

The “pint parade” and a man to remember

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They called it “the pint parade” and in its 1950’s heyday it proved one of the best ways to increase blood donations for The Red Cross. And its best feature was that it was organized by a group of Victoria High School kids, teenagers with a desire to leave a better mark on their community than graffiti.

They persuaded the manager of the Odeon movie theatre to put on a Sunday night show with free admission to blood donors. The first Sunday night movie was a sell out, as was every other “pint parade” movie night that followed.

Prime mover and organizer of the idea – his first major community service project – was Hugh Curtis, a kid who grew up with a sense of community service taught to him by father Hugh Austin Curtis, a Victoria school trustee for many years and later a Victoria City council member, and his mother Helen. The young son never lost his desire to serve.

When telling the story of “the pint parade” he would recall that first Sunday night at the movies and remember the concern as opening night approached that his idea might prove to be disastrously wrong. He could still savour the feeling of relief as he and his teenage friends watched every seat in the Odeon occupied that night and for subsequent “pint parades’.

Organization and hard work had paid off and the lessons learned when he was 17 come 18 were never forgotten as the years rolled by and Hugh Curtis

became an integral part of the political fabric of British Columbia. It was said of Hugh that he ran scared when he first sought and won public office in 1962 at the age of 30, and that he ran scared in every subsequent municipal and provincial election he contested – even the one in which he was returned by acclamation.

It was, he would say, the only way he knew how to run for office. To be confident, to be organized – but to never take anything for granted. It was a formula that saw him win every Saanich municipal election between 1962 and 1972 and every provincial election between 1972 and 1986 – the year he vacated the field.

It was a formula appreciated by members of ex-MLA's with every publication of Orders Of The Day – and between annual dinners at Government House. Those social events of the year hit an all time high a few years ago when internationally renowned song writer, pianist, entertainer David Foster performed in private concert for the Association at Government House. That night to remember didn't just happen – it happened courtesy the generosity of David Foster and the organizing energy of Hugh Curtis.

Complimenting him on the success of that evening he would thank you but immediately stress out that he had a great deal of help from other Association members, the staff of Government House and from donors who made it possible for the night to be as successful financially as it was artistically. That attitude was a Curtis trademark: recruit the best help available, and never forget to give credit where it is due.

Praise him for his work in rescuing Victoria's Gorge Waterway from a derelict skunk hollow to today's pristine in-city water-park jewel and he would immediately recite a list of the names of "those who made it possible." Remind him that some of the Saanich municipal bureaucrats on that list often complained their Mayor – "the bloody kid" – was driving them crazy and he would answer: "Is that what they said? Well, I guess I was, but we did get things done – and they were great to work with. John Tribe the administrator, Gordon Hayward, a first class clerk, and Neville Life, the perfect engineer for an emerging municipality." Hugh Curtis may have been the captain, but he never forgotten that Tribe and Hayward were the navigators and Life the engineer as Saanich shook off the mantle of hayseed cousin and steered its way to major-player role in the capital region.

When regional districts were created in 1965-6 Curtis became the first Chairman of the Capital Regional District and led the push for the eventually coordinated sewer system for the four core municipalities of Victoria, Oak Bay, Esquimalt and Saanich. When the Municipal Finance Authority was created to provide funds for such projects, Curtis was its first chairman.

It was on his watch as CRD Chairman that the first regional parks were acquired. They now number in the 30's – plus a spider web of incredible walking trails from urban ambles to wilderness wild, and all harbingers of what would become known as the green generation. Hugh Curtis was talking "green" and acting "green" years before the word became part of the language of the day.

His community service extended far beyond elected office projects. His work with the Foster Foundation was well known. A few years ago the Variety Club

of BC voted him the outstanding member of the year. Other organizations honoured him with life memberships in recognition of his contributions. Among them: The BC Civil Liberties Association, the Union of BC Municipalities and the Victoria Conservatory of Music. In 2002 he became a Freeman of Saanich. He was an honorary member of the Firefighters Association – and, of course, secretary-treasurer of the Association of Former MLA's and the driving force behind the monthly newsletter.

At the provincial level Hugh was elected as a Progressive Conservative MLA in 1972 but joined the Social Credit “coalition” for the 1975 election that saw the Socreds returned to power. He held three cabinet portfolios over the next decade serving as Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Provincial Secretary, Minister of Finance and Chairman of the Treasury Board.

He held the latter role in the 1979-83 period as BC encountered the ugly world of “recession” – a word Hugh stubbornly refused enunciate until spending cuts became daily announcements and deficit budgets proved unavoidable. Those were the days when cabinet colleagues with pet projects rejected at treasury board tagged Curtis with the title “Doctor No” and, behind his back but not too softly, referred to him as arrogant and ego-driven.

They were tumultuous years when labour unrest and spending cut protests rocked the province. But the administration stayed on its tight-fisted course and it is a matter of record that tough though those times were, the Bennett government was re-elected in 1979 – albeit by a slim five seat majority – and again in 1983. The voters may not have liked the hard times, but were obviously prepared to accept them.

There was a price to pay for public service above and beyond the call of duty. In his quieter moments Hugh would reflect that he often let political and community duties get in the way of family responsibilities. He was 24 when he married Sheila Diane Halford on March 16, 1957, a union that produced two sons and a daughter – Gary Hugh Austin, David Charles, and Susan Diane Helen.

In a 2002 interview with newspaper reporter Jim Gibson he confessed that devotion to politics on top of his sales manager job in radio had been costly at the family level. “I was an absentee father,” he told Gibson. While other dads spent their weekends with their children, Curtis spent his at Saanich Municipal Hall at his Mayor’s desk. He told the reporter “I can’t say they grew up in Saanich municipal hall, but I remember being there many Saturdays and Sundays. Allowing them to ride on the elevator or play at one desk.”

If he had little time to spend with his children in his municipal period, he had even less when he reached provincial cabinet status, especially during the 1980’s recession years. He once mused that in those crisis riddled years he saw more of Bill Bennett than his children.

There is a touch of irony to the fact that the Hugh-Sheila marriage survived the toughest years but faltered and came to an end shortly after he left public office in 1986. Sheila passed away in the spring of 2009.

After leaving politics Curtis joined Belsberg’s First City Trust in Vancouver with an illustrious title of vice-president. He later confessed it was not one of his better career moves. After two years First City and Curtis parted company

with what Hugh told reporter Gibson was as an out of court settlement (he had sued for wrongful dismissal) and “not generous by today’s standards.”

He didn’t sit around moping and was soon up to his ears in Variety Club work and other projects – including the David Foster Foundation and possibly his best-loved jobs as treasurer of the Association of Former MLAs and editor of *Orders Of The Day*.

Perhaps the greatest achievement in his years of remarkable public service is the fact that from “pint parade” to this date his name was never been associated with scandal. In BC where politics has always been a blood sport the closest Hugh ever came to “disgrace” was when he was banished from the Legislative Chamber by Deputy Speaker Walter Davidson.

It was the afternoon session of Monday, May 11, 1981. The late Al Passarell, (NDP-Atlin) had accused Energy Minister Bob McClelland of “cultural genocide” against the Nisga’a by permitting tailings from a molybdenum mine to be dumped into Alice Arm. McClelland objected to the language, said Passarell should be talking to the Environment ministry, and accused the member from Atlin of having no regard for the rules of the house.

As both sides traded insults across the floor Curtis rose to quell the verbal storm. He suggested MLAs should be careful with their words because things said without thought were better left unspoken. His mini-sermon brought a shout from New Democrat Graham Lea that the finance minister should go and “play premier on his own time” and suggested Curtis was angling for Bill Bennett’s job. The Premier was absent from the House for the exchange.

The usually equable Hugh, whose “golden throat of radio” baritone voice had minutes before delivered advice on decorum and words best not spoken, forgot how sound that message was and shouted: “Cheap shot! That’s just the sort of thing you’re known for – cheap shots.” The House was in uproar, Davidson pounded his gavel demanding “order!” but was ignored until he finally rose in his place and even as Hugh hurled another “cheap shot” at Lea – ordered the minister of finance to leave the chamber.

Shane McCune writing in Province newspaper reported. “His face crimson, Curtis stalked out.” And those who knew Hugh Curtis recognized the embarrassment being shown in the flushed face was for being part of the kind of unseemly performance he abhorred and had advised against.

It wasn’t his only embarrassment in office, or his worst. That came in 1982, smack in the middle of the recession when it was revealed – to the horror of Curtis – that B.C Taxpayers had footed the bill for Broadway theatre tickets for two cabinet ministers – Energy Minister McLelland and Finance Minister Curtis – and senior staffers while they were in New York on official government business. Subsequent investigation established that while the charges were true the theatre ticket costs had been allocated to government by error. Minister of Finance Curtis immediately ordered all who had attended the Broadway shows to follow his lead and immediately reimburse the Treasury.

The Opposition accepted the explanation and the quick return of the cash but couldn’t resist tweaking the minister scandal never touched with reminders of his choice of entertainment that night in New York – the Broadway rave hit *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*” which later became a movie with the

same title. Hugh chuckled about it later but admitted it wasn't funny at the time. As he told me at the time: "It was really a great show, entertaining, funny – but not easy to explain to some elderly voters that I'd been to see a play in New York not to visit a house of ill repute in Texas."

Looking back across close to 60-years of community service the two items noted above pale to insignificance. For six decades he walked the mine-strewn fields of BC politics and emerged without a serious scar.

He was called many things on the journey; arrogant, aloof, a tantrum thrower, a loyal man to work for, a hard man to work for, industrious, workaholic, a politically expedient thinker when it came to decisions – but he was never called incompetent or dishonest.

And in the rough and tumble world of BC politics, especially at the provincial cabinet level, that's about the highest accolade a politician can ever hope to earn. Hugh died in late May – an honourable man.