

Alumni want Vic High named a historic site

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They arrive in the summer. They will be in Victoria on holiday and they stop by the school to visit their past.

Vic High hasn't changed much over the past 99 years, so it's easy for people to step back in time when they enter its halls.

"They can go and find some of their original classrooms," says principal Randi Falls.

"They can find the seat that they had in the auditorium. They find their picture up on the third floor or they find a relative's name in the war memorials in the front hallway.

"Once people have been through Vic High, it stays with them."

Now, they hope to share their school's storied history with the rest of the country.

The Vic High Alumni Association plans to apply to Parks Canada in the next few weeks to have the school named a historic site in time for the building's 100th anniversary in May 2014.

The school itself goes back farther than that, however.

It first opened in a log cabin on the grounds of what is now Central Middle School in 1876, becoming the first public high school west of Winnipeg, said author and historian Barry Gough, who chairs the alumni association.

Two more buildings followed before the school moved to its Fernwood location at 1260 Grant St.

Former Victoria mayor Alan Lowe, who chairs the 100th anniversary organizing committee, refers to the building, designed by Victoria-born architect Charles Watkins, as a gem of its era.

“It was built in reinforced concrete, which was the technology of the day, designed in the Beaux Arts tradition and is actually Charles Watkins’ masterpiece,” said Lowe, an architect.

The students and staff who walked its halls over the years made significant contributions to Canadian history.

The school opened at the start of the First World War and more than 500 students, teachers and nursing sisters enlisted in the Canadian forces. Eighty-five did not return and their names are recorded on memorials in the school’s main hall.

Gough is leading the alumni association’s Great War Project to create a digital archive of stories about people and events in the school’s past.

Volunteers also plan to publish a book, tentatively titled Victoria High School and Flanders Fields, about the school’s contribution to the history of Canada and the British Empire at the time.

Greater Victoria school trustees have passed a motion to support the association’s historic-site application to Parks Canada.

“I think it’s a very exciting development to have this recognition for the district,” said trustee Tom Ferris.

“I know when film companies come out to Victoria and they’re looking for a high school, they’re absolutely blown away by Vic High, as I am every time I walk through the front door.”

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