



Some Recollections on Victoria and its High School

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Class of 1955

125th Anniversary Celebration,
May 2001



In a strange way it was great to be born in 1938 – times were so bad they just had to get better. Not only was the country still mired in economic depression but a terrible war was imminent. Despite this horror, shielded by supportive and sacrificing parents I experienced Victoria right from the beginning as an idyllic fairyland, a warm cocoon. Culturally secure behind the tweed curtain and uncorrupted by television, pizza, jet planes, or even the B. C. Ferries, the Victoria of my childhood and coming of age offered a unique combination of quaint formality, insularity, extraordinary access to nature, and freedoms for kids simply unthinkable today. What better metaphor for this Brig o' Doon than the "midnight boat" to Vancouver. And so in 1959, when the front page of the Times pictured the very last passenger (my father!) stepping aboard the very last "boat," Victoria finally joined the rest of the mid-century world. How thoughtful of her to wait till we'd grown up.

Thinking back almost 50 years to high school days I remember how long I'd been in awe of Victoria High School, and how quickly and totally I came under its spell once I arrived at its gates. From age 9 or 10 I had fallen in with a wonderful group of kids who all lived, as I did, within a block or two of Sir James Douglas School. Their older siblings loved to scare us with tall tales of Vic High – the outrageous piles of work, tough bullies, student geniuses, legendary disciplinarians (Miss Cameron, Mr. Roper, ...), etc. The mystique was further reinforced by teacher friends of our parents, often present at dinners and teas. Getting through this place was going to be a challenge, but I would be ready for it! Most valuable in retrospect were the superb older-kid role models with which we were blessed -- amazingly we weren't too dumb to respect them and learn from them. It is curious to note that at least five people from our little enclave traveling the Fairfield to Vic High route between 1950 and 1960 became career physicists. In my case at least the local peer group, especially my next-door neighbour Barry Turner, were powerful and positive influences as I struggled to find my bearings.

I spent three exciting, fulfilling, and exceedingly busy years at Victoria High. Without exception the teachers knew and loved their subjects, and their love rubbed off on me. For example, our somewhat mysterious Grade 10 homeroom and French teacher Miss van Engel, certified by lunchroom rumour to have been a member of the Dutch resistance during WWII, chronicled life in Europe so vividly that I signed up for German with her to learn more about it. A casual choice at the time, learning the German language and culture later changed my life. For additional culture, my Oscar Street neighbour and later Grade 12 French teacher Mrs. Hodson would invite a couple of us to her home from time to time to share slideshows of her summer trips to France and Switzerland. She and her good friends Mrs EleanorMcKee and Miss Enid McKee also made it perfectly clear that our attendance at the Victoria Symphony would be *de rigueur*.

I didn't realize it till much later, but by wanting so badly to learn and explore all the stuff from class, I spontaneously found ways to study and relate material efficiently and intensely, garnering a firm foundation of knowledge that serves in good stead to this day. But more important to a teenager I was thereby able to free up lots of time for enjoying other high priority pursuits like sports and later girls without affecting my grades. Just as the teachers instilled love for learning, a subset of them also fostered great enthusiasm for games and sports. Too clumsy for serious basketball or soccer, I took up rugby instead. Amusingly all the rugby coaches were science teachers -- perhaps they considered the sport as physics of collisions, or mechanics of sodden soil. In any case they taught us very well. Most of the grade 10's had never played before, but by grade 12 we held our own against the very-English private schools who'd been playing all their lives, and most important of all we annihilated the nasty neighbours from Oak Bay. Several of us even went on to play for the varsity at Victoria College and/or UBC.

As did almost every Victorian going to University in those days, I first attended Victoria College and then UBC, where I stayed on to take a masters degree. Wanting a change of scene, I then applied to PhD programs at several fancy U.S. Universities. Almost as a shot in the dark I chose Princeton, naively reasoning I couldn't go too wrong since Einstein had been there. I never guessed it would be where I'd spend the rest of my life! With a magnificent historical campus in a beautiful little town half-way between New York and Philadelphia, Princeton's small size and warm, informal atmosphere turned out to be a perfect match.

On graduating with a PhD from Princeton in 1966 I accepted a postdoctoral fellowship to work at a research laboratory in Hamburg Germany, choosing this option in no small part because of studying German at Vic High. (The first movie I saw in cold-war Hamburg was John le Carré's *der Spion, der aus der Kälte kam.*) Returning to Princeton a couple of years later to join the faculty, I've been there ever since, teaching and pursuing a research program in high-energy particle physics at several international laboratories around the world. I'm now on leave from Princeton for two years to head an experiment at Stanford, in which about 600 physicists from 9 countries are involved, including groups at U Vic and UBC. Whimsically named BaBar, the experiment's modest goal is to understand the experimental observation that the universe today does not contain antimatter, whereas all modern theories of cosmology require matter and antimatter to have been present in equal amounts at the "beginning". Somehow an imbalance developed as the universe expanded and cooled, and bloody good for us that it did, as otherwise we'd all be gamma rays.

On a more personal note, shortly after arriving in Hamburg, Germany I was married to Norma Askeland of New York, whom I'd met while writing my thesis at Princeton -- our first date was to a hockey game at Madison Square Garden (standing room) so she was well warned. A graduate of Columbia, Norma has just retired from her position as Clinical Nurse-Practitioner and Instructor of Psychiatric Nursing at Mercer County College, New Jersey. We have two children: Peter, a CPA in Silicon Valley, and Ian, an M.D. at the University of Michigan. While a University student and for many years thereafter I spent a lot of time playing lacrosse and rugby, activities that were a marvelous help in meeting people and seeing the country when I went to Princeton and then to Germany. I still participate vicariously off and on as faculty advisor to the Princeton lacrosse and hockey teams. My family and I visit BC every year both for business and pleasure: my research involves collaboration with TRIUMF physicists, I am still in close contact with many friends from Victoria and UBC, and my sister Jean lives on Salt Spring Island. While still in deep denial that one day I'll have to retire, I've hung on to some nice land there for when the time inevitably comes.