

Larger Than Life, Vic High's Large Boys Still Making Their Mark

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By Linda Baker, VHS 1969

Four of them passed through the doors and halls of Vic High. Two are still large as life and speak glowingly of their Vic High days. Two have passed over but their legacies remain large, and the collective influence and legacy of this family remains a force in Victoria and beyond.

DataTech, Large & Company (professional accountants), Urban Grocer, Large & Co. (real estate developer), Highbury Asset Management, Country Grocer, numerous liquor stores including Vessel, are just a few of the companies all owned or launched by a Large together with their associates and built into strong community businesses.

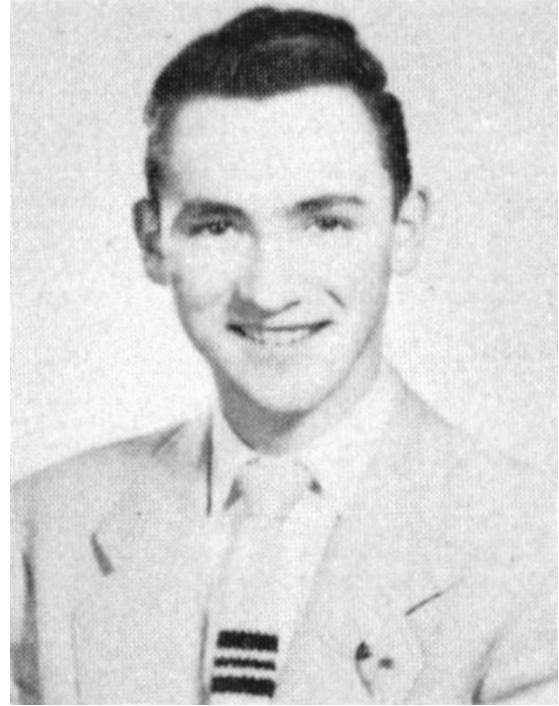


Left to right: Walter, Rob, Earl and Leigh with their mother Marion.

The family started out in Toronto, where Earl remembers he and Rob at age 9 or 10 being fired from their first job. The two young boys were actually canny entrepreneurs who had built a prosperous business selling Liberty magazines for 5¢ each (plus tips!) at local pubs which unfortunately was not allowed. When discovered by the distributor the two were fired on the spot.



Walter Large, VHS 1952 (Passed 2018)



Earl Large, VHS 1955



Rob Large, VHS 1956 (Passed 1999)



Leigh Large, VHS 1963

The year was 1946, their father was unwell and the family was in difficult financial circumstances. With a grandfather in Victoria, they came west for a fresh start. It took awhile, and the boys all had to work to help support the family. Things like selling newspapers in downtown Victoria and snacks at the Royal Athletic Park where at the time professional hardball was played, setting targets at Heal's rifle range and pins at the bowling alley. They all went to Margaret Jenkins Elementary, then on to Central Middle School and Vic High.

Earl recalls when he was 13 taking the streetcar to the James Bay Safeway every Saturday, each time the store manager refusing to hire him because of his age. "One day somebody will be sick," Earl told him one Saturday, "and you'll have to hire me." The manager presumably thinking it was a good point or perhaps because of his persistence, led him to the back, gave him an apron, and he was hired.

His brothers soon followed in his footsteps. "I reckon that working at Safeway is how our family got its start in the grocery business," says Earl. "In my case I just decided I was going to be the best employee I could." And apparently he was because by age 18 Earl was the assistant manager at a Safeway store.



Urban Grocer, Junction of Fort St. & Oak Bay Ave., Victoria



Country Grocer –
Saltspring Island

“While the assistant manager, I was offered the position of Store Manager,” says Earl. “I’d also asked for three weeks off work to go with my family to Toronto and the area manager said no, and if I did go my job would not be there when I got back. After that experience I decided I’d never be under anybody else’s thumb again, and I wasn’t.”

With the family to help support, work took precedence over school many times throughout Earl’s Vic High days. “I missed about a third of Grade 8,” says Earl. “But I knew the things I needed to do to pass.”

“Vic High was wonderful. I loved it.” he continues. “I got lots of support from the teachers. I guess they knew why I was working. You did have to have a note when you were absent, though, and one day my homeroom teacher Miss Roberts saw different handwriting so called home. My mom had actually written that note, not my brother’s future wife, so I was okay.”

Earl had little time for athletics at school, although he did excel in PE activities. “Gordon Hartley wanted me for the track team,” says Earl. “I’d been very successful doing laps on the track, but I had no time to get involved.”

He did have time for the occasional hockey game at Memorial Arena, though, during school hours. One day Porky Andrews got wind of the shenanigans and went down to drag the boys back to school.

Earl went to UVic, the campus at Richmond and Lansdowne, and got his Senior Matriculation. Vocational testing revealed he could do well at any number of vocations. Brother Walter had chosen accounting before him, so that’s what he chose as well. Upon completion of articling for his CA degree he started the firm of Large & Company. His brother Walter then employed at the Canada Revenue Agency, soon joined him.

It was 1962 and computers, punch card machines, and printers took up whole rooms. Punch cards were created from raw data then fed into computers to process the data. Printers used dot matrix technology and continuous track-fed paper that now sells online under the ‘vintage’ heading. Average businesses couldn’t afford the large and very expensive equipment, so the idea of DataTech was jumpstarted.

Operating 24/7, the service included picking up paperwork, processing it within 24-48 hours into standard business reports, payroll records, and delivering source information and reports back to clients. Before long they had other branches in BC. This involved accounts with a multitude of businesses including 60 of the province’s 72 school districts. They were soon on their way to the eventual 26 DataTech branches located across Canada.

But data processing wasn’t all DataTech did. It was realized early on that the IBMs and Honeywells of the world were making a lot of money maintaining their proprietary systems for clients. An opportunity was seen and DataTech became the first third-party field engineering company in the world servicing everybody’s machines – Apple, Honeywell, GE, Hewlett-Packard, Dell, to drop a few names.

By the time DataTech was sold in 1994, it was alone billing the Federal Department of National Defence \$1 million a month.

“I wasn’t a computer guy,” says Earl, “but I knew who to hire and how to talk to decision makers and cause things to happen.”

DataTech had invested in real estate development, too. Its first building, built in 1969, still operates today on Borden just off Mackenze with retail below and offices above.

When DataTech was sold Earl set up Large & Co., a real estate development company, which today is run by his son and daughter. Over the years they have renovated and built homes, condo projects and more. Sixty projects later the company is going strong and while he’s at the office in Fairfield most days, Earl takes more time for himself, his health, his passions.

Nobody gets this far without a champion or two, and there’s no doubt Marion Large was her sons’ and her family’s biggest champion. From age 12 onwards, Marion just always did whatever it took to support her family, from helping raise her five siblings to raising and supporting her own four sons when her husband was very ill. She was a strong proponent of education, loved a good card game, and always had the family’s front door open for whoever needed a bit of help.

Their father Leigh was a big influence too. Quieter than Marion, his health improved once they moved to Victoria and he worked in the machine shop at Yarrows for years. He believed in ‘the better angels of our nature’, always advocating for making the world a better place.

Leigh passed in 1971, and Marion in 2011 at age 101, thankfully living to see the successes of each of her family while supporting them through the challenges.

In addition to or perhaps because of his parents’ influence, Earl says he’s definitely learned a few things along the way. He keeps an annual journal, starting each year by taking stock of his emotional, spiritual, physical and financial health and setting goals, a practice he’s instilled in his kids and grandkids.

“What you think and what you write down, you become,” he says. “Every decision you make is right at the time. If it’s true for you, it’s true. “Just a few of the truisms he’s including in a soon-to-be-published book, *“Living Large”*, which grew from another idea he had, to write a poem on the first day of every month. Watch for the book. It will be worth every penny. And it will also contain art from artists all over the world, just because Earl asked them.

He says an attitude of gratitude changes your body chemistry. Your immune system ramps up and you live longer and healthier. Emerging science now links physical health to thoughts and beliefs, so Earl is on the right path. And of course, the proof is right before you when you meet him. Now 85. Large as life. Healthy. Vibrant. Full of ideas and excited about life. Age is such an arbitrary way of categorizing someone anyways.

What about those other companies, you ask? Well certain of Walter’s and Rob’s kids (together with others) own the Country Grocer stores, except the Salt Spring Island store which is owned by Leigh’s family. The family of Brett Large (Walter’s son) owns all nine Liquor Plus stores.

Part 2 of Living Large we'll explore Walter's and Rob's stories and get Leigh to share his Vic High memories...how he ended up being actively involved in real estate and the retail liquor and grocery businesses and being a sponsor of the Vic High Alumni's Black & Gold dinners.

Stay tuned!