

## Artifacts in the Air Ducts Or Indiana Jim Connor and the Javelin of Doom

Seventy-six-year-old Jim Connor is such a nice guy that sometimes you need to poke him with your finger to make sure he is not an apparition. Every Tuesday morning, his trim figure, clad in his usual plaid shirt, crosses the threshold of the Alumni Archives Office, and begins spouting his well wishes to all. Then he settles into his chair at the table in the north end of the room and begins his chosen tasks for that day. His patience is legendary. It seems boundless, and his curiosity about the past at Vic High excites everyone in the room.



Jim finished his working career in 1999 as the head engineer at Victoria High School. He followed in the notable footsteps of people like Jim Taylor (1914), Jim Taylor Junior, local sports enthusiast Tony Grover and Bill McFetridge. Jim was the fifth chief engineer at Vic High between the years of 1914 and 1999.

Before his 3<sup>rd</sup> class boiler ticket led him to Victoria High, the only school at that time with this designation in the district, he experienced a number of occupations that had a bearing on his role at Vic High. Well okay, maybe not his first job as a box maker at the Victoria Box and Paper Company. He says it was in the red-light district of Victoria, and as you may know, not a lot has changed at the lower end of Johnson Street that is now referred to as the “Red zone.”

He apprenticed as a welder at Yarrows, then a family calling to roam the seas seized him, and he began working with the Department of Transport aboard the Estevan Lighthouse tender. Here he was introduced to boiler rooms as a coal stoker/fireman. Jim loves the principles of steam energy.

He moved on to the Federal Fisheries patrol boat *Howay*, where he toiled in the engine room as an apprentice oiler, just like Steve McQueen’s character, Jake Holman, in the film *The Sand Pebbles*. Twelve years went by before he took a shore job with the school district. The anchor slipped, and within two years he returned to the Marine Fisheries aboard the *Hunter Point* as an engineer, 4<sup>th</sup> class.

Eventually, he returned to the school district, where he worked as a custodian for a number of years and at a variety of schools, including Camosun College. At Camosun he received the 3<sup>rd</sup> class boiler designation that soon had him stalking the bowels and tunnels of Victoria High.

One will note that nowhere in the list of his various occupations is the title “Seeker and Purveyor of Artefacts”; however, Jim worked in a museum disguised as a school, so odd things happen.

Jim finished his working career as the head engineer at Victoria High School. There isn't a nook or cranny in the building he hasn't investigated. I had a personal tour through the school,

with Jim as my guide, and I had no idea so many unusual and interesting places existed in the old building. Just as well. During my days at Vic High, I had enough trouble keeping myself settled in a classroom without the knowledge of all these mysterious nooks and crannies just a shuffle away. One's imagination runs rampant.

In 1998 Jim, on a routine maintenance investigation of the return airflow ducts, noticed a glint of light emerging from the shadows of a supposedly empty air duct. Curious, he reached cautiously in and was poked by the tapered point of what seemed to be a metal rod. Intrigued, he slipped his hand carefully around the metal and gave it a gentle tug. It wasn't lodged, so now assured its removal wouldn't explode his boiler or implode the building, he continued pulling. Out came 15 inches of tapered metal and 7 feet 3 inches of ash wood shaft. "Goodness," he thought, "it's a spear." Well it wasn't actually; it was a javelin.

Not exactly sure what to do next, he offered his find to the archives. They were not sure what to do with it either: therefore, they did the only logical thing they could think of and hung it up, securely, on the wall. Now anyone coming in could see it in all its glory, and the archivists now felt safe, knowing they were armed and ready to ward off any hostile members of the public, waiting for the opportunity to come screaming through the door and thrashing through the records and artefacts in room 104.

There the javelin hung, collecting dust, for fifteen years. It became a mascot. Not the fuzzy lovable type but a mascot nevertheless.

The guessing game was on. Was it a muscle-bound, ill-sighted athlete that had tossed this javelin from the track, through a window, down a corridor, and into an air duct? Or, was it the loot from a botched heist? Botched heist was our conclusion. Fifteen years have passed since that day, and it was agreed that a story was warranted.

"C'mon," I chirped, "we need a photo to liven this story up! Let's get it down." "Not so fast," Linda Smith replied. "It needs to be done carefully. She was right of course. An eight-and-a-half-foot-long spear demands respect while you are milling about in the caboose shape of the archives.

"Look, everybody," I continued. "Put this javelin under all your arms, and then it will appear in the photo as if I have shish-kebabbed you all.

"C'mon, it'll be fun." "No it won't. It'll be stupid," they chanted. "Tough!" I replied. "Okay maybe a little stupid, but let's do it anyway."



Unfortunately, nobody seemed to have any idea how to form a straight line, and the kids loitering in the hall couldn't get enough of the commotion. Finally we told them to "Hit the road!" and we snapped our photo. A good special effect it is not; however, we included it in the article anyway.

I snapped another photo of Jim posing like a Roman sentry, standing guard on Hadrian's Wall, and then we retreated to the archives room.

On our return, I became aware of the trademark on the javelin: Gill: Athletic Equipment. It resembled a coat-of-arms, certainly not a modern logo. It aroused my interest, and I wondered if our pointy-headed mascot was more than a curiosity.



We weighed it, measured it, photographed it, and then began a search on the Internet. I sent off the photos and particulars to the contact site for Gill Athletics. Two weeks went by without a response. Determined I would find its origin, I contacted a firm mentioned in association with the U.S. Track and Field Team site.

The Track Man, LLC;  
Ron Johnson Rebuilding;  
The Javelin Man

Mr. Johnson specializes in the rebuilding and refurbishing of javelins. My guess was that this was our guy. Within less than an hour, the following response arrived:

“That is a nice find; I have 2 of them exactly the same. Made out of ash and I am not sure when this model was produced. Somewhere between 1922 and 1955 I believe. I have manufactured javelins with AMF Pacer (Dick Held) in the 1980s, OTE in the 1990s and Gill in 1987 and 1999 only because they bought AMF Pacer and OTE out. Here is a tid-bit on Harry Gill:

Founder Harry Gill was hailed as one of the greatest athletes of his generation, winning the American All-Around Championship (equivalent to the Olympic decathlon) in 1900. He started the company in 1918 when he became so dissatisfied with the equipment then available he decided to make his own. His breakthrough ash javelin was so well-received, he expanded into other areas. By 1922 Gill was offering a full line of superior track and field equipment, which helped propel the University of Illinois team he coached to 19 Big Ten track and field championships.”

I went further into Harry Gill's background and found out he was a Canadian looking for some real competition in his specialty. Perhaps, like a lot of wonderful Canadian athletes, he went south to escape our Canadian prejudice for sports associated with snow and ice.

How about that? It seemed our mascot had suddenly shed its skin as a curiosity and emerged as an artifact.

I'll never look at that old javelin the same way. I feel like a coach that has been neglecting his prodigy. Suddenly we were in the presence of a star.

We'll never determine what that javelin was doing in that air duct. Was it a lone perpetrator? Perhaps its hiding spot came about from a masterful conspiracy involving the FBI, or the CIA, the Mafia, or Fidel Castro. Our biggest surprise came when we were not contacted by Prime Minister Harper staking federal claim on the javelin's existence. We were shocked when

Senator Mike Duffy didn't demand a receipt for his senatorial expenses. We thought it most unusual when Toronto mayor Rob Ford didn't ask to smoke it. And, concerning CSIS, we weren't at all surprised when they threw up their hands, proclaiming that the technology associated with this potential instrument of war was far beyond the means of their IT department.

No matter, Jim feels pretty good about his find. He wishes he had an opportunity to thank the former student who gave him this opportunity to celebrate the retrieval of a real artefact. Mind you, Jim also wishes he had an opportunity to meet the wise guy who left a 12-pound shot put nestled in the toilet bowl in the boys' change room.

The mystery javelin will be on display at the Centennial open house in May. There you may bask in all its eminence; however, this will be a view-only display. Remember, Alexander the Great and an army of Macedonians conquered most of the known world hurling these things all over the place. Maybe, even into an air duct.



A special thank you to Ron Johnson: The Javelin Man. He took time out of his busy day and added a little drama to our story. It was much appreciated.

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Barrie Moen, Class of 1969