

Victoria High School will replant 'memorial avenue'

By Jeff Bell, timescolonist.com September 28, 2011



A patch of soil is all that remains of the original "memorial avenue" for Vic High's fallen soldiers of the First World War.

Photograph by: Adrian Lam, timescolonist.com

Canada's first tree-lined "memorial avenue" for fallen soldiers will be replanted to honour war dead from Victoria High School.

Most of the trees that formed a canopy leading up to the school were felled this year due to rot, 94 years after they were planted in 1917. Two trees had to be removed a few years earlier.

The then newly built Vic High — it was completed in 1914 — lost 82 students and three teachers in the First World War.

A row of 10 red maples will be planted in the same area as before during a special ceremony Nov. 10. They will extend up to the edge of the school from Fernwood Road, along what is still formally part of the Vining Street right-of-way.

"They'll run along Vining Street between the sports field and the new plaza area," said Seamus Howley, director of facilities for the Greater Victoria school district.

Vic High's student-leadership group is putting the occasion together. It will include the 5th Regiment Band, which also performed in 1917.

When the original silver maples were unveiled that year, the Victoria Daily Times wrote: "While they arrest the notice of the passerby, 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 now lie, heroes of empire, beneath the sod of France."

The 1917 ceremony saw 14 saplings planted in front of a crowd of close to 2,500. It was followed by a similar memorial route on Shelbourne Street, as well as more in Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, North Bay and Montreal.

The new maples are part of a landscaping plan for Vic High, linked to recent construction, that calls for a total of 33 replacement trees. The rest, 22 oaks and a Linden tree, will be planted elsewhere on the school property.

The new planting generated debate about what type of trees to use, with members of the local branch of the Western Front Association emphasizing the value of more-durable oaks. Ray Travers, who belongs to the historical research group, called for a mixture of oaks and red maples. He said he would like to see a canopy of trees like before, rather than a column, but district officials said the choice fits with uses of the grounds that have developed.

Dave Pitre, vice-chairman of the Greater Victoria board of education, said the maple trees that were planted marked a significant part of local history and carried a powerful message. He said the choice of red maples as a replacement is appropriate.

In a letter to the Greater Victoria board, Vic High principal Randi Falls and vice-principal Grant Boland said replacing the trees is providing a "unique opportunity" for the school community to again pay homage to those students and staff members who died in the First World War.

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