



Okanagan
Centre
School Days

Osam Kobayashi

MS 36

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My sister Ruth asked me to write an account of the eight years I spent in the Okanagan Centre School now the Lake Country Museum. Although she is just as capable as I of telling about those school days I attribute her reluctance to the fact that she is the most unassuming of all the Okanagan Centre Kobayashi family. I am not sure of myself as a worthy source of information because in those days I drove my teacher Mrs. Parker and my family to distraction with my antics as the village urchin.

That being said I would be the last to refuse a request from Ruth.

When I began my education in 1932, the Okanagan Centre School was brand new. My cousin Margaret and I were in the first Grade 1 class. From Grade 1 to 8 we were the only two in each grade as the years passed. So one of us always ranked first or second.

I have been back to the old building but after almost seventy years much has changed. The boys and girls "toilets" located to the north and south beyond the school have disappeared as well as the wood shed where Akira Hikichi and I stacked wood. The basketball poles have succumbed to time. Gone is the tennis court to the north. The swings adjacent to Mrs. Gray's house have long been uprooted.

The girls' washroom was just the right size for playing "High Over" We chose sides and took turns throwing a tennis ball over the roof. The opponents on the other side caught it and came running around the corner to hit as many of us as possible. Every schoolyard must have had such a building.

Girls always outnumbered boys. At one time of 15 pupils Akira and I were the only boys. As a result our school lacked a "team" concept. We were unable to play soccer or hockey which the Winfield boys enjoyed. Despite this lack Akira was a fine athlete. He became a soccer and track star at Vernon High School and the University of Toronto. He is now retired after a career as an entomologist in Simcoe, Ontario.

Winfield boys like Sus Taiji and Nick Shishido came over the hill and introduced Akira and me to manly games like "Pow". It was a type of war game using toy revolvers. "Pow" was an enormous contrast to such games as "Nuts in May" and "London Bridge" which we were accustomed to playing with the girls on Valentine's Day.

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Mrs. Parker taught us many English songs and ballads. "Rule Britannia" was mandatory as well as "Hearts of Oak". I thought the saddest song of all was "Barbara Allen". How could anyone die for "love of Barbara Allen"? Except for constant teasing about this boy or that girl, sex was not a problem. Our school was almost unisexual/as they say today about barber shops. Any indication of matters sexual would have been considered an offence worthy of expulsion. To the boys the closest to sex was vague feelings as we grew.

That's all it was - vague feelings
Miss Gleed the Winfield teacher arranged for us to exchange letters with her pupils. I wrote to Robert Offerdahl and David Lodge. In one of my letters I impertinently asked if their teacher was "cranky". Mrs. Parker intercepted my missile and the question was duly censored.

Bullying with its evil presented itself especially in the fall when new arrivals appeared for September school opening as well as the apple packing season. Those with special talents often fell prey. The locals did not like anything or anyone new and different. I found girls just as aggressive as boys in this aspect of childhood behaviour.

When Argyll Williamson appeared on the scene the bullies suddenly became victims. With his powerful muscles he stamped out bullying for good at the Centre school. I later joined him for smokes under the packing house platform - pals forever.

Special days came and went with the changing seasons. The first grand occasion was Halloween which meant a masquerade party. Once I had to wear a Japanese samurai costume my mother had brought from Japan. Instead I wanted to be a pirate or even Mickey Mouse. Since my heart was not in my role as a warrior I was not considered for a prize.

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Then came Christmas and the concert. Mrs. Parker was reputed to present a concert unequalled anywhere. At any rate they were always greatly enjoyed. We sang "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" with Mrs. Parker at the piano. Every child received a gift, an orange, and a net bag full of sugary candy. We had the time of our lives.

Akira and I always did recitations. We presented "The Night Before Christmas" and a piece about two Chinese boys. After Akira left for Vernon, in spite of Mrs. Parker's objections I insisted on doing a recitation portraying a French Canadian voyageur. I believe a poet called Drummond composed it. I got my way. There I was a little Japanese boy with close-cropped hair reciting away with a Quebecois accent. Poor Mrs. Parker. What she had to put up with.

During the concert the cord which supported the beam which lowered the stage curtain would slip off leaving it dangling on a diagonal plane. Half the actors would be visible and the other half would be concealed. The quality of the concert made up for these mechanical malfunctions.

With the coming of spring and warm weather Mrs. Parker organized "Nature Walks". On a Friday afternoon we walked up the hill past her house, past the fox pens, and into the woods, note books in hand. We jotted down the names of trees and plants especially wild flowers which blossomed in abundance. Our favourites were "Shooting Stars" or "Lily Bells" (as we called them) rare among the common "buttercups".

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Much later I read Gabrielle Roy's "Where Nests the Water Hen" . In this book a bright young Manitoba French teacher takes her class to study nature in a "lecon des choses" or a "lesson about things". Essentially this is what Mrs. Parker did with us years ago at our little country school house.

June and the end of the school year brought closing day. It was time to put the year's accomplishments on display. Mrs. Parker called the event "The Exhibition" as in "The Canadian National Exhibition".

Geometrical designs in living poster colour bordered the walls above the blackboards. The best examples of McLean's penmanship were tacked in place. I had on exhibit a book case and a bird house made from packing house box shook (apple box wood). I wanted to make airplanes but Mrs. Parker never consented.

The ladies from the Women's Institute came to judge the garden plots which surrounded the school on all but the north side. My plot was on the south-east corner of the school. One year I had the bright idea of covering all the weeds in my garden with topsoil producing a beautifully manicured effect. Unfortunately the Judges were not impressed and I was prizeless at the end of the day. That was also the year I came second in academic efforts. Cousin Margaret ranked first thanks to her mathematical aptitude.

The adults enjoyed tea and we kids ate sandwiches and drank lemonade. My mother was quite relaxed because I was on my best behaviour.

The next day we went to Carr's Landing for our picnic.

As a story without names is like a ^{house without people} ~~flashless-skeleton~~ I will try to recall some pupils who attended school with me.

We Kobayashis ruled the roost for a number of years. Combined with our cousins, we were too numerous to list.

Among the local pupils were: Pat Cheeseman, the best swimmer, and a good athlete. She and her dog, Jock. Ruth Nuyens, writer and poet. Ken Nuyens who roamed the hills above the Centre with me during my last years at the school. Karleen Hare, probably the most demure of us all. I believe Karleen's father built the school.

Nora Carter and Lorraine Long were with us during their later school years. Lorraine and Akira teamed up against Nora and me to play pick-up basketball. Against Lorraine's height and Akira's athletic skill, Nora and I never had a hope.

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The Toda family spent a short time at the school before they left for Japan. I remember Nobu especially because of her love for singing. The Takeda girls were also on the school roll until they left for Winfield. Akira's brothers Jack and Mitsu also attended.

Stir others into the mix like Douglas Mills, Philip Meares, Kenny Eppard, Henry Stoll, and the Wooldrige boys, and you had a good cross-section of people. There were also the Crandlemires from Alberta. I must not forget Richard Olsen. He could tap dance and was also the hit of one Christmas concert when he gave one of the finest renditions of "Gold Mine in the Sky" ever heard in the Centre. What a voice!

During those school days as a reticent boy I was only barely aware of adults in the village. Mr. Glead, ^{Post-master and store-keeper} stands out as a kind and gentle man. I picture him turning the handle of the vintage Imperial Esso gas pump as he dispensed gasoline slowly but surely.

Another of my favourites was Mr. Nuyens who directed operations at the packing house. Whether speaking to a boy or village elder he seemed the same. He always had a greeting and a pleasant word for us little people. A good man.

Of the ladies Mrs. Evelyn Cooney will always remain in memory as the kindest of persons.

Those were "halcyon days" as the tourism writers would say. Eight years with the same school and the same teacher. What peace and stability! No stress. No strife. No bills to pay.

Although Mrs. Parker said I was "pig-headed" and at times threatened to "knock me into the middle of next week" she was an A-I teacher.

Her strength was creativity. She also had the knack of making time pass quickly - an elusive talent, especially measured against our time of constant complaints about boredom.

I hope others as well as my sister will relate to the memories I have of "Okanagan Centre School Days".

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