

## **Trees of Remembrance, Avenue of Sacrifice: Victoria High School Commemoration 1917**

On 20 April 1917, during World War One, just after the Battle of Vimy Ridge, fourteen maple trees, donated by the Women's Canadian Club were planted on the grounds of Victoria High School. These memorial trees bordered both sides of the Vining Street entrance. In early 2011, to the shock and sadness of thousands, the thirteen surviving maple trees were felled in an act that has many shaking their heads as to why this was done by the authorities. The good news is that plans are underway to replant and rededicate one of the most remarkable groves of memorial trees in Canada and the Commonwealth. These original memorial trees served as a model throughout Canada for other "Roads of Remembrance" and related commemorations of war sacrifices and pledges of peace. The story of the Vining Street Maples, therefore, is an important part of Canadian Military history.

Three teachers and 83 students of Victoria High School died on the fields of France and Flanders in the Great War of 1914-1918 now called the First World War. Many others came home maimed, crippled or suffering battle exhaustion, shock and psychological injury. Female students served in nursing units. The School took pride in its eleven military crosses and seven military medals. Yet it mourned from the very first, every casualty as the loss of a flower of its generation. The war memorials in the School entry hall and the photographs of the fallen in the School Archives tell of heroic and unselfish sacrifice in the cause of Canada and the British Empire, who with Allies fought against Imperial Germany and the Central Powers, and led to the Armistice of 1918.

At the time the trees were planted the war was far from over: 19 months of hard fighting lay ahead. Victory and peace were by no means assured. But Victoria High School, the City and the Province did not wait until the Armistice of 1918 to memorialize the fallen. The Second Battle of Ypres, in Flanders, Belgium, was on minds of those who followed the war and recorded our School's losses. The desperate and heroic actions by the Canadian Expeditionary Force in resistance earned it universal respect and undying fame. On that occasion, the enemy used poison gas on the battlefield for the first time. The Germans commenced their assault on 22 April 1915, with high losses on both sides. By battle's end the 1st Canadian Division had suffered 6,000 killed.

To commemorate the Second Anniversary of Canadian sacrifice in the Second Battle of Ypres, the closest Friday to the date of this battle was selected to plant the Vining Street Maples. The date was 20 April 1917. The Women's Canadian Club organized the ceremony. Active in the planting and dedication were the School Principal, the School Board, and the School Cadet Corps. Music was supplied by the 5<sup>th</sup> (BC) Regiment Band, now known as the 5<sup>th</sup> (BC) Field Regiment Royal Canadian Artillery Band. A combined schools choir under Mr. Pollard sang out "O Canada." A musical piece called "Canada's Song of Freedom," with words composed by Wellington Dowler, was not performed because the heavy, wet weather kept many choristers away.

Prominent in planting the memorial trees were Mrs. Margaret Jenkins, a School Trustee, H.C. Brewster, Premier of British Columbia, John Cochrane, President of the Canadian Club, and Miss Burris, President of the University Women's Club. The School staff and student body both attended. The Lieutenant Governor Sir Francis Barnard was there, and the High School Cadets formed the Guard of Honour. Nearly 2,500 braved the elements for the memorial ceremony, which ended following the dedication of the Kitchener Memorial Oak, planted nearby on Grant Street, midway between Fernwood and Camosun.

The Reverend Captain Campbell, the Military Chaplain, delivered the invocation. A local newspaper reported his words as "thanking God for the beautiful country in which they were privileged to live, a country in which all enjoyed civic and religious liberty. The Empire had held unswervingly to the principle of contending against tyranny, despotism and oppression. Might the day soon come when war might cease and matters of international dispute be settled in other manner than by the sword." The drapery of mourning, he said, was spread in many Victoria homes. The dear ones mourned had given life for the freedom of mankind, and he hoped they would "uplift the future generations by the memory of their sacrifice." Then he turned his attention to the trees as living symbols of the victory of life over death. "These trees now being planted would grow up a living memorial to the gallant young men who had passed through the High School and gone on to death in championing so great a cause." They were, he said, an example of sacrifice not to be forgotten, but to be remembered forever. That these were maple trees, with their own Canadian symbolism, was not lost on anyone.

*The Victoria Daily Times* put it this way about the symbolism of the trees: "An avenue of tall young maple trees...will bear leaf in a few weeks. While they arrest the notice of the passer-by they will suggest to his inward eye the picture of the boy-students who once gathered with their fellow students in this Alma Mater, but who now lie, heroes of Empire, beneath the sod of France [and Belgium]."

Plans are underway for a re-planting of memorial trees and a rededication ceremony later in 2011. Active student and citizen participation is anticipated.

This story is compiled based on details provided in Peter Smith, *Come Give a Cheer! One Hundred Years of Victoria High School, 1876-1976* (1976) and "Trees in Honor of Heroes of Empire: Citizens and School Children Attend Impressive Memorial Ceremony at High School," *Victoria Daily Times*, 21 April 1917. If one employs Google Earth, 2010, the avenue of still-standing Vining Street Memorial Trees can be seen from above and in leaf. For information on the **Kitchener Memorial Oak of Victoria High School** and its dedication the same day, see this story on Victoria High School Alumni website.

Written by Barry Gough, VHS 1956 and Staff 1964-1965. Posted June 2011