

## The 1946 Fire Destruction of Duncan High School and Impact on Duncan Elementary School

Duncan High School opened to its first students in 1911. It was located where the current McKirdy building sits beside Duncan Elementary School on Nagel Street. Extensive renovations were made to the school in 1937 with the addition of new classrooms, science laboratory, library and restrooms. Commercial classrooms were housed in the building across Cairnsmore Street in what now houses the Cowichan Valley Open Learning Centre of School District 79 (Cowichan Valley).

Duncan Elementary School opened in 1913. Both the high school and elementary school students shared playing fields and gymnasiums. Both schools were under the authority of the Duncan Consolidated School District.

Following WWII there was a concerted effort by the BC Department of Education to consolidate school districts. In the Cowichan Valley alone there were at least 10 separate public school districts and boards (Bamberton, Bench, Chemainus, Cobble Hill, Cowichan Station, Mill Bay, Lake Cowichan, Mayo, North Cowichan, Shawnigan Lake, Sylvania – to name a few).

Dr. Maxwell A. Cameron was appointed by the government as a one-person commission to look into public education administration. He recommended a new formula for school finance and the reorganization of British Columbia into large, regionally defined school districts. His report was tabled in the BC Legislature on February 25, 1946, the recommendations accepted and then enacted through the Public Schools Act Amendment Act of 1946. Seventy-four large school districts were created, amalgamating almost all of the rural, municipal and city school districts which had existed previously. The resulting impact on the Cowichan Valley was the creation of School District No. 65 (Cowichan) and School District No. 66 (Lake Cowichan).

In anticipation of the implementation of the Cameron Report, Lt. Col. Richard McNaughton Lendum, DSO, who returned to his teaching duties following the conclusion of WWII, was appointed by the Duncan Consolidated School Board at its meeting of December 7, 1945 to be the supervising principal of all three Duncan Schools – the senior high, the junior high and the elementary schools. The appointment was made without any prior notice to the two current school principals, Mr. Ernest A. Goddard and Mr. Lionel Arthur MacKay Peake. As supervising principal Mr. Lendum would be in a position to undertake much of the administration burden carried on by these two men. Naturally, both Mr. Goddard and Mr. Peake sought clarification.

Disapproval of the method and timing of the appointment of Lt. Col. Lendum was expressed in writing in January 1946 by the Inspector of Schools, Dr. Plenderleith, who recommended that Mr. Goddard and Mr. Peake be given total responsibility for the administration of their schools until the end of June 1946. The Board stuck to its original decision.

Then, topping this political hot potato, disaster struck. Duncan High School burned to the ground on Sunday, March 24, 1946. By the time the Duncan Volunteer Fire Department arrived at the site the building was fully involved. Efforts to save the school were seriously hampered by lack of water pressure and winds fanning the flaming. By morning the school was in ashes. The fire and smoke had been so intense that no contents were saved. The only good news was that the fire occurred on a weekend and no student or staff lives were lost.

There was still three months left in the school year and the Duncan Consolidated School Board had to move quickly to find temporary accommodation. Grade 7 and 8 students at the Junior High School (aka Commercial Building) on Cairnsmore were moved to empty classroom space at Fairbridge Farm School. Grade 11 and 12 students took up the classrooms at the Junior High School. The remaining Grade 11 and 12 students were accommodated in four temporary classrooms built into the high school gymnasium which had escaped the fire.

In June 1946 the BC Department of Education determined that it did not recognize Lt. Col. Lendrum's position of supervising principal and the new School District No. 65 found itself with too many principals. Mr. Lendrum's appointment as supervising principal was rescinded, after which he was appointed senior principal with jurisdiction over Cobble Hill High, Cobble Hill Elementary, Bench, Sylvania, Bamberton and Shawnigan Lake Schools. This latter appointment was satisfactory to all and cleared up the technical objections in the first appointment.

In the meantime, the new school district had to arrange ongoing temporary school accommodation for students in the Duncan area as well as see to the construction of a new high school. Approximately 200 children of Duncan Elementary were bussed to Fairbridge Farm School up until June 30, 1947. To avoid transporting these students in the 1947-1948 school term, accommodation was found at the old Duncan Public School house off Station Street and the old Somenos School on Herd Road. Arrangements were also made with the Vimy Social Club to convert their premises into two classrooms. When school opened in September 1947, 54 additional children registered, and so transportation for two classes of Duncan Elementary School to Fairbridge continued.

Vimy Community Hall opened to two classes of children in September 1947 as an annex of Duncan Elementary. Many residents in that area of the school district expressed approval of their children attending school there because it eliminated a long bus ride for their children. In 1949 Vimy Hall was reported to be in a state of disrepair and poorly heated and with outhouses and a poor playground. Duncan Elementary School classes continued to be held there until about 1954.

The old Somenos School which was owned by the Municipality of North Cowichan had been used as a community hall for many years before it was brought out of retirement to become a school again. Its roof was re-shingled in the summer of 1947 and other repairs made to bring it into good order as it was in very poor shape. In March 1948 the Somenos Women's Institute purchased the building from North Cowichan and then agreed to rent the building as a schoolhouse to the School Board on a yearly basis, the rental being in the form of various repairs and improvements. The agreement would continue until June 30, 1950 when it would come up for renewal.

The agreement was renewed but by 1952 the old school, which had been built in 1914, was in really rough shape. The main concern was water, which had to be carried to the school by the janitor from his own home. A damning report in December 1952 from the Vancouver Island Health Unit stated among other things that the water was contaminated, the toilets inadequate and there were no separate washing facilities for the students. The building continued to be used as an annex of Duncan Elementary until June 1958 at which time it became the Somenos Community Hall.

The loss of Duncan High School also saw Duncan Public School (aka Alderlea School), brought out of retirement as an annex to Duncan Elementary School for children in grades 1 through 4 under the name Zenith Club Elementary School. The building had originally been built as a one-room schoolhouse in 1891 with a second classroom added in 1901.

Because of overcrowding in all the temporary school accommodations, a shift system was implemented at Zenith in September 1949. Two classes attended from 8:30 am to noon, and two classes from 12:30 to 4 pm. Parental criticism of this system was quite vocal and resulted in many parents removing their children from schools in Duncan.

The quick acquisition by the School Board of two more emergency classrooms – one in the main hall of the Armoury Building which stood behind the Agricultural Hall, and the other in the basement of the school building in use by high school students on Cairnsmore Street – eliminated the shift classes. Zenith School continued as an annex of Duncan Elementary School until June 1958. Today this building, owned by the City of Duncan, houses the Arcadian Day Care.

Between 1950 and 1961 the Cowichan School District opened seven brand new schools in the Duncan area – Alexander Elementary, January 1958; Cowichan Senior High, 1950; Koksilah Elementary in 1958; Mount Prevost Junior Secondary, 1961; Quamichan Junior Secondary, 1961; Sahtlam Elementary, 1955; Somenos Elementary, 1953. Temporary accommodations made as a result of the loss of Duncan High School were no longer needed and Duncan Elementary reverted back to having all its students on site.

Today, 2014, many of those new schools have closed permanently or been repurposed for other uses. Duncan Elementary itself no longer operates as a full school. One class of middle alternate students uses classroom space on the upper floor, and future plans see the building housing the school board offices later this year.

A celebration of 100th anniversary of Duncan Elementary School, organized by School District 79 (Cowichan Valley) and volunteers, will occur 1:30-4:30 pm at the school on Saturday, April 5th, 2013. See you there!

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