

SCHOOL MEMORIES – The Girl Gang

by Heather MacAndrew

Jack asked me to speak about Jill from the perspective of growing up and going to school in Victoria. Now – as we all know, memory at our age is fickle. Why can I remember the colours of the dress Jill wore in our grade 6 class photo – mauve, blue and pink - but I can't remember what I did last Friday? So when he asked me, it wasn't a case of having to excavate memories from the back shelves of my brain... because so many of those early memories of Jill are still so remarkably vivid. I think they are so because the bonds that were formed in those years among our particular little group of girl pals were so strong and formative... and cemented from so many shared experiences at a pivotal time in our lives. We had each other from elementary to high school – and beyond.

So the story of Jill and school days is very much the story of how a group of girls needed, relied on, and influenced each other. We didn't think anything of it then but as the years have gone by we've all realized how important those friendships were while navigating the bumpy route to adulthood.

Jill, like many of us in the Victoria of the 1950s and '60s grew up in one house, in one neighbourhood and went to neighbourhood schools: Sir James Douglas, Central Jr. High and Vic High. Jill and Diana Leeming – who is here today – and Robin Allen met in kindergarden; Linda McDonald, joined them in grade 3. Here is what Diana remembers:

I see a bright - in every way - lively, curious little girl.

I remember her hair in curls and how cute she always looked. She loved to learn our lessons and get good marks. Though she and I weren't particularly good at sports, she loved to cheer on our pal Robin who could run like the wind. Jill was always enthusiastic about everything we were doing, even as a little kid.

I came along in grade 6 as the “new girl” and it didn't take long to figure out that Jill and Diana had the distinction of being the two smartest students in Mr. Lister's class. The grade six Jill was energetic, determined, studious and a big Yankees fan. Even then she had strong opinions and pushed herself to always achieve her best – whatever it was.

Jill's house had Danish modern furniture and real art on the walls. Jill's dad drove a new white Pontiac Parisienne and Lois, always smartly dressed, bright and chipper, was almost like

a Donna Reed tv mum in her ability to juggle family and their increasingly busy social lives – a result of Lawrie Wallace being appointed provincial secretary and in charge of BC's centennial of 1958.

Jill's sister Marilyn was mature and all-knowing – or so we thought; and Wendy was the kid sister who somehow had this great thing going with a mug of cocoa every night before bed. I think the rest of us spent considerable time wondering how to con our own parents into such a major and consistent treat.

The transition from elementary school to junior high was big. Junior high was the time of first bras, first periods, nylons and garter belts, shared secrets, and other markers of impending teenage-hood. After grade 7 we didn't ride our bikes anymore – and so the ritual of walking to school and gathering up the girl gang began. It started with Diana at 29 Marlborough, way down at Dallas Rd. who would walk over to Moss St., pick up Robin, and they'd carry on to Fairfield Rd. where they'd meet up with Jill and Linda and together they'd tackle the Moss St. hill to Rockland Ave. where they'd find me waiting.

Here's how Robin remembers those days. She writes from Mexico:

I remember our walks so well, especially when we went to junior high, and later on high school. We always did the same walk. We got along so well! The only thing we ever argued about was ..'who had the best mother?' And Jill, coming to the full height and length and breadth of absolute certainty, almost shouted (but not quite...) that her mother was the best. Lois, undoubtedly the best mother of them all - for Jill was always right – let us make sundaes with ice cream and chocolate sauce and bananas.

As I remember it our morning chatter was usually about the previous night's homework - and our hair. We obsessed about our hair, sleeping on rollers to make it curly or make it straight and dreading outdoor phys ed which combined hair disasters with the hated change room. So on we trekked, every single morning for years.

Our social life in junior high basically revolved around each other. We spent endless hours on the telephone, checking homework, fretting about exams, and planning excursions to the bowling alley where we played 10 pins. We all took home ec and practiced recipes at home. Jill's expertise in baking I'm sure dated back to those days - in spite of the weirdest assortment of home ec teachers you could imagine.

We had pyjama parties and at Jill's we got to sleep in the little playhouse in the back. The most daring thing we did was stay up past midnight when as Robin remembers, "we laughed all night". Except...on one occasion Jill showed us a book she had discovered high in the shelves of her dad's - a former teacher - library. It had to do with adolescent health and signs of puberty. Jill showed us one page that had a new word for us: masturbation. I can still see us in our flannel nighties gasping at the drawings and wondering what on earth nocturnal emissions were. Clearly Mr. Wallace's library was a gold mine of mysteries.

Getting good marks was extremely important to the five of us and we were relentlessly competitive. Jill was always convinced she had failed tests and we never knew whether she carried on about this to make the rest of us feel better when we moaned about the exam's toughness or whether she truly believed she wouldn't get good marks – which she invariably did. Her extreme self-deprecation carried on through her life, always downplaying her achievements which, as time went on only grew more considerable and impressive.

We never went out on school nights, always studied, rarely acted out, and completed homework on time. We were brought up as good middle class girls who were taught to think about others first – and to achieve. We were relentlessly earnest and polite. We looked somewhat enviously at classmates like Jane Holland who wasn't a goody-goody like us and who was unafraid of authority figures and saw school as a great opportunity to push boundaries. Jill's only vice, bordering on obsession, was baseball. She was a dyed in the wool Yankees fan – and – now remember the early sixties were the glory years of the Yanks with Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris becoming folk heroes. The World Series was THE most important fall event for Jill. She knew every player, their history of home runs, shut-outs and on and on.

We had a few wonderful teachers at Central. Mrs. Rance taught from a wheel chair after cancer left her unable to walk. Not only that – she had her car outfitted especially so she could continue to drive. Not that long ago Jill and Di and I recalled the day she came into class holding her new driver's license high in the air for us all to see and the whole class burst into applause. She was remarkable as was Olive Heritage who was made principal – the first ever woman in Victoria to be made principal of a public school.

After Central it was Vic High. And in high school Jill really shone. She was active in clubs and worked on the school annual. But perhaps her proudest achievement was making the girls' basketball team, the Tigers – her dad beaming proudly at games. And of course she continued to get top marks.

The down side of high school included the endless rules, dress codes, rivalries and the boys who were never interested in us. Our last year, 1965-66 was just the beginning of big

social changes. Stephen Bigsby came to talk to our grade 12 class about university life and said just enough provocative and irreverent things to shake us up and make us think that university might just let us discover who we really were. There was no question that we wouldn't go to university. We had been told we were "university material" from grade 7. So in the fall of 1966 off we went ... and after that into divergent lives – but we kept in touch.

How do we become the people we are? I don't know what combination of role models from our post-war, middle class upbringing, and encouragement of each other planted the seeds in all of us to become the feminists we did. Certainly Jill grew up with the idea that she could do or be anything she chose and somewhere through the years we became convinced that she would be come the first woman prime minister. We were utterly sure of her competence even if she wasn't.

Linda McDonald writes from Vancouver:

We have aged; we are no longer those rambunctious young kids, playing sports together, doing well in school, and adventuring together in friendships. But I think in many ways we still are those kids, untouched by time.

As Diana writes:

Jill , Robin, Linda , Heather & I formed friendships that have lasted to this day. Jill was a wonderful, lifelong friend.

Jill, you were both tenacious and self-effacing to the end, determined to carry on when you could barely walk, not wanting to trouble anyone, or have attention drawn to yourself and your illness. You never wanted anyone to make a fuss about you ... so now this is our chance to celebrate and honour you. And what a perfect place to do it – in the auditorium named after your dad.

Thank you Jill for being such an integral part of my and the group's growing up...for your encouragement and unwavering belief that women can and should be able to do anything they choose. You have left many of us who have known you for so long with memories that will never fade.