

**James Helmcken,  
Class of 1945,  
Victoria Royalty**

By Linda Baker, VHS 1969



It had started as a simple phone call looking for a new address to update the Alumni's newsletter email list. He sounded young and vibrant for his apparent age, and we began to chat. When I discovered he'd graduated the same year as my dad, I naturally asked and to my surprise learned that not only had he known my dad, they'd been buddies at Central Junior High School and Vic High.

He'd also known my great-grandfather A.J. Daniels (Dock Superintendent at Yarrows Shipyards for many years), my grandmother Rae Baker (secretary at Central until 1968), and other members of the family who shared the Daniels home on Rockland. I was overjoyed. My dad passed in 2015 so shared memories are precious, specially stories from his high school days.

It was the 1940s. Cadet training started in Grade 7, he said. Everyone was recycling and salvaging materials for the war effort, and almost daily someone you knew or knew of was killed in the war. By the time you got to Vic High it was army, navy or air force cadet uniforms on parade days, rifle target practice in the as-yet unautographed attic, and learning how to throw a hand grenade properly.

And yet despite the horrors of war touching everyone, 'tremendous school spirit' is how James Helmcken, Class of 1945, remembers those times at Vic High. 'We had exceptional teachers and staff, and a fantastic principal, Harry Smith, who set the tone for the whole school and knew every one of the 800 students by name. There was a resolve, a focus, and shared experiences. Many of us were very involved in sports and clubs. Of course, despite our cadet training, we were relieved that the war ended before we were called to serve.'

Naturally I had to find James in the yearbook. According to the 1945 Camosun, 'Jim's the fellow in the Army Cadets who marks the roll. Lucky lad! Prefect.'



Grad photos were definitely more serious back in the 1940s.

"So what did a Prefect do?" I asked. I remembered seeing several Prefect badges in the Archives, carefully layered in tissue and packed away in acid-free boxes. "Well I guess we were kind of role models in the school," James replied. "There were six girls and six boys. The Principal chose them, kids other kids respected. We sort of helped maintain discipline, more by example. And helped guide or advise the younger students."



James' Class Pin and Prefect Pin...saved all these years.

Looking carefully at grad photos and write-ups in the Camosun, I saw that most of the boys belonged to the Army, Sea or Air Cadets. Until the possibility of peace loomed, many of these boys spent their high school years believing they would be going to war and maybe never coming back. The war had started when James was in Grade seven, so it was a regular part of his high school years.

James' sister Mary also attended Vic High, leaving after Grade 11 when her successful Commercial Program studies qualified her for a position as a stenographer. James' father and his brother and sisters had attended school at Boys Central and Girls Central, then University School, now known as St. Michael's University School.

Academics were James' favourite subjects at school, but sports were part of almost everyone's lives and he especially enjoyed soccer and tennis. He also remembers quite a few students who bussed to Vic High from outlying communities like Sooke.



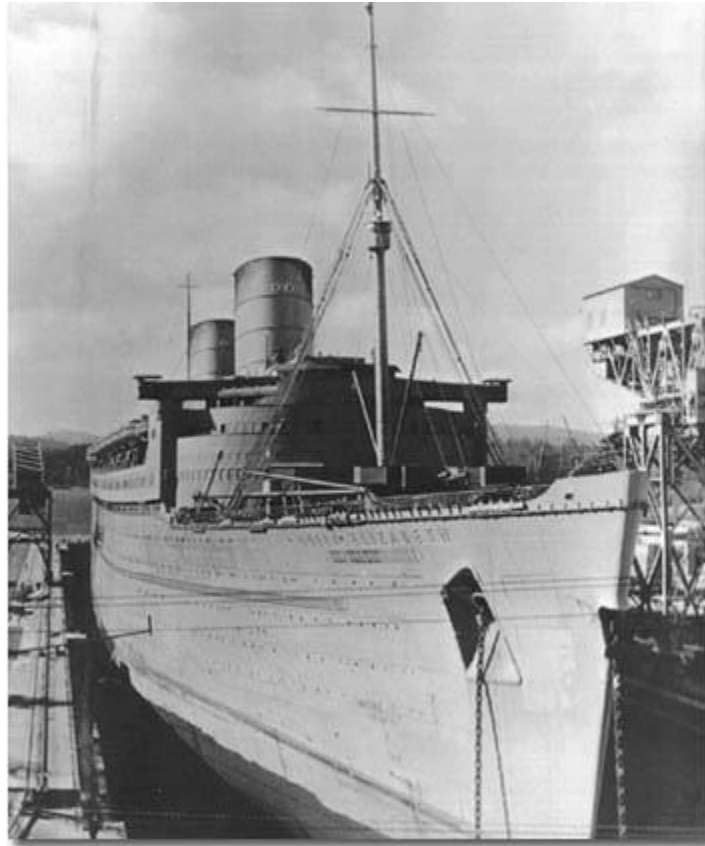
James' Grade 11 class photo. He's the lucky chap in the 3rd row up standing next to the girls. My dad, Roy Baker, is on the left holding the blackboard.

“Summers were usually spent involved in some sort of war-time activities,” James continued. “We were expected to get ‘ship-y’, with Victoria having a prominent shipbuilding industry at the time. I worked at Yarrows #1 Yard as a Joiner’s Helper stacking lumber for 56 cents an hour. And yes, I knew your great-grandfather.”

James also remembers when the Queen Elizabeth came to Victoria to be refit at Yarrows Shipyards as a troop ship. “It was a great war-time secret,” says James, “except half of Victoria turned up at the waterfront to watch it come down the strait and enter Esquimalt Harbour.”

I, too, remember the stories my dad shared of my great-grandfather being given the dimensions of a vessel but no name and being told to prepare to dock her. As Dock Superintendent it was his job to bring all vessels into drydock and oversee their refloating. 'Grandpa Daniels brought her in with inches to spare,' my dad had always told me.

"Yes," agreed James, "and he'd had to order the removal of her fuel so she'd float high enough to come into drydock. She was so big you could see her for miles, but her name was never spoken in the city."



*Click here for another Queen Elizabeth troop ship story featuring Vic High students. [The Secret Sixty - Victoria High School Alumni Association \(vichigh.com\)](http://TheSecretSixty-VictoriaHighSchoolAlumniAssociation(vichigh.com))*

James went on to Victoria College at Craigdarroch Castle and really enjoyed debating activities there. Perhaps it was partly what inspired him to attend law school at UBC. He moved to Nanaimo in 1952 and to Vancouver in 1960 and has lived there ever since. His career in banking law included directorships of several companies and a great deal of travel.

James' name had also intrigued me and so I finally asked: "Are you a member of *the* historical Helmcken family in Victoria.?"

"Yes," he said, "and we're the only Helmckens in North America."

James' great-grandfather was Dr. John Sebastian Helmcken, brought to Fort Victoria in 1850 by Chief Factor James Douglas. A prominent BC physician and founding president of the BC

Medical Association, he'd also played a key role in BC joining Confederation. Dr. Helmcken was married to Douglas' daughter Cecilia, making James Helmcken, Vic High Class of 1945, the great-great-grandson of Sir James Douglas.

My 'what's-your-new-email' call had just become even more interesting.

James never knew his famous ancestors in person. James and Amelia Douglas and his great-grandfather, Dr. John Sebastian Helmcken had all died before he was born. But he has wonderful memories of many Sunday dinners and family events at the original 1852 Helmcken family home, the oldest one in BC still standing on its original property next to and part of the BC Museum in downtown Victoria.



### [Visiting Helmcken House \(royalbcmuseum.bc.ca\)](http://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca)

James' grandfather, Dr. James Douglas Helmcken was also a prominent Victoria doctor, whose commissioned home at 1015 Moss Street (formerly 915) is now in Victoria's heritage register. James remembers living in the family home and cycling all over Fairfield with my dad.



But there's more.

James' father, son of Dr. James Helmcken, was Ainslie Helmcken, credited with establishing the Victoria City Archives in 1967 and overseeing it as City Archivist for seventeen years. James remembers how that all got started.

"My dad and my uncle John kind of grew up in Bastion Square," says James. "My grandfather had an office there and they spent a lot of time in the area. At one point – I think it was the 1950s or 1960s – they were there taking a look at the huge restoration of Bastion Square. A reporter from the Daily Colonist saw them and asked my dad if he'd write something for the paper, memories of a boy growing up in Victoria, that sort of thing."

"So my dad wrote three columns for the Islander section," James continues, "all set in the Government Street corridor. That was supposed to be it, but the paper got many requests to continue the stories. So Dad went down to City Hall to dig for more information and discovered they were about to throw away a lot of old records. He was very upset, so offered to sort through and organize them. And that's how the Victoria City Archives got started."



Ainslie Helmcken became the first Victoria City Archivist and was instrumental during his 17 years there in accumulating many documents, artifacts, and oral histories of Victoria residents.

With one son (no offspring) and three daughters (6 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren), James may be the last of the family with the Helmcken surname, but his family's influence over life in BC and Victoria is extraordinary. And judging by the happy memories of his time at Vic High, it's safe to assume his years there also helped shape the life of this happy and contented Vic High alumnus.

Note: All Camosuns are now available digitally through the Alumni's website, [www.vichigh.com](http://www.vichigh.com).