GROWING UP IN...
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"School Days, School Days, Good old Golden…?": A Childhood in British Columbia in the 1930s and '40s.[1]

Neil Sutherland

I spent part of my childhood in South Vancouver. The first house I can remember was in the 1400 block on East 27th Avenue. I vaguely remember the house but my sister Joy, eighteen months younger, does not. When I was about four we moved to 4424 Ontario (how my mother must have drilled the address into us!). Next door was a vacant lot that we used as a playground. Across the street was a large, bush-covered area, logged off long before, that is now the site of the local ballpark and Queen Elizabeth Park. Two great-aunts had houses within walking distance. We enjoyed visiting both.

I started school in September 1937 at General James Wolfe (teacher, Mrs. Hall). I enjoyed school and did reasonably well there. Printing, however, was a major trial. I am left-handed. Our scribblers were made of newsprint that tore easily when touched by an eraser. As she circulated to check our work, Mrs. Hall would use the edge of a ruler to tear out pages of printing that were not up to her standard. These pages had to be done again. I repeated a lot of pages. As was common then, Mrs. Hall wanted me to switch to my right hand. However, my mother told me that new departmental regulations forbade switching left-handers over if they didn't want to change. I therefore told Mrs. Hall it was against the law to make me write right-handed. I don't recall her answer (perhaps it was sotto voce), but she abandoned the quest.

I enjoyed reading and learned how to, reasonably quickly. When we read silently most of us still mouthed the words as if

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1. I am indebted to my sister, Joy Nicolls, and to Ken McLeod of the John Oliver Historical Society and the many friends and classmates with whom I have reminisced over the years.

we were reading aloud. I vividly remember the day when Mrs. Hall told me to stop mouthing the words and just to use my eyes to move along them. It was like learning to change gears in a car; I surged ahead through the book and then on to others.

Family circumstances (the Depression, and family breakup) led to my mother returning to teaching the next year. She had been a teacher in northern British Columbia after graduating from the Vancouver Normal School in 1919. Her new school, Chilliwack River, was in the Fraser Valley five miles up the Chilliwack River from Vedder Crossing, itself about ten miles from Chilliwack. My sister and I brought the school numbers up to ten so that school could stay open. (Mother's predecessor, a single woman, had to leave after a couple of years there because enrolment had dropped below the provincial minimum number and the school was to be closed.) We lived there for three years; for me, grades 2, 3, and 4.

The rural community "up the Vedder," as people referred to it, bore only superficial resemblance to that of the vigorous pioneering rural one in Evelyn that I described in *Growing Up*.[2] The Vedder area had first been settled at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps because of the Depression, it still had a very backwoods character with a mostly subsistence economy; a little farming and ranching (stump ranching, really), gyppo logging, road work, and taking pack trains loaded with supplies to a mining camp on the American side of the nearby border.[3] Further up and across the river, at Chilliwack Lake, there was a larger logging operation connected to Vedder Crossing by a logging railroad. The locomotive had a mournful whistle that echoed across our silent landscape. The camp closed during our first year in the area. The younger people of the community either left or went away seasonally to search for casual labour. Thus the whole of one local Mennonite family went away each year for the hop-picking season.

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2. *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), esp. chap. 7.

3. A "stump ranch" is usually one on which the trees have been fallen, or logged off, with grazing and hay growing in their midst. It is often used to refer to very marginal kinds of rural family operations which support themselves with a variety of work. Some make a good living at it. I describe them in more detail, ibid., 162. A gyppo logger or a gyppo logging operation is a small one, sometimes as small as a man with his saw and a team of horses (or now a small cat). Today the term is sometimes used to refer to fairly large operations by contract loggers or by those who buy the wood on a certain lot and then log it.

My sister and I enjoyed living in the country and going to a very small school (between eight and twelve pupils) but it must have been a grim place for our mother.[4] We played outside a lot. In our first year we lived in a tiny cottage in a field. Our lighting came from a couple of coal oil lamps. We got our water in a bucket from a creek about a hundred yards from the house. I remember our excitement at seeing spawning salmon appear in the creek. The next year we moved to a new two-room log house that we had watched being built from felling and trimming the trees, making the shakes for the roof, and doing our share of "chinking" between the logs with moss. We got our water from a creek that ran right by the house. In warm weather the local children dammed it further downstream for a swimming pool.

We had a battery radio (wet cell) that could only be used very sparingly. We received Sunday school papers and the occasional reading material that came our way. Our mother set up a very small school library. I read all the books in it, some of them over and over. We usually went to my maternal grandparents in Vancouver for Christmas, Easter, and the summer holidays. During the latter Mother attended summer school in Victoria to upgrade her teaching certificate.

The three-mile walk to the school from where we lived was something we very much enjoyed. One could fish for small trout in the many little streams, and keep an eye out for bears, cougars, and deer. We tried to catch squirrels. Occasionally, the ranch kids organized it so we all rode to school bareback, two or three kids to a horse.

The one-room, little white schoolhouse sat in a small field that served as our playground and as corral for the horses. It also held a small woodshed/barn and two outhouses. Behind the field was a small wooded area in which we built forts. The school was heated with a wood stove. The room had blackboards on two walls and a row of windows on the third. There was no artificial light. Despite the low numbers there were usually at least four grades to teach. Mother taught the basics separately to each grade, but we all did science, social studies, and art together. One year in manual arts we made a library corner out of old orange crates, a craft mother picked up at summer school.

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4. And she was poorly paid. Her last previous year of teaching, 1923-24, in Barkerville, paid her $1300; Chilliwack River paid the BC depression minimum of $780 per year.

We also knitted squares to be made into Junior Red Cross blankets. Since one could listen in on all the lessons, we younger children learned a lot of the work of the upper years. I enjoyed the informality of it all and greatly regretted leaving the school.

Craft display, Chilliwack River School:
Joy Sutherland and Harry Wiebe, c.1940
(Photograph in possession of the author.)

For most children in the community, much of their education took place outside the school. They learned to saddle and harness horses, milk cows, and use such farm equipment as rakes and mowers. Willy-nilly, I picked up some of these skills and could, ineptly, put on a harness and milk a cow. By observing the older children and adults I learned other skills that I did not get to practise until I was an adult. Twenty-five years later at our cottage I was able to split fence rails and make shakes in the way I had observed as a child. Fortunately, although I saw it done and still know what to do, I have yet to be called upon to treat a bloated cow.

We moved back to Vancouver to live for a time with my grandparents at 1328 Kingsway. My grandmother owned the building, which held a fairly large apartment above and two stores below. My grandfather had his shoe store and repair

business in one of the stores and for many years the other held a small delicatessen. My grandmother always described the neighbourhood (and implicitly her family) as "respectable working class." The family had emigrated from England in 1909 and 1910. My grandfather had apprenticed as a saddler;[5] before her marriage my grandmother had helped in the pub her father managed. The neighbours were English, Scottish, and Irish immigrants and their children. There were also a couple of Chinese families, each of which had green groceries, one of whom also lived over their store just down the street from my grandparents. Until early 1942, a Japanese family with two children lived just up the street behind the family's fish store.

Our neighbourhood was similar to and just west of Cedar Cottage, the neighbourhood I described in *Growing Up*. Its relatively stability of the late 1930s began to unravel in the early 1940s, when families, mostly from the Prairies, came to work in the war industries, especially the shipyards. The area to the north of Charles Dickens School became an area of crowded, often transient housing.

In the fall of 1941, I enrolled in Dickens, an eight-grade elementary school. I entered grade 6. (The rural school inspector had moved me up one grade). Dickens was in a way a family school, for both my maternal uncles had attended it. Although I did not use it as a model, Dickens resembled the elementary school I described in my article "The triumph of formalism…"[6] The playground sometimes could be a frightening place, subject to bullying gangs. One I recall labelled itself "the fourth Reich." Newcomers, and there were many of us in these wartime years, had to move warily into this environment. Since the violence was mostly implicit, more often a matter of menace rather than practice, we adjusted to it if not always comfortably then at least adequately. There we played all the playground games of the time, ritually following their seasons. After a couple of weeks I settled in, made new friends, and began to enjoy school again.[7]

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5. In my review of Michael J. Child's *Labour's Apprentices: Working-Class Lads in late Victorian and Edwardian England* in *Labour/Le Travail* (Spring 1995): 363-66, I argue that it accurately describes the youth of my grandfather.
6. "The triumph of 'formalism': Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s," *BC Studies* 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986): 175-210.
7. My grade eight class spawned another historian. Retired Anglican priest Fred Thirkell has written a number of regional histories, most recently Fred Thirkell and Bob Scullion, *British Columbia 100 Years Ago: Portrait of a Province* (Vancouver: Heritage

Teachers in Dickens employed a formalist pedagogy for both the "new" and traditional education. Whatever the subject and whatever the teacher, lessons followed a standard Herbartian pattern. Every activity and project received a numerical grade. When I later came to write about the "new" education, I found myself on very familiar ground. Our manual training projects, for example, were identical to those laid out in 1901 for Macdonald-Robertson teachers.[8]

Although I met no outstanding teachers in Dickens, I had some that fitted into the "nice" or reasonably competent category I laid out in my article; I was especially fond of Miss Jessie Johns, Mrs. A.B.M. Hamilton, and the Vice-principal, C.C. Cooke. Some less-than-good teachers were the art and manual arts teacher, the music teacher, and a male classroom teacher who was very fond of the strap. For a time he gave one on the hand for each mistake on the weekly spelling test, and even had kids strapping each other when we made more mistakes than he could cope with. He later became a Vancouver elementary school principal!

Charles Dickens' principal was a severe, even tyrannical, disciplinarian. When in the principal's homeroom in grade eight, I was always pleased when we had his relieving teacher. The principal's office led off through a door at the back of the classroom and we were auditors to the frequent strappings he carried out in there. We all noticed that he wore his shirt collars too tight, or with too much starch, for he was constantly adjusting them. At a Charles Dickens reunion in 1995 a number of people commented on this characteristic gesture. Soon thereafter this principal joined the provincial inspectorate, ending up as a municipal school superintendent. To the bemusement of former pupils, he is now memorialized in the name of a school.

Later, I taught in four British Columbia elementary schools (Oliver and Osoyoos in the Okanagan Valley, and West Bay and Gleneagles in West Vancouver) that were very well-ordered but whose principals did not feel they had to display the fierceness that seemed to characterize some Vancouver principals of the time. My life-long friend, the late Thom Greenfield, also

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House, 2002).

8. *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (1976; new ed. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), chap. 12.

attended Dickens, and in the 1950s became the unhappy vice-principal to one of these tyrants. Eventually, as a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Greenfield articulated a much more humane mode of school administration.[9]

Most Dickens pupils went on either to Vancouver Technical (Van Tech) or King Edward VII (King Ed) for high school, although in some years a few opted for John Oliver (Jayo or JO). I was torn. My mother, a John Oliver (as South Vancouver High School) grad of 1918, favoured it; it was part of the family lore.[10] Her cousin, Alan Napier, had been in the first class of the founding principal, J.T.E. Palmer (colloquially "Jake" but definitely not to his face) when the school opened in 1912. Other cousins also attended JO. They all spoke very warily of Palmer, but none advised against the school on that ground. Over the years Palmer had made the school famous for track and field, and as a school with high academic standards, whose students were frequent winners of both track meets and academic prizes and medals.[11] This latter characteristic reflected the aim of the South Vancouver school board, and appealed to parents (and kids) keen on upward mobility; the school motto was *virtus vincit*. Although the school had a substantial commercial and a small vocational stream, Palmer and the staff gave high priority to the matriculation program.

My grandmother and uncles spoke in favour of King Ed. It also had a good academic reputation but without the intensity supposedly characteristic of John Oliver. Most of my school friends opted for King Ed, but at the last moment I decided on JO. I think I was the only one from Dickens that year to do so, at least of those going into the matriculation program. (Two years later my sister followed many of her classmates to King Ed. Her accounts of it gave the feeling that indeed it did lack the tension of JO.)

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9. Thomas Greenfield and Peter Ribbins, *Greenfield on Educational Administration: Towards a Humane Science* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993.)

10. The school's name was changed to that of the provincial premier when he opened its new building in 1921.

11. Between 1920 and 1940, three former John Oliver students won the provincial Rhodes Scholarship, eleven John Oliver students won Governor General medals for topping the provincial matriculation examinations, and the school won the Greater Vancouver track and field meet fourteen times. K.A. Waites, ed., *The First Fifty Years: Vancouver High Schools, 1890-1940* (Vancouver: Vancouver School Board, 1943), 99, 156, 158.

"Jake" died in the summer between our grade nine and ten years. He occasionally visited our mathematics class with Miss M. Adams. He was so fierce that we had real difficulty answering the questions he thrust at us.[12] A mistake received an angry, sarcastic rebuke. I later learned that Miss Adams – herself no slouch in the fierceness category – also quaked at Jake's visits. When in the '60s and '70s I worked professionally with Jack Young and Eric Kelly, both of whom had been my teachers, neither was very forthcoming about Palmer as a person. Jack noted the high quality of his fellow staff members and the school's outstanding academic record. As his work on the history of the school and his long service testify, Eric was always loyal to it.[13] Each, however, spoke warmly about Palmer's successor, his vice-principal Mel Wallace.

My one "personal" encounter with Jake, if it could be described in that way, was an unexpected summons to the office. Some windows had been broken the evening before at Selkirk elementary school and I had been reported as amongst those present. After a meeting of the scout troop (the 56th) at St. Margaret's, on 22nd at Dumfries, just down the street from Selkirk, some of us had wandered over to the Selkirk school ground where we sometimes met up with scouts of another troop (the 55th). By the time we got there that evening windows had certainly been broken and we joined a group examining the damage. I could tell Palmer honestly that I had not broken windows myself, and had no idea as to who had. I confess to surprise that this story was accepted with only the comment that it was perhaps better to go right home after scout meetings. (When principals ask one about one's supposed delinquency, one feels guilty even if one is not!)

On the whole, I enjoyed my years at JO. We were quickly sorted out and later resorted into classes based on academic ability, and I was always with an able group of peers, all of us on the matriculation (university entrance) program. Boys sat on one

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12. In my mother's papers I found a little notebook with brief comments under the heading "Our Teachers" on the staff as it had been when she, as Dorothy Johnson, was there during the Great War.

> Palmer's sarcastic & thinks himself smart
> I think he was born with a stone for a heart.

I donated the notebook to the JO archives.

13. Kelly graduated from the school, taught there, and later served as principal. He played a major role in preparing *South Vancouver's John Oliver High School: a proud record, 1912-1986* (Vancouver: The school, 1986).

side of the room and were addressed by their surnames, girls on the other and were always addressed as "Miss" and their surnames. In my opinion (really now probably mostly a professional one because of being so long in the field myself), the teachers were well above average. Some teachers were as good as it was possible to be, including Jack Young, W.E. Reed, Eric Kelly, and Jack Sparks. Others were certainly good teachers: J.P. Ledingham, R.C. Harris, Dave Ellis, and T.H. Adney amongst those whom I had for classes, and undoubtedly others with whom I did not study. (The school was a very large one for the time: over 1400 students. It had grown very rapidly during the war.)

A few teachers were mediocre; the science teacher, known as "Mushy Mac" (also remembered as such by my mother), for his habit of sitting down beside the girls in their desks, ostensibly to help them with their work; "Jingles," from his habit of jingling the coins in his pocket; a PE teacher and counsellor who later went on to be a high school principal (an appointment that strengthened my later professional judgement that the Vancouver School Board's selection procedures for principals was for a time seriously flawed). This teacher had a sadistic, even vicious, streak, which he took out on those not really good at sports. I was only passable, and was ignored by him, but awkward or fat kids were given a "jocular," supposedly humorous, but really nasty treatment. In grade 11 or 12 we did a series on sex education in guidance classes, which he conducted by showing us some Department of National Defence films on venereal disease. (I later saw some of them again when I was in the army; perhaps they served an appropriate purpose there but were entirely unsuitable for high school.) They contrasted sharply with Jack Young's very respectful, almost lyrical, discourse on human sexuality in the biology section of one of his science courses. He recommended chastity to us, but more on the grounds of the need for mutual respect than fear of disease or morality.

I had enjoyed PE in elementary school but was not up to any of the JO standards. After the potential track and field, and then basketball, stars were sorted out for special treatment, much of the time the rest of us were put to a sort of PE busy work. In Grade 11 and 12, George Meehan and I hit on a device to get out of PE. We were each taking an extra course in lieu of study periods and that gave us non-standardized timetables. At the time of the first PE period of the year, we turned up at the

library, saying that our timetables had been changed. Friends also reported to the scheduled PE teacher that our timetables had changed. Since we were not wandering the halls, or in the pool halls on Fraser Avenue, our ruse went undetected. By avoiding study periods we were also able to take two grade 13 courses in grade 12.

Mathematics teachers Miss E.M. Montgomery and Miss Adams (note how they still rate the "Miss" in my mind) were notorious for their fierceness, a reputation transmitted, like Palmer's, through youthful lore to the feeder elementary schools. Two very bright girls in our young people's group opted for the commercial rather than the matriculation program because of their fear of having either one or the other as teachers. I had no experience of Miss Montgomery but I had Miss Adams for four years, and she was my homeroom teacher in grade twelve. She mellowed over that time and was tolerable, even pleasant, as a homeroom teacher. Perhaps she did not really mellow so much as that we through long experience had learned to read her moods and avoid most of the many known triggers for her temper. (When later I read of someone going "white with rage," I knew exactly what the condition looked like: Miss Adams in a fury.) Her fury was not in response to discipline questions – we were a completely cowed lot – but to "stupid" answers and the like.

My mother and Miss Adams had a bit of a confrontation when her school's bowling team (Sanford Fleming Elementary) met JO's. Adams went into one of her rants – familiar to her students – that the elementary schools didn't teach anything – "eight years wasted." Mother took issue, but I was pleased to note that Adams did not know my connection to the teacher who had dared to disagree with her.

Social studies, and history especially, had been my favourite subject since elementary school. I had read a lot of historical fiction from the school and public library, and from some books at home. I had Ledingham for grade 9 SS, T.C. MacCaughie for grade 10, Eric Kelly for grade 11, and took Sr. Matric world history in grade 12 with Reed. Like some others, I also took the two geographies in one year from Harris. Kelly and Reed were outstanding teachers. From MacCaughie one item has stuck in my mind: for some time he had on the side board a quotation from Goldsmith's "Deserted Village."

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey
Where wealth accumulates and decay.

He never commented on it to us so I suppose it had come up in another class.

Dave Ellis was the amiable if somewhat lazy Latin teacher who did little to stimulate any real interest in the subject. He threw chalk, accurately most of the time, at those who dozed off as the weary round of translating wended its way through the class. To amuse ourselves we kept track of the smoke rising from the crematorium that we could see in the cemetery about a block away. For four years I went deeper and deeper in debt to Bill Sleath, who helped me put together the weekly "sentences" we had to write in Latin. Bill, who became a physician, was alas one of the earliest of our year to die. Translating Latin into English was much more agreeable than the reverse and my competence at it (sometimes with the help of a "crib") got me through the senior matric examination and even two further years of the subject at UBC.

It is interesting to note the subjective hierarchy amongst the languages taught. To the dismay of Ellis and perhaps other traditionalists, JO no longer had a Greek class, but the subject was still examinable in BC, and one of our class wrote the paper. Latin had the most prestige, and lured some of us into taking it for that reason. Most students sensibly took French. German seemed to be reserved unofficially for those who spoke it at home – there was a fair sprinkling of German-speaking immigrants in South Vancouver - who reputedly carried off all the top marks. Spanish was looked down upon as the easiest language to learn and therefore the choice of the weakest students.

For English, I had Harris, Jack Sparks for two years, and Miss A.R. Weatherbee for grade 12. Each was a good, effective teacher, stimulating a wide interest in reading and writing. Having fine student actors Joe Oman and Neil Macleod in these classes made our Shakespeare and other play readings very interesting. (Although when Neil followed up a "How now?" at some point in "Julius Caesar" with "brown cow," Jack Sparks was livid when our laughter destroyed his carefully crafted mood.) In grade 12 particularly, a certain competition developed amongst some of us in both English and History classes that went beyond just the urge to get good grades; we tried to write as well as we possibly could for the sake of the product itself. In

this regard George Meehan had always excelled and was in a class by himself.

Schooling is very much a matter of making friends. My closest friend at Charles Dickens, Fred Thirkell, went to King Ed. We remained and still remain close friends, but saw each other on weekends or at our young people's and other church-related activities. For a couple of years a special trip of the Knight Road bus, morning and afternoons, went from Kingsway up Knight and then across 41st to JO. Both Selkirk and Dickens alums took the bus. Amongst the regulars were Greenfield, and friends from our church's youth group, junior choir, cubs, scouts and other neighbourhood activities. Meehan was another, and became a close, life-long friend based first of all on a shared interest in reading, history, literature, and current affairs. He was much better read than I and stimulated me to a more wide-ranging reading. However, neither his nor my mother's enthusiasm for Dickens led me to any real appreciation of the writer. Obviously, the flaw is mine, for I still try him now and again and still bog down very near the beginning, most recently in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Since many of us had part-time jobs – I delivered the *Province*, and then clerked in a drug store, in shoe stores, and worked as an office boy – intervals in the school day and getting to and fro was the main location of friendship. School clubs met mostly at noon hour or during a special "club" period in the six-day cycle. At school I enjoyed the company of others on the university program. The school environment then was not conducive to close relations with girls on site, as it were, but we were with them at school dances and sporting events (at which we often enjoyed the fine trumpet playing of Jimmy Pattison). Most of the girls I went out with during these years were from the school, but none from a class I was in. Girls tended to go out with older boys, and the reverse. Indeed by grade eleven during these wartime and post-war years, many "girls" were really women. Many of their contemporaries in the commercial program left school for work at sixteen and were adults, at least away from their homes.[14] A couple of years after grade 12,

14. One of my interviewees for *Growing Up* who was a member of the JO 1946 cohort told me she switched to commercial from academic in grade ten so she would have more time to attend the many dances, etc, being put on for the servicemen in town. She quit school completely at the beginning of grade twelve to enjoy herself and to work in a department store. She later returned to school and became a teacher.

many of our cohort, both women and men, were full-time teachers. To do so they had spent a further year in high school taking Senior Matriculation and another at the Vancouver Normal School.

Our high school years culminated with an awards ceremony and a "formal;" boys in suits, girls in long dresses. I didn't get any awards but did enjoy the dance.

About twenty of the eighty in Charles Dickens grade eight cohort turned up at the school's 75th anniversary celebration in 1995. A diligent group in my high school class has kept track of all of us, organizing five reunions, the most recent on the fifty-fifth anniversary of our graduation. The list of the 240 graduates prepared for that event noted that forty-three (now forty-five) of the group had died, leaving perhaps a surprising number of us at present still alive.