

The Man Who Built Duncan Elementary School

Much has been written about the design of Duncan Elementary School as one of the best examples of early school architecture in the province of British Columbia. The credit for the design was architect William Tuff Whiteway. But who carried out the actual construction of the school?

Edward Walter John Lee was born in 1882 in London, England. A carpenter by trade, he left England in March 1908 for London, Ontario where he was engaged in the building business. In 1909 he moved to Vancouver, continuing in the same occupation. He married Violet Fleetwood-Philliston in 1911, and, in 1912, he and his wife moved to Duncan, settling in a house at the end of Nagle Street.

Edward became a partner in the Island Building Company in 1912. Tenders for construction of Duncan Elementary School were issued in the early months of 1913 and the Island Building Company was one of five that submitted bids on the construction of the school. All the bids surpassed the amount of money available to the school board, so the tender was amended such that the interior of the second story classrooms in the school would remain unfinished. The Island Building Company and Robert McLay, as the two lowest bids, were asked to resubmit bids based on the amended building specification. The Island Building Company, being the lowest bidder in this second round, was awarded the contract.

No sooner was the construction of Duncan Elementary School completed in 1913, that the Island Savings Company, Ltd. was awarded the contract for the construction of Kuper Island Indian Residential School. Building of this second school was completed in 1914 at a cost of \$60,000.

With the move to Vancouver of Edward's business partner in 1918, the Island Building Company, Ltd. came to an end and Edward started his own contracting business in his own name, E. W. Lee. A great number of the buildings in Duncan were built by Edward's firm: Bazett Block, Wragg Block, Elks' Lodge, Maple Bay Inn, the Cowichan Leader building, Totem Lunch, Overwaitea and the Christian Science Church, to name a few.

Edward was first elected as an alderman for the City of Duncan in 1926 and was never beaten at the polls. He then ran for Mayor in 1939 and won with a two-to-one majority. After a second term as Mayor from 1941-1942, Edward retired from civic politics.

He also served a long term on the Kings Daughters' Hospital Board and was president of the Duncan Rotary Club, 1935-1936. Edward died at his home on Vista Avenue in Duncan at age 83 years in 1966.

Edward is just one of Duncan's residents who had an involvement with Duncan Elementary School. His children attended the school, and one of those children, Ed Lee, now aged 96 years old, will be coming to the school on April 5th to celebrate the 100th anniversary of this much loved heritage building that his father helped build. A photo of his father as one of the attendees at the 50th anniversary of the school will be on display in the room dedicated to the years 1913-1963. Members of the Cowichan Valley are invited to join Ed and share in this once in a lifetime 100th Celebration of the school that is a fine monument to the community.

Carolyn Prellwitz
Retired Teacher, School District 79 (Cowichan Valley)
Secretary, Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society
12 February 2014