

THE PASSING OF "YON"

A quick glance through the *Times Colonist* obituaries in July 2016 might have missed the passing of Vic High grad Yoshio "Yon" Shimizu at the age of 92 in Wallaceburg, Ontario.

In April 1942, Mr. Shimizu pleaded to graduate with his Vic High classmates but his request was denied and he was transported to a Japanese internment camp in Schreiber, Ontario.

It wasn't because of his grades (he was an excellent student) or behaviour but because he was considered "Japanese" even though he was born in Victoria.

Seventy years later, the Vic High graduating class of 2012 decided to honour Mr. Shimizu with a graduation certificate at their own graduation ceremony. Mr. Shimizu, who was blind by then, could not attend and his friend and classmate, Tom Halbert, accepted the certificate on his behalf.

In an interview published in the Spring 2012 *Alumni News*, Mr. Shimizu emphasized, "I do not become bitter over anything."

Two months after the Japanese air attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Canadian government passed the War Measures Act, which created a 100-mile-wide Pacific coastal "protection" zone in which residents of Japanese descent were prohibited.

About 40 Japanese families, including Mr. Shimizu's, lived in Victoria and were taken to internment camps, mostly in the BC interior.

Before his family's property and possession were taken by the government, Mr. Shimizu asked Principal Harry Smith to intervene so that the student could finish his high-school education and graduate with his class. It was a two-month extension that Mr. Shimizu requested. Mr. Smith lobbied strenuously for a two-month reprieve, but his efforts failed.

Vic High's class of 1942 honoured Mr. Shimizu by including him in the Camosun school annual, describing him as "one of the brightest and most cheerful boys in our Div."

At the final assembly Mr. Shimizu attended at Vic High, Principal Smith held an emotional meeting, following which Mr. Shimizu was one of the students who held the doors open for exiting staff and students, some of whom were in tears, wrote Peter Smith (son of the principal) in his book *Come Give a Cheer*.

Mr. Shimizu went on to earn a chemical engineering degree from the University of Toronto in 1948 and an MBA from the University of Windsor in 1976.

He became a successful and respected businessman in Ontario. Years later, he chose to remember his high school and his favourite teacher by purchasing a seat plaque in the Lawrie Wallace auditorium which reads: "Yoshio (Yon) Shimizu, Class of '42, remembering Miss Mary W. Hamilton."

Miss Hamilton was Mr. Shimizu's homeroom and French teacher who wrote encouraging letters to him at the Schreiber internment camp.

The property seizures and forced internment camps are now history and the Canadian government has apologized for the actions.

Mr. Shimizu seemed satisfied with that, but he would probably smile at each and every Victoria High School student who seizes the opportunity to attend classes until their final day of Grade 12, an opportunity never afforded to him.