mostly by rote. By 1884, larger urban schools were "graded", and although pupils still went through the series of readers individually, a teacher would have the lower book children ("primary" from "primer") or the higher book children. "Rural" schools continued much longer with individual progress measured by "reader" level.

The first public high school in British Columbia was Victoria High School - later known as "Vic High". Jessop argued that high schools would **"do good service as training schools for teachers, till such time as the number of our school districts would warrant the establishment of a Provincial Normal School.** The early high school teachers were almost all graduates of universities in Eastern Canada, many from Queen's or McGill.

The first high school entrance examinations in 1876 covered arithmetic, grammar, geography and spelling. The first two teachers each taught all the courses until they divided them in 1880. The curriculum included: "ENGLISH: Geography, ancient and modern, Grammar, Rhetoric and Composition, Mythology; SCIENTIFIC: Botany, Physiology, Natural Philosophy, Astronomy and Chemistry; MATHEMATICAL: Arithmetic, Algebra, Mensuration, Euclid, and Book-keeping; CLASSICAL: Latin and Greek; MODERN LANGUAGES: French; together with Map drawing, vocal music, &c." The two teachers each taught all of these subjects until they divided them in 1880.

New Westminster High School opened in 1884, Nanaimo in 1886, Vancouver in 1890 and Nelson in 1901. From 1901 to 1914, the number of high schools grew from 5 to 40, and the curriculum changed and developed from traditional classics and liberal arts to a more practical education. Commercial courses (besides book-keeping) were introduced in 1906 and Manual Training, started in 1901 (thanks to Sir William MacDonald, who funded facilities and equipment in Canadian schools), became an official high school course in 1908. Domestic Science was offered in Vancouver in 1909, and a full three-year course in home economics started in 1917.

The federal government supported Agricultural Education, and in 1914 the Fraser Valley inspector reported twenty school gardens. A course in agricultural education was offered in Chilliwack High School in 1915. It developed into a two-year program in 12 high schools by 1923.

Technical courses grew out of "Manual Training", were recognized as important to the public school system in 1914, and opened in King Edward High School (Vancouver) in 1919. Expansion of the program was helped by the federal Technical Education Act, which gave ten million dollars over ten years to assist the Province.

In 1912 a syllabus of physical training, prepared by the officers of the Strathcona Trust was adopted and introduced into the schools. The Trust also provided training for classroom teachers. Students joined cadet corps during World War I, even at the elementary school level, and physical training included military drill.

"British Columbia had entered Confederation with the most centralized school system on record." (Johnson, 88) Gradually, as the cost of education rose, the government was forced to share both costs and control with local authorities.

The Public Schools Act of 1888 shifted more of the cost of education to local government, and more powers were granted to the local boards, which were no longer elected in cities: three were appointed by the Provincial Government and four, including the chairman, by the city council.

This was not practical for small rural districts (by 1944 there were 650 school districts.) The government "assisted" schools with 10 or more students by paying the teacher's salary. By the 1920's, the differences between some rural schools and urban schools, especially at the high school level, meant too great a difference between the "standing and progress" of the students. "...assisted schools (were) simply not satisfactory...very badly planned...hardly one has a library...salaries too low to attract capable and experienced teachers...standing and progress of the students...far below that of pupils in other schools...."

During the Depression, some school districts were successful with "consolidation" and in April 1946, 650 districts were amalgamated as geographic, economic and/or political units into 74 municipal and rural districts.

For many students who had attended the tiny "assisted" schools with their immediate neighbours, this meant that, for the first time, they would take the school bus to a larger school in a larger community.