Vic High's first technical class in 1920 in the woodwork shop on the Central School grounds. Captain George Breadner stands at the left

THE STORY OF FAIREY TECH, 1949-2011
Two articles by Ken Roueche (VHS '63), Denis Johnston (VHS '67) and Dr. Randall Fairey, with additional material by Peter L. Smith (VHS '49)

Technical education at Vic High dates back to 1920, when the main Vic High building was only six years old. Peter Smith wrote a short history in 2001 for the souvenir program for Vic High 125:

"Although Technical Education had been introduced to Victoria High School in 1920, students were required to walk over to Central School for their practical shop work. In 1928, the School Board decided to build a structure that would embody practical and technical work, but the necessary by-law was defeated three times by Victoria ratepayers.

"It was not until World War II that the first shops were built at Victoria High. Facilities were requested for servicemen in carpentry, bricklaying, metalwork, and other trades. Instructional and material costs were to be borne by the War Emergency Training Programme, with the City supplying $8,263 of the $18,000 price tag. The unit was built by soldier trainees, assisted by Vic High students. The facility was opened on February 10, 1943 by Mayor Andrew McGavin."

A driving force behind its construction would have been

F.T. FAIREY (1887-1971): THE MAN WHO INSPIRED "FAIREY TECH"

Most students – indeed most teachers – attending classes at Fairey Tech don't know who the building is named after. But the influence of Col. F.T. (Frank) Fairey is present nonetheless, unquestionably one of the strongest influences on education in BC in the 20th

Col. F.T. Fairey at Fairey Tech

century. Indeed, his ideas still affect current educational thinking in the province.

Francis Thrower Fairey was born in Liverpool, England, the 5th of 12 children. His father William was a skilled joiner/carpenter who was determined that his sons would be apprenticed to various trades. At age 13, Frank was to be apprenticed as a clerk to a major shipping company; but on the day he was to begin work, a teacher sensing the boy's intelligence and natural aptitude for education appealed to his father to allow Frank to train as a pupil-teacher. William Fairey agreed, reportedly remarking: "It wouldn't hurt to have one gentleman in the family!"

Frank began the three-year teaching apprenticeship required before enrolling in the English equivalent of a teacher's college. In this time, he attended classes for half of

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Vic High students help in the construction of the wartime training facility

Col. F.T. Fairey, a long-time BC teacher who was then the province's Director of Industrial and Technical Education and also Regional Director of the Canadian Vocational Training Program. (See accompanying article.) It was an open secret that many boys lied about their age in order to enlist; it appears that putting the soldier trainees to work was one way of keeping them away from combat zones until they were old enough to take an active part.

Around 1946, by which time Fairey was the province's Deputy Minister of Education, the decision was made to provide new Industrial Arts facilities at Vic High built onto the south end of the wartime unit. The addition consisted of Electrical, Automotive, Sheet Metal, Welding, and two Woodwork shops plus three classrooms on the ground floor, with two drafting rooms and two classrooms on the upper floor. In May 1949, amid a post-war construction boom in the Greater Victoria School District, it was announced that Vic High's new technical-vocational building was nearly completed. "It is a fine building and a credit to School District 61," said a spokesperson, "built to serve all Greater Victoria."

Classes started in the new building in September 1949, and an official opening took place on November 7. Building costs of some $270,000 were shared by the federal government (35%), provincial government
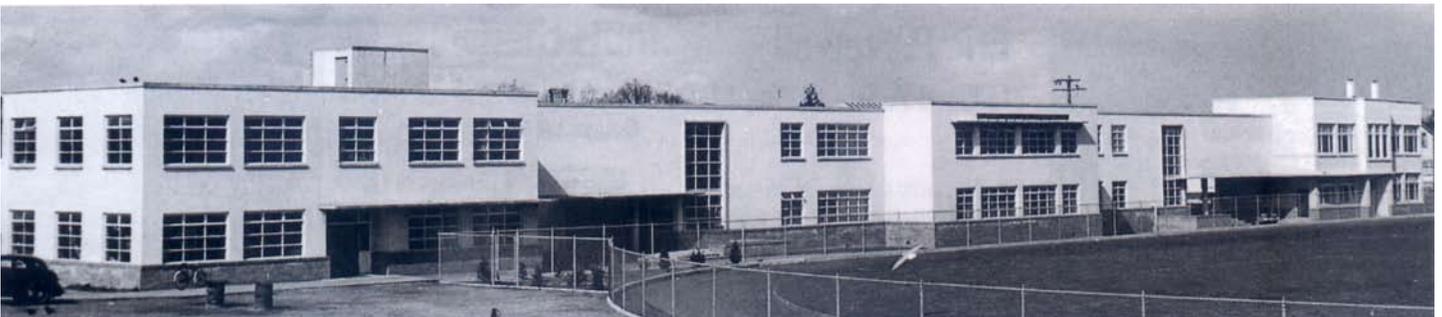

Long-time teacher Jim Hill with students in the automotive shop, 1964

(35%) and Greater Victoria School District (30%). Guests at the opening ceremony included BC's Premier "Boss" Johnson, his Minister of Education, and the federal Minister of Labour, while the official "ribbon cutting" was performed by Victoria's oldest ex-student, a 93-year-old man who had attended school in Esquimalt in 1862. Appropriately, the new building was named after Col. Fairey, who had contributed so much to Technical Education in the province.

Fairey Tech immediately became a focal point for technical education in Victoria and beyond. Besides vocational programs, academic students could take electives there, and adult education classes ran four nights per week. In the mid-1950s, further additions were made to the building: a much larger auto-shop complex was added to the south-west side, and an electronics shop and classroom were added to the second floor.

In recent years the Fairey Technical Centre has housed Career Preparation programs in electronics and electrical, carpentry and joinery, auto body, auto mechanics, and metal fabrication and machining, plus junior and senior courses in drafting, industrial design, metalwork, woodworking, power mechanics, and art

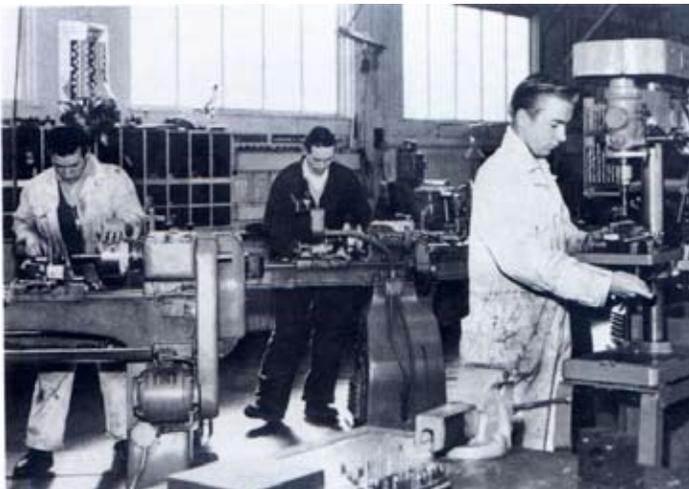The F.T. Fairey Vocational-Technical Unit opened in 1949

Stu Gibson's class in the machine shop, the oldest part of the Fairey Tech complex, early 1950s

metal and jewelry. Students who are focused in their trade area also have the opportunity to enrol in ACE IT apprenticeship programs, which are partnered with local colleges, in Carpentry, Cabinetmaking (joinery), Automotive Service, Welding, Electrical, Sheet Metal, and Automotive Collision Repair. These students are able to complete their Level 1 or first year of apprenticeship training while still attending high school.

The building has seen some great years but is getting quite worn out, the wood shavings embedded in its concrete ceilings a visual reminder of the bygone age that produced it. While now there is a dance studio on the second floor of the original Fairey Tech building, the Vic High Dancers have to cope with a severely sloping floor, a result of the ground settling beneath the foundation.

For half of the 20th century, the F.T. Fairey Technical-Vocational Building was the flagship of technical education in Victoria, and to some extent in British Columbia. To this day, grads of its programs feel a kinship in the high standards they carried into the trades and into other careers. While the closing of Fairey Tech in 2011 marks the end of an important landmark, it also provides the newly built technical unit with an important tradition and a springboard into the future. Fairey Tech – in both its old and new incarnations – is a vital part of the traditions of heritage and achievement that make Vic High such a special school.

Students in the machine shop, 1957

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each day and taught younger children for the other half.

Only a month after Frank began his new program, his father was killed in a fall at a job site, leaving Mrs. Fairey with 11 children and one on the way. At a family conference it was decided that Frank should continue with his studies while the family would begin the process of emigrating to Canada, starting with the older siblings.

Frank arrived in Canada in 1907 to join his older brothers, who were working as bricklayers in Victoria. On the strength of his credentials and references, he quickly obtained a temporary teaching certificate, travelling by rail and stagecoach to Quesnel for his first assignment. Later he returned to Victoria to teach at Corrig College, a private boys' school.

Frank's long career in technical and vocational education began in 1910 when he was apprenticed to W.H. Binns, the province's Supervisor of Manual Training. Following this new path, in 1912 he moved to Vancouver and taught manual training at several Vancouver schools, including Lord Nelson School in the West End where his future wife Hilda Gillanders was on staff. They were married in 1915; by that time his mother and the rest of the family had joined Frank and his older siblings in Vancouver.

In 1916 Frank joined the staff of King Edward High School, where the province's first Technical Program had begun three years earlier. He was proud to be there when the first Technical Class graduated the next spring,

and received an inscribed watch in appreciation.

That spring, a week after his second child was born, Frank enlisted in the Canadian Army. He saw action in France with the First Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade, rising to the rank of Corporal. He was demobilized in April 1919 and returned to teach at King Edward High School Technical Division. At the same time, he remained in the Army Reserves to pursue officer training, eventually rising to be Lieutenant-Colonel and commanding officer of his reserve regiment, the Irish Fusiliers of Canada. Thereafter he was known as "Col. Fairey" – a very useful title when the next war came.

In the 1920s, King Edward High's Technical Division changed into Vancouver Technical School and moved to its present location on East Broadway. Frank described the school as "wonderful, growing in both size and reputation for excellence." When its first principal retired, Frank moved up to Vice-Principal. In 1938, when the province's long-time Director of Technical Education retired, Col. F.T. Fairey was appointed to replace him, and Frank and his family moved to Victoria.

The outbreak of World War II brought tremendous focus to his new position. During the war, he was not only Director of Industrial and Technical Education but also Regional Director of the Canadian Vocational Training Program. Frank recalled: "We had classes going day and night for welders and electricians, men for the

Col. Fairey helping to inspect cadets, probably in the 1930s

Receiving his honorary degree from UBC, 1948

army, the navy and the air force in numerous trades. We trained 40,000 people in simple skills…. I had something I have never had before or since: unlimited authority. I could say, 'I want that building.' I had authority from the Government to take it, and equip it, so that we could turn out young people with simple skills. That's where you learn the tremendous potential there is in young people. Girls as well as boys."

Frank was also appointed to Canada's Vocational Advisory Council, which entailed trips to Ontario twice annually. On factory inspection tours he observed that the skilled mechanics in the shops he visited were mostly from England. That realization prompted a change in Frank's priorities: "That's what made me adopt for the rest of my life the repair of the great gap between the ordinary machine operator, the man who could do simple skills, and the engineer. We talk about the shortage of engineers. We were not short of them, but there were too many engineers acting as technicians – and they weren't competent at it either. What we were short of was the technician, the man of practical experience, who could transmit the thoughts and ideas of the designer into real practical things and to lay out the work for the worker to accomplish."

Frank took his strong leadership into other areas as well. In the early years of the war he was in charge of vocational classes for the unemployed in both Vancouver and Victoria. He

was also responsible for the Vancouver School of Navigation.

In 1945 Frank was appointed BC's second Deputy Minister of Education, succeeding former Vic High principal S.J. Willis. The years following World War II were especially challenging for educators as war veterans returned to the work force and the first "baby boomers" were on the verge of entering school. Frank was responsible for reorganizing BC's school system when 650 School Districts were reduced to 75.

In October 1948, UBC awarded F.T. Fairey an honorary Doctor of Laws. The citation read in part: "In honouring him this university pays tribute to his wide and distinguished service in war and peace in both executive and administrative positions; and to his administration of his present post which has been characterized by genuine insight into the nature of educational objectives, and by the thorough understanding of the educational administrator's function in supporting those objectives.

In November 1949, one day before Frank's 62nd birthday, the new F.T. Fairey Technical Unit at Victoria High School was officially opened. Accompanying Dr. Fairey were the Hon. W.T. Straith, Minister of Education, the Hon. Humphrey Mitchell, Federal Minister of Labour, and the Hon. Byron "Boss" Johnson, Premier of British Columbia.

At an age when many teachers and public servants are looking toward retirement, Frank Fairey seemed to seek

At the opening of Fairey Tech, showing some VIPs how to use a jig saw: Col. Fairey (right) with Education Minister W.T. Straith, federal Labour Minister Humphrey Mitchell, and Premier Byron "Boss" Johnson

out new challenges. He was recruited to be an adviser to several UNESCO missions and conferences, including a mission to Burma to report on its education system. Later, as a Member of Parliament, he was a member of Canada's delegation to NATO, and in 1956 he represented Canada at UNESCO's ninth general session in New Delhi, India.

In 1953 Frank Fairey retired as Deputy Minister and in the same year was elected as Victoria's MP in the Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent. Even in this new career, his driving force was the same. "I went to Parliament for one main purpose," he later recalled. "I wanted to do what I could to urge the Federal Government to assist technical education. I said, 'You can't expect provincial authorities to build technical schools; they haven't got the money; their classes are smaller and their equipment is expensive; you have to pay top wages to top mechanics to teach; and you must train them how to teach.'"

"I said to the Minister of Labour, 'Give me $10 million and we'll start three schools. You don't need too many of them: you don't need one in each city – they'll come later – but let's make a start.' The B.C. Institute of Technology … was the kind of thing I was after, financed by the Federal Government. In this way you would be able to train those people at a different level than the professional engineer – the Technician, the man who knows his materials, knows his science, who knows the limitations of tools or materials and the potentialities of the machinist, a man who can appreciate and direct the personalities of the men working under him – Technician. That in my opinion … was the great lack and what we have to prepare for if we are going to have a first-rate work force in Canada."

Frank caused quite a stir by suggesting that significant responsibility for education be handed to the federal government. Nonetheless, his

Opening ceremonies at Fairey Tech, 7 November 1949.

passionate support for technical education was the focus of his political philosophy.

After losing his seat in the Diefenbaker victory in 1957, Frank continued to conduct UNESCO seminars on business and vocational education in about 20 different countries in Asia and Africa. In a later speech he recalled his chief message:

"I try to define to them in my talks what I think vocational education is and what technical education is – that there is a difference. I try to tell them how they should go about preparing a work force in their country, not to start at the top like they do in so many things, but to start at the bottom like we did … come to understand what is fundamental in this matter of industrial education. It is the training of a skilled work force – understanding the duties and type of training required for each member of each class of worker – the machine operator, the artisan, the technician, and the engineer."

The above articles are edited from longer pieces written in 2007 by Ken Roueche and Randall Fairey, grandson of Col. F.T. Fairey. Full transcripts are deposited in the Vic High Archives. Photos courtesy the Vic High Archives and Dr. Randall Fairey.

Frank Fairey, MP, representing Canada at UNESCO's 9th General Session, New Delhi, 1956