

Connaught School, 100 years? Really?

I was a student at Connaught School for nearly all of my elementary education, Kindergarden to Grade 8, with the exception of most of Grade 4 which was spent at Strathcona School. This encompassed the years from the fall of 1941 through the early summer of 1950. The first four years were during the Second World War, but the remaining ones happily saw a return to peace and better economic conditions. Both the war and the "Dirty Thirties" were finally behind us.

It seems that life was much simpler then. Everyone walked to school, rain, shine, wind or snow, both in the morning and afternoon, and home and back at lunch time as well. There were no school buses, nor do I remember any of the students being driven to school by their parents. Perhaps the streets really were safer then, for I can't recall anyone expressing much concern about the safety of their children. All that walking may also shed a little light on the current problems with overweight, or even obese children.

Although the war years had a significant impact on our general lifestyle, particularly the rationing of sugar, butter, meat, gasoline and tires, it did not seem to have much of an effect on school activities. Of course, those with family members in the services had special concerns to worry about. We were encouraged to buy war savings stamps which we kept in little booklets, but beyond that, the only war related school incident I can remember is getting sent home in midmorning one day in the spring because of events in Europe. Careful counting seems to indicate that occurred in either Grade 2, when Miss Colbeck was my teacher, and D-day was the event, or in Grade 3 and Victory in Europe on May 8, 1945 was the event. Miss Polly was my teacher that year. Somehow the latter seems to be the right one.

Another memory of the early grades is the Nurse's Office. In those days we were subject to a medical examination each year. A traveling doctor would appear on the scene and subject us all to a cursory examination. I'm sure all my male contemporaries can remember being asked to cough during one part of the exam. Today that doctor would be up on child abuse charges. We also got some of our inoculation or vaccination shots at this office. All of one class would be lined up partly in and partly outside the office as each of us in turn got punctured. Anticipation of the shot was so stressful for some of the students that tears were shed and bladder control became a major issue.

Physical Education was not a very well organized part of our experience. Most of it occurred during recess which happened twice a day at approximately 10:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., the beginning and end of each being signaled by the ringing of the school bell. The girls were allotted the north side of the grounds, which didn't give them much space, and the boys had the much larger southern portion. No one thought that there was anything wrong with such an arrangement. In the early grades such activities as playing tag were pursued. But as one advanced through the grades you could take part

in scrub softball games in the warmer months and shinny or ball hockey in the winter. The school provided no equipment but most boys had a hockey stick of some sort, and a few had an old tennis ball, without which there was no game. Forget the old horse apple stories! Each grade would commandeer a plot of ground, scrape the snow to the sides to form "the boards" and two snow mounds at each end for goal posts and play away each recess and return to school early before the afternoon bell for another half hour or so. It was too late after school in the winter to see the ball, so we just went home, or perhaps to a friend's for an hour or so of play.

In the summer, softball was the sport. Again there was no school equipment, but most boys could bring a ball glove, often a hand me down of dubious quality, and someone usually had a bat and ball. I can't remember any specific diamonds and backstops being present, although there might have been two or three in the corners of the field. The playing fields got divided up in some fashion and each of the higher grades would have a game going during recess and before the afternoon bell. There were no little leagues organized in those days except for hockey, nor were there organized school leagues at the elementary level. But I do remember at least one occasion when Davin School brought a team over for a ball game after school. Unfortunately, Connaught was not victorious that day.

A Field Day was held once a year in the spring during which no classes were held and all the students went outside to participate in a variety of sporting events organized by the teachers. Most events were races of one sort or another, but there were also a few such as the high jump and broad jump. Ribbons were handed out for first, second and third places, so one wanted to collect as many of these as possible.

There was no gymnasium at Connaught at that time which may partially account for the absence of anything much in the line of organized sports activities. One consequence of that was the lack of success Connaught students had at basketball when they went on to high school. The only sports equipment provided were soccer goal posts at either end of the boys side, and a heavy old leather soccer ball which made an appearance exactly once in my seven years at Connaught. There was also a steel swing set on both the girls' and boys' side and a simple steel bar on steel posts on the girls side for some sort of gymnastic endeavors. Hanging upside down by the knees was about the only thing I ever saw done.

One activity that would have been frowned upon had one got caught doing it, has subsequently become something of a recognized sport in recent years. I refer to climbing the lower section of the walls to perch on a ledge about six or eight feet off the ground. Although most of the building is of red brick construction, some of the class pictures I have seen show the light colored stone layer around the lower perimeter of the school. There are horizontal grooves cut in this stone surround, just large enough for toe and finger holds which allows one to climb up to the ledges found in indentations of the upper brick work. Although I am sure this was a completely accidental result of the school design, we spent considerable time attempting, and succeeding at climbing

the walls. Little did we realize that rock climbing would one day be a recognized sport, and that a few daredevils would carry wall climbing to unimaginable ends.

But if we lacked a gym, we did have a Woodworking Room and a Home Economics Room. Or was it a Domestic Science Lab? We were scheduled into these rooms only in Grade 7 and Grade 8, and I'm not even sure about Grade 7. They were in the basement of the boys' side in the first case, and the girls' side in the second. A traveling teacher appeared once a week to conduct the woodworking class. Davin School did not have a woodworking room so its students came over to Connaught on a weekly basis to have their woodworking and home economics classes. Come to think of it, why didn't we go over to Davin once a week to make use of their gym? An early lesson in the injustice of the world, I suppose.

As with sports, not much attention was paid to Art or Music. We did a bit of both in our classrooms, and now and again a special travelling teacher would show up to conduct a class in one or the other. There was a special school choir made up of those who showed some ability in their classroom singing, and they got excused from class now and again so that they could practise somewhere in the school. Was there a music room with a piano somewhere? As you can see, I was not invited to participate in the school choir. Those of us who were musically challenged remained in the classroom and were given some activity to keep us busy. However, a system wide choir was formed when I was in Grade 8, and much to my astonishment, I was invited to be a member. No doubt this was due to the minor miracle of the male voice change.

A number of us got some early lessons in crimes and punishment. Somewhere there must have been a list of misdemeanors for which various levels of punishment were prescribed. These included talking in class, and running in the basement on rainy days when we were all confined to the available indoor spaces, mainly the basement, boys on one side, girls on the other. For these lesser offences one might have to stay after school and complete some assigned task or another. On the only such occasion I can remember, Miss Parker gave us our assignment and then left. Apparently there was no need for the teacher to stay after school just because the students were bad. While some worked at the assignment at least one of us decided to look out the window and thereby discovered the Principal, Mr. McDiarmid, fallen on the front steps of the school. Although I believe we were the first to notice this, and have vague recollections of going to find the janitor, I can no longer recall exactly what we did. As it turned out, he had suffered a fatal heart attack. It was the single most dramatic event in my school life.

For more heinous crimes, you got the strap. This was administered either in the classroom by the classroom teacher, or for the more serious infractions, in the Principal's office by the Principal or Vice Principal. The strap was a piece of leather or rubberized canvas, about 16 or 18 inches (40cm) long and 2 to 3 inches (7 cm) wide. You held out hand, palm up, and it got struck one or more times. This was then repeated for the other hand. It certainly smarted and you did your best not to cry, but except for the brief stinging and reddening of your hands, it really wasn't all that traumatic. All that I observed who were punished in this fashion seemed to survive, and

were neither much the better nor worse for the experience. It was, however, best not to let any word of this reach the home front, lest some real punishment might follow.

Occasionally, when the classroom assignments were completed a few minutes before the end of the day, or before recess began, students were invited to offer their classmates a recitation, a riddle, a joke or a small performance of some sort. A few of the braver souls did. I can remember one young lady doing a song and dance rendition of "The Trolley Song", one young man singing "Old Shep", a melancholy song about his doomed pet, and a couple of clever word plays that have stuck in my head all these years. First, a riddle.

Question: Why does one never have to fear starving to death on the desert?

Answer: Because of the sand which is on it.

Secondly, a morality tale:

A south seas potentate lived in an enormous palace built entirely with grass. He was well known for his addiction to fancy thrones, so visiting kings, dukes, ambassadors etc., always brought him a new throne as a gift. The old throne was carted away and stored in the attic as the king seated himself in the new one. This went on for many years until the addition of one extra throne to the attic brought the whole collection, as well as the attic floor and roof down on the king, his visitors, and his entire entourage, killing the lot of them.

The Moral? People who live in grass houses shouldn't stow thrones.

Finally, the boy-girl thing. Somewhere around Grade 4 or 5 one began to notice that one of the girls in your class suddenly seemed to have become much more charming than you had previously realized. You might find yourself watching her across the classroom for lengthy periods of time. And if the gods of romance were on your side, the object of your admiration might simultaneously notice that you weren't quite as offensive as she had hitherto thought. If she chose to stare back you would find yourself in a staring match, the first one to look away being the "loser". Pretty exciting stuff! By the time we reached Grades 7 and 8, co-ed parties were common, and a few boys and girls were involved in "serious" crushes. We were slowly leaving our childhoods behind and beginning our relentless progression to adulthood.

While we might have lacked the physical amenities common in schools today, most of us seemed to enjoy our school days, and most of us got a pretty decent education, even if it was through the use of educational practices such as rote learning and failing students, apparently frowned on in current educational theory. For most of its students, Connaught seemed to prepare them well to continue on to high school, and ultimately to take their place in adult society.

Happy 100th Connaught!

Submitted by Donald
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