

**GROWING UP IN...
GRANDIR EN...**

**“Where all the children were
United Empire Loyalists”:
Schooling in Saint John, N.B., in the 1930s and '40s**

Jud Purdy

My entire childhood and adolescence were spent in that proud old Loyalist city of Saint John, N.B., which had been incorporated in 1785. Local tradition holds that the first Loyalists landed on that grim, foggy, grey, rocky shoreline on May 18, 1783. This date was a treasured school holiday for New Brunswick children, the only ones in Canada to celebrate it. In my youth it was regarded as a major event, far more important than July 1st, Dominion Day, as Canada Day was then called. All of this lore fed into our backgrounds and made us hearty champions of all things British. That famous map with one-quarter of the globe coloured in red for the mighty British Empire hung in our classrooms while the Union Jack waved from a multitude of flag poles. These values were deeply ingrained in children in those days by families, school, and church and became an essential part of our education as World War II progressed in the early 1940s.

My introduction to formal education came in September 1938, when I entered grade 1 in New Albert School on the west side of Saint John's splendid harbour. My teacher was Miss Amy Napier, a little old lady who wore pince-nez glasses and seemed to us to have been teaching since the expulsion from Eden.

The school building itself was enormous and impressive. It covered almost an entire city block and was, for its time, extremely well equipped. It had a large gymnasium, which was rarely used; a library that was solidly locked (although I once managed to obtain some books about World War I when I was in grade 3 or 4); and a large auditorium that was used for a variety of purposes. The curriculum centred on the three Rs, with copious amounts of

memory work. Dick and Jane were the stars of our first reading program while our early printing exercises were done on slates with slate pencils. One had to be careful not to break those pencils. Over the years we performed wearisome recitations of mathematical tables. A person could walk down the corridors and hear long-suffering children chanting the times and division tables like monks performing their daily offices.

After we were arranged in rows of desks firmly screwed to the floor with our feet neatly tucked under them and our hands folded on top, the day's work began. First came the calling of attendance, which the teacher carefully marked in her register. This was followed by the opening exercises, which consisted of a Bible reading and a hymn or the national anthem. Then it was down to business until the end of the school day, interspersed with a break for recess and a mid-day meal at home. There was lots of testing in those years. At the end of the last term pupils were ranked according to their results into first position, second position, and so on. If there were thirty-two students then one person was graded thirty-second and that unfortunate child was labelled the class dummy by his classmates. What a dreadful practice! Since I had a slight case of cerebral palsy that made handwriting difficult for me, Miss Napier decided that I should be placed second and not first. I cannot remember if this affected me in any way but my mother was furious. Yet as the years passed I was consistently in the top five or six in any class. I found school enjoyable and once I learned to read with a degree of expertise I never stopped. I soon became an avid reader, scooping up every book and magazine I could obtain. My tastes were very eclectic; anything that appeared in the house I immediately devoured. Reading became my principal delight and pasttime. Since I could not play sports I spent endless hours with books that transported me to other times and places. It was sheer delight.

One day in grade 1 another older lady came to our class to talk to us about taking piano lessons. Her name was Miss Mabel Sharp (really!). Well, at that moment we did not have a piano at home nor did my parents really feel they could afford lessons. But about a year later, influenced by the advice of a doctor at the Shriners' Hospital in Montreal, which I attended annually for many years, a piano was purchased and there I was learning to become the next protégé destined for Carnegie Hall. While I never achieved the status of a concert artist (much to my father's disappointment),

being exposed to classical music at such a young age was one of the most significant educational experiences of my life. Those exercises and endless hours of practice gave me another outlet, like early reading, that has served me as pleasure and has sustained me in many moments of emotional difficulty.

At the beginning of my second year of schooling I was placed in Miss Rogers' class. But the real event of that September was the start of World War II, an event that would have a profound effect on all of us, particularly in Saint John, whose harbour quickly became a major centre of activity. For the next six years the comings and goings in the port were a daily reminder of that dreadful series of episodes that were being played out across the Atlantic. I vividly remember September 3rd, the day war was declared. We were still at our summer cottage on the Saint John river, where we remained for a further two weeks because authorities feared the possibility of a German air attack, unlikely as that sounds today. When we returned to the city an anti-aircraft gun had been installed on part of the school's playground, much to the delight of every little boy! As the war progressed barracks were erected to house the soldiers who manned this gun and the other ones that were placed there. While we lost much of our recess area we kids were enthralled by this display of Canadian military power. After all, they were defeating those dastardly tyrants, Hitler and Mussolini, weren't they? Warships, merchant ships, troop trains, air raid practices, collecting materials for the war effort, buying war saving stamps at school, listening to the news broadcasts about the Blitz in England, watching newsreels of battles and raids, all became a part of children's lives and undoubtedly shaped our view of human activity and the world around us. No one could live through those years and experiences without being affected in a very dramatic manner.

Most of the years after grade 2 remain a blur or almost indistinct except for occasional special episodes. In grades 3 and 4 my teacher, Miss Margaret Kindred, thought that I was the leading student that year and so she placed me first in the order of grading along with my old friend Nancy White. Nancy and I had been close buddies almost since birth and were to share many happenings and confidences until the end of university. Another close friend was Donald Macaulay, who also started with me in grade 1 and went on to the same university. One year, probably grade 6 or 7, he and I went on a reading binge and raced through a series of books on a

young air force pilot whose name was Dawson. Anyway, we traded the whole series one winter.

Grade 6 introduced the girls to Domestic Science and the boys to the joys and wonder of Manual Training for one half-day a week. First term we drew plans for what we would be making in the second term. When we started actual woodworking this subject became an absolute nightmare for me. Our first task was to square a small block of wood. After eight attempts and a considerable amount of frustration I finally succeeded in completing this task but I never really understood the central purpose of this subject. It was abundantly clear that my vocation would not be as a carpenter so why was I stuck in this detestable class every week for three years? (although by the end of my stint in Manual Training I did manage to construct a *small* bookcase that still adorns my residence).

Along with the standard (but staid) curriculum other things which reflected the war years went on in our classes. In grade 7 we organized a Junior Red Cross Branch to do some type of effort for the war. I was elected president of this group, an act that launched me on a series of chairmanships and presidencies. Another way that year in which we were prepared for war activity was by being taught a course in first aid sponsored by the St. John Ambulance Society. Our teacher, Miss Hayes, was a member, had obtained her instructor's licence, and was really keen to induct us into the mysteries. So during that winter we were drilled in various lifesaving skills. At the end of the year we were examined by one of the organization's senior members and those who passed were awarded certificates. I think this was the first such award I ever received so I proudly carried it home and had it framed and placed on my bedroom wall. It would be the first of many such pieces of paper I would accumulate. Another war-oriented school activity was purchasing war saving stamps. These cost 25 cents each and were pasted in coupon books to be redeemed after the war. Often classes would compete to see which could buy the most during a specified time period, usually a week or a month. Sometimes the whole school would participate in a major drive. Friday afternoon was the time for totting up the score. I can well remember running home on one occasion to try to beg or scrounge another quarter to buy just one more stamp so our class could be the winner. Obviously the purpose of the whole enterprise was to have children make a contribution to the war effort and perhaps to teach them the value of saving and investing their money. I doubt if the latter

objective was very successful but we certainly felt that we were making a contribution to Canada's war effort. Also there were all those patriotic songs we memorized and sang at school assemblies. We heartily enjoyed belting out "Hearts of Oak," "Rule Britannia," "Land of Hope and Glory," and the many pop war tunes that came and went during those hectic years.

Learning geography in Miss Samson's grade 8 class was either a joyous wonder or a pedagogical nightmare. We were required to memorize many of the major physical features of the various continents. Each morning as we arrived in class Miss Samson had us stand in front of the map and with a pointer indicate the location of whatever was the feature of the day. For some reason I can still see myself standing in front of a large wall map of South America rattling off the names of its rivers. While modern pedagogues might view her technique with dismay, there was a certain element of pride and fun in being able to accomplish this task successfully. Certainly many areas of the world became familiar to us and perhaps constituted one of the more valuable lessons of our schooling.

It was in Miss Samson's class that I scored my first success as an historian. All that reading I had been doing finally paid off. Our course that year centred mainly on British history with a small dollop of Canadian thrown in at the end of the year. In later years I realized how much of local history we had *not* been taught. Saint John was virtually an open-air history museum. Beginning with the Native peoples, then the Acadian settlements, and finally the British occupation, we were surrounded with it. Every area around the school was redolent with episodes and buildings that would have made excellent lesson material. However, it was not to be. Instead we ploughed through the successive reigns of British sovereigns and a smattering of European explorers and early Canadian prime ministers. (One sidelight on this was that my grandfather Purdy, who had been born in 1870, told me that he had once seen Sir John A. Macdonald on the hustings. Now that was thrilling!) Well, I managed to absorb enough of this material to win the British History Prize donated by a local chapter of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire. Every year the ladies donated a prize for each of the grade 8 classes. The other one awarded that year was garnered by my old friend Nancy White. Each of us was given a book suitably inscribed with the date and the reason for the award.

My prize was a copy of *The Song of Roland*, a tale about the great medieval French warrior.

Grade 8 also introduced us to the mysteries of algebra and Latin. I found the former very interesting. All through high school I enjoyed working out problems, especially quadratic equations. You have to be something of a nut or a fanatic to revel in doing this kind of mathematical puzzle. Latin was also fascinating. Although we had to chant declensions of nouns and verbs there seemed to be something very exotic about this language. I enjoyed translating sentences and paragraphs and in later years deciphering from Caesar and other authors. Did these exercises aid in preparing me to be an historian? Perhaps roaming around in Caesar's Gallic Wars was useful.

Passing into grade 9, the first year of high school, was a defining moment in our lives. Most students in Saint John entering this level attended one of the public high schools located in the city, but those of us who lived on the west side of the harbour could continue in New Albert School, which offered two classes in grade 9. Our principal, Mr. Stuart MacFarlane, an excellent administrator and mathematics teacher, presided over one while the other was led by a tall, elegant lady, Miss Dorothy Crouse. She became my homeroom teacher and fortunately for me from the beginning of the year she singled me out as a potentially bright student and lavished attention and interest on me. A first-class teacher, she also was an excellent counsellor. She sparked my interest in going on to university. While this idea had been vaguely discussed in the family, it was Miss Crouse with her enthusiasm for further education who really influenced me to consider it. She even explained many aspects of university life, even how one became a teaching assistant (although it would be years before I attained that exalted status).

At the outset the first term in grade 9 did not seem to be any different from grade 8 except that we were introduced to two or three new subjects. Suddenly we were declining French verbs and nouns just as we had their Latin counterparts. We began to translate copious amounts of French literature but at no time that year or in our high school career did we learn to speak French with any degree of fluency – and this in a province where one-third of the population was francophone. What a loss! Geometry also was a new subject but one that I took to readily. But it was the new kind of history that I really enjoyed. The textbook had a green cover and

we used it for the next three years. For reasons that I never understood the grade 9 offering began with modern history from 1492 or thereabouts and brought us up to the contemporary world. The next year concentrated on the medieval European period followed by, in grade 11, a review of the ancient world. I thought this approach was chronologically backward but absorbed it all with enthusiasm.

Grade 9 also brought the usual adolescent problems including, for the boys, meeting girls. Well, of course, we had encountered them before, especially the usual teasing sessions on the playground, but now it meant dating and other things. Our principal and Miss Crouse aided or abetted outbursts of teenage angst by organizing separate clubs for each gender. They set aside an unused classroom as a centre for our activities and each club elected a set of officers. My male mates elected me as president and so I presided over the club's activities for the year. The highlight of the year was a dance in the spring, the first that many of us had ever attended. I vividly remember waltzing with the elegant Miss Crouse. What a treat!

By the end of the first term I began to realize that high school was serious business. These were the years that prepared us for our life's choice of employment, whatever that might be. The approaching Christmas examinations virtually terrified me so I studied in a more serious fashion than I had ever done before. When the results were announced in early January, to my astonishment and delight I had scored the highest percentage in both classes. Miss Crouse was delighted. At the end of Grade 9 the leading student was presented with a gold medal donated by a local resident. I was the obvious candidate for this award. For the rest of the year Miss Crouse really pushed me hard to retain my lead over the next student, Moira Galbraith, who was in the principal's room. I later realized that there was an element of personal rivalry between these two teachers. However, at the conclusion of the final June examinations Moira copped the higher marks by less than a full percentage point and was duly awarded the medal. It was science that did me in! I was never a strong science student and subsequent years in secondary education only proved this point.

Losing the medal did not really disturb me very much although Miss Crouse was annoyed. Somehow she persuaded the principal that the graduating class should have a valedictorian. Mr. MacFarlane was not totally convinced about this novel idea but she

got her way. At the final school assembly, with great trepidation, I stood on the edge of the platform before the whole school, parents, and visitors, and made my first public address. I gather it was a success. (Remember, these were the days when people listened to Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt!) Unfortunately, I did not retain a copy of my speech so I have no idea what I said.

By the time I reached grade 9 my ability to do proper handwriting had not developed any more accurately than in my earlier years. My physical disability prevented any improvement. Here the indomitable Miss Crouse devised two strategies to help me. First, she suggested that I use a ballpoint pen. This was a brand-new invention. The first ones, made by the Reynolds Company, were in the shape of a regular pen with a detachable top and a thick round barrel, and were a pretty shade of blue and silver. So, I acquired one. I was probably the first student in the school and even in the city's system to do so. Unfortunately it did not really improve my scrawl so Miss C. then proffered her next idea. Why not use a typewriter? I had been banging away at an old Oliver machine at home for therapy so I was somewhat acquainted with the mechanics involved. She persuaded my parents to obtain a portable one. Such a purchase was a considerable outlay for my folks but they readily agreed to it. What a major break this was for me and those teachers who had to read my exams and essays. I used this machine continuously from grade 9 until the completion of my Ph.D. It is a truism that a teacher can have a profound effect on a child's life by one act of kindness. I have been forever in Miss Crouse's debt.

Entering grade 10 was something of a daunting experience. We left behind our connection with our friendly neighbourhood public school and became members of the very large and somewhat impersonal Saint John High School. This institution, which had an enviable reputation as a first-class academic school, claims to be the oldest one in Canada, being the direct descendant of the Saint John Grammar School founded in 1805. The building we entered was a very imposing one located on the brow of a hill overlooking the harbour. Travelling to it each day was an adventure. A few students from the west side of the city took the city bus (there were no yellow school buses in those days). The other mode of transportation was the harbour ferry. Travelling this way could be fun but on a cold winter's day with a sharp wind whipping in from the Bay of Fundy it was absolute misery. We usually went home

for dinner (it was always dinner at noon in those days) and then dashed back down the wharf for the return trip. However, on many Friday afternoons, displaying less enthusiasm for education, we deliberately slowed our pace until the boat had departed the dock. Arriving at school we claimed that the ferry had left early. This lame excuse was never well received by our teachers!

When I arrived at Saint John High School the principal was Mr. A.T.G. Harrison, a tall, dignified man, who had only recently assumed this role after having been a science teacher for a number of years. His initial task was to impose a more strict regime after a few years of a lax administration. In the end he succeeded and earned an enviable reputation as an excellent administrator. With a skilful staff he rebuilt the school's academic reputation. Most of the teachers had university degrees and displayed a deep sense of professional pride in their work.

Classes in the school were based upon a taken-for-granted gender division. The boys were located at one end of the building and the girls allocated to the other side. An invisible reline was drawn through the center of the school across which a student did not trespass without a valid excuse, preferably a note signed by a teacher. This situation certainly was a barrier to social relations between the sexes but adolescents were always able to find ways to circumvent it. There was a plethora of clubs dedicated to a variety of activities and a multitude of athletic teams. Perhaps the most popular were the ones sponsored by the local chapters of the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. They held dances on Friday nights at their respective buildings and these affairs offset the segregated classes. A ferry boat ride home after one of these dances could be really interesting! I joined one of these clubs and served as a secretary and then president. Some of the clubs also became involved in fund drives for welfare agencies.

The extremely academic curriculum was, of course, the core of the school's activities. We were required to take English, French, Latin, history, geometry, algebra, chemistry, and physics. There were no electives in those days. It was a pretty steady grind of classes from early morning until mid-afternoon. The only break came at lunch time so there was no opportunity to sneak off to the library or some quiet room to do preparation or the next day's homework. And homework we had! Loads of it! I carried piles of books home and after supper did a couple of hours of work in the evening. The teaching techniques were very traditional, even to the

point of uninspiring. I vividly remember memorizing in grade 11 English a portion of Sir Walter Scott's poem, *The Lady of the Lake*, which my father also had learned when he was in high school. And my younger brother learned the same part eight years later. That is hardly an example of progress. As a matter of fact, I can still recite those lines. Yet classes were not always dull or routine. Many of them, especially in history and Latin, were both interesting and even fun at times.

Some of the teachers did try to make learning a worthwhile experience. I had two history teachers who certainly exhibited the traits of excellent teaching. Mr. Glendon Dewar, a rather prissy man who was always immaculately groomed, and Mr. Coop both had a sense of the movements of history and could explain developments in society in a very intelligible way. For some reason Mr. Coop took a real interest in me and gave me valuable advice about my choice of courses when I entered university. Two or three other teachers stand out in my memory for their classroom performances. Mr. Dickson, a short, rotund individual with a deep resonating voice, taught Latin and algebra and constantly had us standing at the blackboard writing translations from Caesar or Virgil or doing quadratic equations. Mr. Chown, who taught geometry, had been an army officer during the war and demanded a strict discipline in class, where he was precise and no-nonsense but actually quite effective.

In grade 11, which was the final year of high school for New Brunswick students in those days, our homeroom teacher was Mr. William Seeley, the school's leading character. His nickname, Wild Bill, reflected his reputation, and he certainly exhibited a more relaxed attitude towards discipline than his colleagues. Our class, composed of a group of very bright boys, many of whom continued on to university and in later life had commendable professional careers, posed a real challenge. We enjoyed making mischief – and that is an understatement. We became notorious for our pranks. Someone described our performances as “organized chaos.” No one was ever hurt and there was never any physical damage to the building but we really tested “Wild Bill's” temper, which exploded on many occasions. It was simply good, clean fun. The principal once said to me, “Purdy, I will be so glad when your class graduates and gets out of here.”

Well, on the evening of June 28, 1949, in the large commodious auditorium, we graduated. There we were, a group of

194 young people seated on the platform, presumably prepared for life's next adventure. The girls glowed in long white dresses while the boys radiated confidence in dress suits or blue blazers and grey flannels. I placed twenty-first in the class. I never duplicated my grade 9 success story again but felt rather good about my final achievement of 77.43 per cent. At least it was honours level. Nancy White, my old buddy, was less than a full percentage point ahead of me. The kids from the west side of the harbour had done all right.

In the fall of 1949, while some of my friends entered university, I enrolled in grade 12, which was then recognized as the equivalent of the first year of university. Since we did not pay tuition fees and lived at home it was much cheaper for our families. The curriculum was the same as the freshman year at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, N.B., but was taught by some of our high school teachers. Six courses were required, namely French, English, Latin, history, chemistry, and mathematics. We were treated as regular high school students. There was only one grade 12 class and it was for both boys and girls. Our homeroom teacher was Miss Gladys Bell, a striking looking lady who was head of the girl's physical education. She was a very genial person who lent a light and graceful touch to the room's atmosphere. There were no repeat performances of the previous year's rowdiness.

Certainly the academic fare was more challenging and the amount of homework increased considerably. Our teachers did a creditable job of introducing us to university-level work but it was not the same as being at university. We were still housed in a high school building and were surrounded by all the characteristics of early adolescence. I did not feel that I was a university student.

Two teachers stand out in my memory. Dr. Alexander, who had previously been the principal and was now the system's mathematics consultant, covered that subject and was extremely effective. The other instructor was a sweet, gentle lady, Miss Molly Lingley, who taught Latin and really made it an interesting course. One of her techniques was to use a newspaper published in Latin for high school students. It was a unique teaching tool that I found highly enjoyable. Our history teacher was Mr. Dewar again. The course was one of the strangest history courses I ever encountered. It was one of those survey courses of western history from prehistoric times to the contemporary era but taught from a philosophical perspective rather than the usual historical or

chronological one. I did not really enjoy it but managed to absorb most of its content. As usual the science course, chemistry, was almost my downfall. I barely scraped a decent passing mark.

By the end of the year I passed the final examinations and earned an honour grade that stood me in good stead for the next year. Also, I was elected vice-president of my class although I do not remember any attendant duties I had to perform. Once again, on a night in June, 1950, we held a graduation ceremony and received our certificates from Dr. W.H. MacKenzie, the local school board superintendent.

Our years in high school were finished. Now it really was off to university!

Unfortunately, Jud Purdy was not able to see this memoir in print. He died in February 2006. Several months previously, he had mentioned to one of the editors that he had thoroughly enjoyed putting together his recollections of his early schooling. The editors are pleased to publish this essay as a worthy contribution to this section in its own right, but also as a tribute to a valued colleague.