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# The four schools of Gabriola

by June Harrison

It was around 1870 that the families on Gabriola first saw the need for a school. On July 1, 1872, the Superintendent of Education visited the island from Victoria and noted that the population of school-age children was fifteen. Shortly after, the Provincial Secretary declared Gabriola and Mudge to be members of a newly-created Gabriola School District. However, because settlements on Gabriola were located at opposite ends of the island, it was difficult to select a site for a school that was convenient for all the children to attend.

After much discussion, it was decided to build near the Maples, on the site of the present-day Community Hall, on the south side of Gabriola.

On the Board of Trustees at various times in those early years were:

Magnus Edgar

Thomas McGuffie (McGuffey)

Richard Chapple (Chappel)

John Kemp

Jonathan Martin

Thomas Degnen (Degnan, Dignan, Dignam)

Henry (Harry) Heath

John White Penberthy (Penburthy), and

Richard Norris from Mudge Island.<sup>1</sup>

## Gabriola School—1872–79

One of the trustees, John Kemp, donated land for the school, and the government then funded the building of the first schoolhouse on Gabriola. It measured 16 by 18 feet, and

was made of wood. A teacher could not be found immediately, but on October 1, 1873, an American, John E.L. Seneker, was appointed to the job at a salary of \$50 per month.

The children started their education with reading (1st class) and writing, and then progressed to reading (3rd class), dictation, grammar, arithmetic, and geography.

In the Annual Report of Public Schools for the year 1874, it was reported of Gabriola:

“Educational facilities are duly appreciated in this district; trustees and parents act in concert with the teacher, thus securing the best possible return for moneys spent for school purposes.”

Early the following year, dissatisfaction from residents of the north end of the island came to light. They felt that the distance was too great for their children to walk. A proposal was made to build a second school to be erected at the north end, thereby enabling these children to receive a portion of the teacher’s time. However, the idea remained just an idea because the settlers couldn’t agree on a site for the new school.

Meanwhile, the children of the south end continued to attend school on a regular basis and their educational progress was reported by the Public Schools Inspector as “tolerable”.

After a two-year engagement as teacher, Mr. Seneker left “in order to travel East on a visit”, and he was replaced at the start of the school year in September 1875 by Mr. O.M. Gregory, a young Canadian. Mr. Gregory however was not too happy at the school, and he left the island shortly afterwards to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.island.net/~gm\\_chin/gmfamily.html](http://www.island.net/~gm_chin/gmfamily.html)  
Also: Gabriola Museum History Committee, *The Chapple family*, *SHALE* 3, pp.18–19; Jan. 2002. Don Martin, *The Martin family of Gabriola*, *SHALE* 5, pp.22–23, Dec. 2002.

undertake a temporary teaching assignment in Nanaimo. An Englishman, Capt. B.A. Wake, who lived on Valdes Island, was subsequently hired to replace him.<sup>2</sup> On days when the school was open, Capt. Wake would row across Gabriola Passage to Gabriola early in the morning, and then row back again to Valdes in the afternoon.

In the summer of 1876, a teacher's residence was built beside the school and other improvements were made to the school itself; there were seventeen children attending and the cost to maintain each student on the register was \$33 per annum. For the older children in school, an English Examination set by the Board of Education consisted of writing a composition within a two-hour time limit. The gentlemen were required to write on the subject of politics, the ladies on manners.

Unfortunately, it appeared that not all were happy with Capt. Wake. An excerpt from the Annual Report of Public Schools for 1877 concerning Gabriola reads as follows:

“Dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the teacher in this district, which have existed for the greater part of the year, appear to be almost laid aside, and in their place it is to be hoped that confidence, goodwill, and mutual respect will spring up. Although his method of imparting instruction is somewhat defective from want of professional training, yet painstaking industry and great influence over the children which is exercised for their good, should more than counterbalance what may be considered objectionable in other respects.”

It was also noted in the same report that year that approximately one third of the island's children were not attending school due to the travelling distance involved.

<sup>2</sup> Wake Cove on Valdes Island is named after him. See Lynda Poulton, *Captain B.A. Wake and his family*, *SHALE* 5, pp.3–13; Dec. 2002.

Presumably, the Inspector was referring to the children at the north end of the island. He noted that the parents of these children were repeatedly offered half-time tuition if they would provide the room for the purpose, but they did not avail themselves of the offer. As a result of the non-attendance by this portion of the school population, the cost of running the school rose from \$27 per student, based on enrolment numbers, to \$43 per student, based on actual attendance.

The affairs of the school did not continue to run as smoothly as they might have. On the return of Mr. Gregory from his temporary assignment in Nanaimo in 1878, there arose a bitter dispute as to who should continue as teacher—Mr. Gregory or Capt. Wake. The dispute evidently led to a temporary closure of the school. The *Daily British Colonist*, published in Victoria, took a very political view of the affair, for the following article appeared on Friday, September 13:

“Victoria would seem to be not the only place in which the Government have undertaken to meddle with the free schools. B.A. Wake, Esq., formerly a captain in H.M. Navy, holds the authority of the Board of Education as teacher on Gabriola Island. A few days ago there arrived on the Island a person named Gregory, and forthwith the trustees undertook to place him in forcible possession of the school. Capt. Wake resented, flung one of the trustees off the stoop, and held the other trustee and Gregory at bay until bystanders interfered on behalf of the gallant captain. The damaged trustee was arrested on complaint of Capt. Wake and taken before Mayor Bate, who fined him for assault. Gregory, the usurper, stated in court that he came up on the advice of Messrs Walkem and Abrams [the premier and Nanaimo MLA] and was engaged solely by Messrs. Chapple and Edgar, with the understanding that he (Gregory) ran the risk of getting paid or not. This is but one instance of many in which the present

Government has set at naught the authority of the Board of Education.”

On the same day this article appeared, an extraordinary meeting of the residents of the School District was called “to take into consideration the affairs of the school and to elect trustees”. Capt. Wake noted that “the business before the meeting is in the interest of the children and advised that all animosity be put away”. A second resolution was proposed by Joseph Martin “that the meeting is dissatisfied with the conduct of the two trustees [Chapple and Edgar] in closing the school and dismissing the teacher [Capt. Wake]”. At the same meeting, it was also decided that a trustee be elected from the north end of the island. This was a partial response to the Board of Education’s offer to fund a part-time teacher for the north end.

Mr. Gregory nevertheless succeeded in regaining his job and made an appearance as a teacher in the 1878/9 School Register. There were then nine students attending the South School: Margaret, Ellen, and Robert Degnen; Mark and Ann Edgar; Annie and Margaret McGuffie; Joseph Chapple; and William Kemp. The subjects taught continued to be reading (up to 5th class), writing, grammar, dictation, arithmetic, and geography.

At the start of the new academic year in August 1879, available records show that the school failed to open. Details as to the circumstances of the closure are rather sketchy, but the school remained closed for two years.

### **South School—1881–89**

The South School, and at that time Gabriola’s only school, was re-opened in 1881 with Alexander Shaw Sr. engaged as teacher. This extraordinary man owned a farm across the road from the school, on property now owned by the Davidson

family. Mr. Shaw was born in Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1835 and was father of nine children. He was farming a 12-hour day when he decided to become a teacher. Mr. Shaw has been credited with being Gabriola Island’s first teacher, however this mistake was perhaps due to the fact that he was the first upon the re-opening of the school, it having been functioning for six out of the eight years of its existence.

One can presume that Mr. Shaw was greatly saddened and disappointed to see the little schoolhouse, which lay in plain view from his farmhouse, sit empty for two years running, while the local children went uneducated. And with nine children of his own, he no doubt had an interest in seeing to their education.

In 1881, at forty-six years of age, Alexander Shaw obtained books from the Department of Education and studied at home by candlelight. He then built a rowboat, rowed to Victoria to pass his examinations, and received a temporary teaching certificate.

There were twenty-seven students when the school re-opened in 1881. Five of Shaw’s own children were attending, the others probably not of school age. In the School Register for that year, Alexander Shaw noted that: “School having been closed for two years found the children much behind for their age, but very willing to learn”.

When the Public Schools Inspector visited the school in 1882, he noted that: “The School has done well and is deservedly popular among the parents of the children attending it”.

Alexander’s son, John Shaw, passed the standard for admission into High School that year, and the following year, 1883, another son, Alexander Jr., and James Gray also followed into High School. At that time it was customary for these students to attend

school in Nanaimo, boarding with families during the week and returning to Gabriola on weekends. High School students continued to do this for half a century.

After having completed their studies, around 1884, the three boys accompanied their father and former teacher to Victoria, again by rowboat, to obtain their teaching certificates. Alexander Sr. also wrote the examinations, his temporary certificate having expired, and continued to teach at the school.

By 1884, the subjects taught at the little school had increased, and now included such courses as penmanship, bookkeeping, mensuration, vocal music, natural philosophy, and linear drawing.

Alexander Shaw was also a stern disciplinarian, and corporal punishment was accepted as the standard of the day. Excerpts from the School Registers read as follows:

September 23, 1885—Corporal Punishment, Ann McGuffie, for gross bad conduct.

In the following year, there are two more entries:

June 73, 1886—Ann Peterson, stood on a seat half an hour for swearing;

November 27, 1886—Corporal Punishment, Sara Jane Martin for lying.

Mr. Shaw continued to teach at the school until 1888, occasionally aided by his son, Alexander Jr. His other son, John, went on to become principal of the Nanaimo Boy's High School in 1887, then principal of the combined High Schools in Nanaimo.<sup>3</sup> Like

<sup>3</sup> When Alexander Sr. left Gabriola to go to Nanaimo in 1888, his life's careers were still only beginning. He was then in his mid-fifties. In 1889, he became station agent for the E. and N. Railroad. The following year, he was planning electric power for Nanaimo and was manager of the enterprise when

To become a teacher you had to have at least grade eleven plus "Normal School" education.

"I went to high school in Nanaimo and after school, the people in my class were either nurses, teachers, or secretaries, so my girlfriends and I decided we would go to Victoria, Victoria Normal School. We were already normal, but that is what you did to be a teacher." (Ila-Mae Dixon, née Wilton).

Teachers rarely stayed in one position for more than a couple of years and were always being sought. On Gabriola, most boarded with a local family. A teacher was expected to set a "moral example" for the students, to show courtesy, truthfulness, integrity, and thoroughness of work. The teacher had to be "worthy of the community" and also had to perform public health duties such as spotting neglect, impaired vision, speech defects, head lice, etc. Men and women teachers were not treated equally; the women were paid less, and their teaching certificates were revoked if they married.

Visitors were encouraged to come to the school to see the teacher and the students, and could record their comments in the Visitors' Book.

his father, John made a name for himself in British Columbia education.

Following Alexander Shaw's departure, Sara Preston, John F. Smith, and Robert J. Douglas all taught in an eighteen-month period. The teachers of the day received a salary of \$50 per month. Young teachers fresh out of school often accepted posts in outlying districts, such as Gabriola, which they would use as a testing ground to see if

the lights went on in 1890. Shaw spent time panning for gold in the hills behind Nanaimo, and he taught at Beaver Creek (near Port Alberni) from 1899 to 1908. He finally returned to Nanaimo to retire in 1912. He died in Nanaimo on March 11, 1916 at age eighty-one [reported in his obituary in the *Nanaimo Free Press*].

they were going to continue in the profession.

### North School—1883–89

In correspondence available dated May 1, 1883, between Mr. McLay and the Superintendent of Education, the former suggests that a farmhouse owned by the Hirst brothers could temporarily be outfitted to serve as a school for the north end of the island until a proper one could be erected. Mr. McLay also noted:

“There is a wish to know how much [money] could be had at once, or if the whole amount could be had at once. I mention this with the object of having you do as well by us as you possibly can. The settlers here have got somewhat disheartened on this school matter, owing to former attempts and failures.”

The “former attempts” referred to in James McLay’s letter was the partial construction of a log building which was to be used as the school. It had been started the previous spring, but the construction was poor, as Mr. McLay noted in a subsequent letter:

“The logs are there yet, but so badly jointed and hopelessly twisted that it would be the height of folly to try and make anything of it.”

On June 8, 1883, the first school meeting on north Gabriola was held and trustees Alexander Hoggan, J. Pemberthy, and James McLay were elected. Mr. McLay was appointed chairman and secretary.

The possibility of locating the school at the farm owned by the Hirst brothers had by this time diminished as another tenant had moved in and commenced farming the land. Consequently, a new site for the North School was chosen, on a quarter-section then known as the Plain (a short distance behind the present day Post Office).

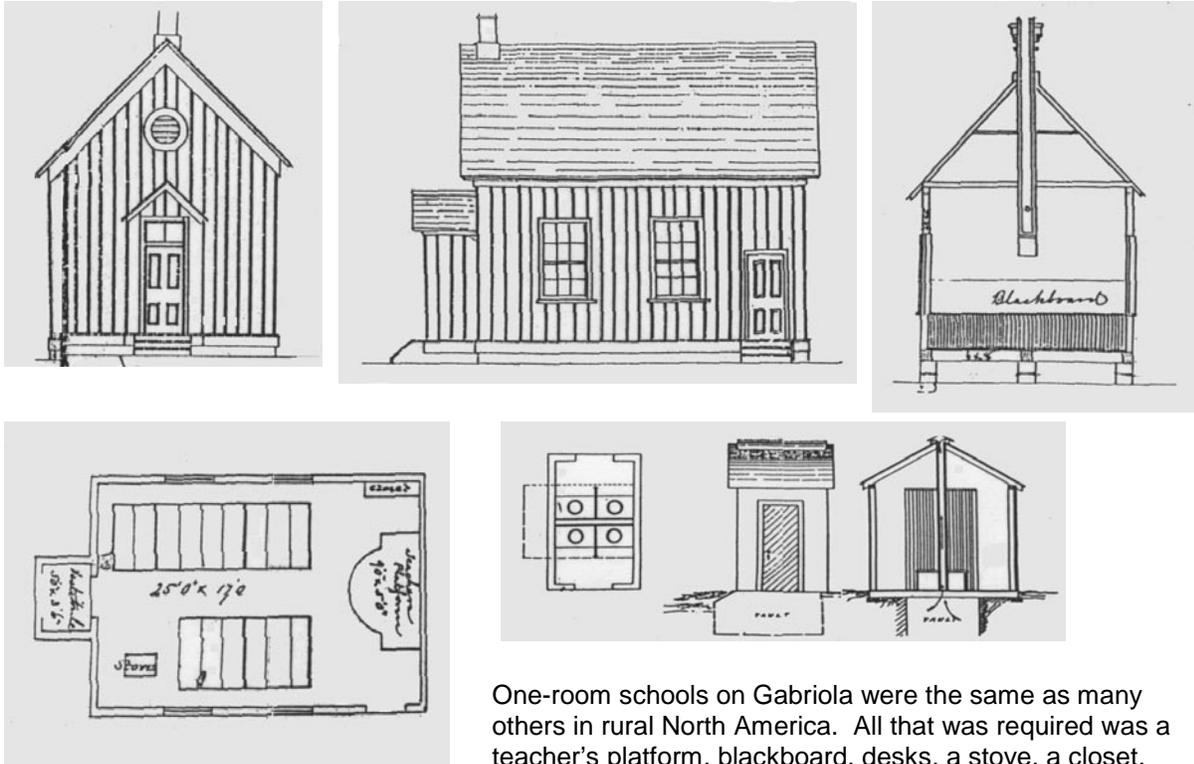
The trustees received \$200 for the construction of the school; however, they found this sum to be in no way sufficient. In those days, \$500 was considered to be the standard amount allotted to build a school. The trustees felt that a mistake had been made and applied to the Lands and Works Department for the full amount that they felt they needed. In making his plea on behalf of the North Gabriola School District, Mr. McLay, acting as secretary for the trustees, wrote:

“I may say I am one of those who thinks education cannot have the same effect being taught in a stable as it would have in a neat tidy House and most likely I have struck your own key-note in this respect as by your punctuality and exactness in all matters connected with education, you can scarcely help feeling depressed at the sight of a wretched School House and proportionately pleased with one of neat description.”

Unfortunately, the additional money was not granted and the school was constructed with the \$200 originally given. The opening of the school was slated for September of 1883.

Mrs. Hoggan, wife of Alex who served as a trustee, also worked very hard during this period to obtain a school. Her daughter, Martha Holm, recorded her memories of her mother’s determination in this regard:

“She wrote to Victoria and found out that there must be 15 children ready to go to school and some place for a schoolhouse. So Mother went to Nanaimo and talked to the sawmill man there, a Mr. Penny, I believe, and asked him how much he would charge for enough lumber to put up a school and make some benches and desks. He said if she could get \$25, he would give her enough lumber and tow it over to the farmer’s landing for her. Then she talked to Jack McLeod, who lived on his big boat, if he could build the school and for how much. He told Mother if she could get a couple of men to help him he would build it for \$25.



One-room schools on Gabriola were the same as many others in rural North America. All that was required was a teacher's platform, blackboard, desks, a stove, a closet, an outhouse, and a woodshed. This is a typical example.

From "Gabriola Three Schools' Reunion" by Peggy Lewis Imreedy, 1984.

So Mr. McLay, my father, Mr. Pemberton, and another man that was staying there helped to build the school and make the seats and desks. Also, they put up a slant (roof) woodshed. So far, so good but most of them didn't want to send their children. My oldest brothers were working in the mine and they needed the little they made to live on. Also, we had to get a teacher. Well, Mother had a friend that she knew who lived in Nanaimo and had a daughter just ready to teach. So, she asked him if he would let her have her to get the school started. He said yes, if she would board her free. Mother had three boys and four girls, Mrs. White-Pemberton had one boy and two girls, Mr. McLay would send one girl and two boys, and we still needed two more. Father said, 'We will take the boys out of the mine till we get this school started, then they can go back'. But Mother needed every penny, so they decided on taking James out and sending me to

school. I was just a couple months past 3, so that made 15 (students)."

Although there are discrepancies in the monies spent to build the school, the story told by Martha Holm is substantiated by the official records kept at the time. The young teacher that was mentioned apparently did not come to teach. James McLay wrote to the Superintendent of his urgency in obtaining a teacher for the school:

"I have put an advertisement in the Nanaimo Free Press for a Lady teacher, duties to commence about 1st October. But it is just likely that, at this late date, we will have to be satisfied with one of either sex."

Finally, Jean Ann Scott was engaged as the first teacher for the North Gabriola School.

James McLay again appealed for additional funds to further complete the school. At that



The enlarged South School, built in 1890 near the Community Hall, as it was shortly before being demolished almost a century later. In the 1970s, the building was being used as St. Martin's Anglican Church.

Photograph by Judy Preston

point, it consisted only of rough boards and battens, and inside needed to be “studded and lined”.

There was still no porch, well, or “much-needed conveniences outside”. Eventually, these were obtained, and Mr. McLay pressed further for the construction of a teacher's residence, and a fence around the school premises.

During the first seven years of the school's operation, six different teachers were engaged. Margaret Sweet followed Miss Scott in 1884, and for each successive year, a new teacher arrived: Jennie Ramsay (1885), Eva Bell (1886), Mary Clunas (1887), and finally, Mary Heard (1889).

Martha Holm went on to recall:

“Mr White and father cut the wood free for years. Mother, with the help of the children,

cleaned that school free as long as she was able.

“I can tell you we Hoggans had to have our lessons all done up before we went to bed at night. From the oldest down to the last we always brought home good reports and the three honour rolls every year. Regularity, Punctuality, Proficiency, and Behaviour.”

The Hoggan children do appear on the honour rolls as published in the Annual Report of Public Schools during this period. However, records are available which show that Mrs. Hoggan was paid for cleaning the school and that the wood-cutting which Mr. Hoggan laboured at was put out for tender each time the supply ran low.

It must have been a very dismal day for all concerned when on December 6, 1889, the North Gabriola School was closed “on account of failure to maintain the average attendance required by statute”.



Some of the children attending the South School in 1908 standing on the steps of the school with the school teacher's house in the background.

Gabriola Archives 1995.020.003

### South School—1889–1936

In 1889, the year of the closure of the North School, the South School had an enrolment of eighteen students. The cost of maintaining each pupil on an average attendance was \$51.

The following year, a larger school was erected at the south end.

The new school measured 24 by 36 feet, three times as large as the original building! No doubt, this new school was much better equipped with more modern desks, chalkboards, and maps. All was well for the children attending the South Gabriola School.

In those days, the schools were closed from time to time for various reasons. Sickness, which spread from one pupil to another, such as chicken pox, measles, whooping cough, and influenza, often closed the

school doors for weeks. Funerals, such as that of Agnes Edgar in 1897 were attended by all islanders young and old. Social events, such as the Poultry Show and Harvest Home Picnic of 1897, also resulted in cancellation of school lessons.

The following are the Rules and Regulations for the Government of Public Schools in the Province of British Columbia (circa 1894):

“It is required of every pupil —

1. That he come to school clean and tidy in his person and clothes; that he avoid idleness, profanity, falsehood, deceit, quarrelling or fighting; that he be kind and courteous to his fellows; and that he conform to the rules of the school.
2. That he present to the teacher an excuse from his parents or guardian for tardiness or absence from school.
3. That he be present at each examination of his school or present a satisfactory excuse for

absence, for absence after promotion examination has been held, he shall forfeit standing obtained at such examination, unless such absence was caused by sickness or other equally satisfactory reason.

4. That he do not depart without the teacher's consent, before the time appointed for closing the school.

5. That he be amenable to the teacher for any misconduct on the school premises, or going to or resuming from school.

6. That he come to school with the prescribed school books and school requisites; but in case of his inability to comply with this rule the teacher may, under special circumstances, supply the necessary books free of cost; but authority to supply the same must be first obtained from the Education Office.

The highest morality should be inculcated, but no religious dogma nor creed shall be taught. The Lord's Prayer may be used in opening and closing the school upon permission of the Board of Trustees".

In the decade 1900–10, the South School maintained an average of about 20 students each year.<sup>4</sup> The list of teachers who taught at the South School during that period was almost as long as the list of students—at least eleven in sixteen years.<sup>5</sup>

The South School acquired its first piano in 1906. A Henry Bord piano, built in Paris in

<sup>4</sup> The school Register for 1903 lists the following students and their ages: Barbara Forrester, 10; John Forrester, 8; Robert Gray, 5; John Lewis, 11; Thomas Lewis, 6; Willie Lewis, 5; Lena McConvey, 5; Vera McConvey, 7; Christian Peterson, 12; Flora Peterson, 14; George Peterson, 7; May Peterson 10; Sam Peterson, 5; Ivor Roberts, 13; Cecilia Shaw, 9; Jean Shaw, 7; Frank Silva, 13; John Silva, 11.

<sup>5</sup> A. Currie (1900); E. Wilson (1901); Grace Gibson (1902); Isabel Harrar (1903); Margaret Mouat (1903); Elizabeth Murray (1904); B.R. Elliot (1908); George Bertram (1909); Nancy Clough (1910); Clara Ruth May (1911); Irene Carter (1913); Janet Mill (1915).

1870, was bought by public subscription by the residents of Gabriola from the Dunsmuir home in Nanaimo. This piano is now housed in the Women's Institute Museum, on loan from Mrs. Lily Gray.

The year 1914 saw the South School closed for one month due to an outbreak of chicken pox. The following year, 1915, severe heat and a "smokey atmosphere" forced the school to close for another three weeks during late August and early September.

Attending a rural school, the students of Gabriola were regarded as being a little tougher than their urban counterparts. One former teacher, Frieda Snider (née Dickinson) remembered her first day of teaching at the South School. It was during 1922, and her students decided to test the stuff she was made of by cutting the rope that held the water pail at the well! Another time, they lowered the flag to half-mast and it stayed that way for quite some time, unnoticed by Miss Dickinson.

It was customary for a young unmarried teacher to board with a local family. Mrs. Snider remembered attending a dance in Nanaimo one night, accompanied by friends, and of course, a chaperone. On the return trip they ran aground at Jack Point at low tide and had to remain there until early morning for a high tide. The young teacher finally arrived home in the early hours of the morning, with just enough time to walk from the wharf at the Maples and open the school for the day's lessons!

### North School—1893–1899

In the fall of 1893, good news came to the residents of north Gabriola in that their own school was re-opening after four years of closure. Mr. McLay wrote to the Superintendent of Education regarding this event:

“This school was opened on Monday, September 4 by Miss Armstrong, teacher, with 16 fine healthy children, which was indeed a pleasant sight as well as a pleasant incident.

“You will see by the accompanying list, that along with the advertisement I have entered the articles we got at the opening of the school. Whether or not we have been too rash will depend on yourself.”

Michael McKinnon, who taught at the South School in 1894, possibly as a “testing ground”, resigned his post and took up a teaching position at the North School in 1895. He obtained land and settled his family, consisting of three children. The residents of the north end were doubtless happy to hear of his children, as this would help insure against any future possible closures due to lack of students; it was truly the more, the merrier! Ironically, Mr. McKinnon was eventually fired by the trustees.

The next time we hear of the North School is in the Annual Public Schools Report on the North Gabriola School submitted in 1899 when again it was closed.

### North School—1906–20s

The North School re-appears in the Report of 1906. Although no particulars are given, it can be presumed that the school had been closed during that period, yet again due to lack of pupils.

After 1906, Lilian Roth taught at the North School, followed by her sister, May Roth. Harold L. Campbell was engaged as teacher in 1910, and the trustees were William Griffiths, Richard Easthom, John Johnson, and Robert Hoggan.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Campbell later went on to become the Deputy Minister to the Department of Education and was on



Teacher and students of the North School circa 1911.  
Gabriola Archives 1995.002.047

### East School—1919–36

In 1919, another school appeared on the Annual Report of Public Schools, called the Gabriola East School. According to Grace Gibson, this schoolhouse was built by her father, Abraham Crocker. The lumber for the school was cut by the Sunrise Saw Mill, which was run by a Japanese family and located in Silva Bay.

The East School was erected on a bluff on property owned by the Crocker family, behind the little Log Church. Mr. W.D. Knott was the first teacher to be engaged at this school, and later, one student, Miss C.B. Law, returned to teach at the school. Throughout the years of its operation, the school was attended by many of the Crocker

hand at the opening of the new school facilities in 1976.



Chrissie Law, teacher at the East School in 1935–6. Her students are shown in the picture below.

Gabriola Archives 1996.048.019(a)

children and was finally dismantled several years after it was closed. The lumber was then reportedly used to build a chicken house for Eddie Silva.

It seemed that at this point in time the small island of Gabriola could boast proudly of having three schools. However, the School Inspector was not so impressed with this state of affairs. He noted in the Annual



Report of 1920-21:

“On the islands in the Gulf, from Saturna to Gabriola the number of schools has been increased, but in a number of instances the cause of education would have been much better served had there been schools of two or more divisions established instead of multiplying the number of one room schools.”

Clearly, the impact of this statement would be felt in years to come!

### North School—1920s–36

The years leading up the mid-1920s had passed with no interruption in operation for the North Gabriola School. This ended abruptly when in early 1927, the school burned to the ground. No blame was ever established.

A special meeting of the North Gabriola School Board was held on July 17, 1927, to discuss the rebuilding of the school and it was decided to build on the old site. The Board obtained a \$1200 loan from Rudd and Mitchell, to be repaid in three years, and contracted the work out at once to Mr. Green in Nanaimo. The new school that resulted is today the Women’s Institute Hall. In 1935–36, the students of this school were the winners of the Strathcona Trust Prize for physical training.

### Gabriola United—1936–52

Amalgamation came to the Gabriola schools in 1936. It was decided by the Department of Education that the island would be better off with the higher and lower grades taught at two different schools. The East Gabriola School was closed down and from then on, the South and North Schools became known as the Gabriola United School District, Divisions I and II. The primary grades were

The island had two school newspapers in the 1930s, the ANECHO (south, later Division I school), and the *Gabriola Star* (north, later Division II school). Extracts from copies kept by Dorothy Rowan Foster were used by Peggy Lewis Imredy in compiling her "Gabriola Three Schools' Reunion" book for the reunion held at Silva Bay Resort, Gabriola, August 4, 1984.

Gabriola Archives 1996.019.012

### NEWS

Mr. Coats run out of gas at Robert Degnans in October. He went in and got some gas.

The girls have a sewing club. It is called "The Busy Bees" and it meets every Friday night.

The brickyard, which had quite a long run this year, has recently been closed down again.

Clam digging is proceeding on the clam beds near the Maples.

On October 15, James Rollo was hauling wood to our school, as he was going over the bridge it broke and we heard a crashing sound, while we were in school. We could hear the truck trying to get out. Finally after much trying it succeeded. The bridge is very badly damaged.

Mr. McGee cut our wood and stacked it in the woodshed for us. He had to work on the pile for two days.

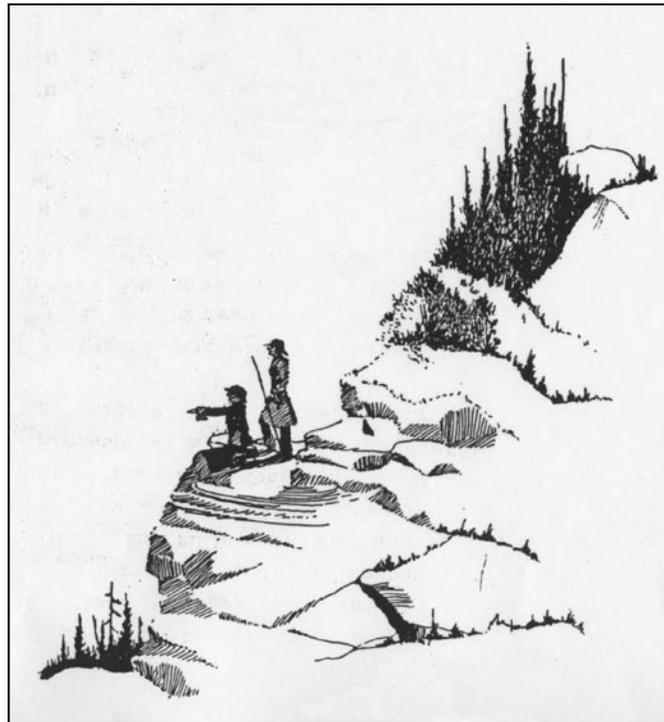
Dr. Plenderleith, our school inspector, was pleased with our paper. He told us it was the best one he had seen in his inspectorate.

ANECHO, Xmas 1939

taught at the North School and the subsequent grades at the South.

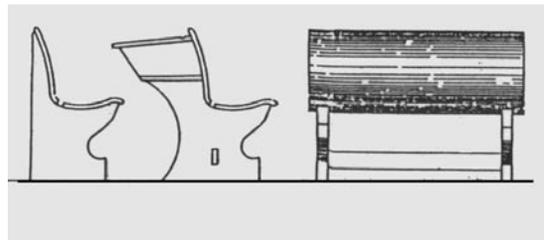
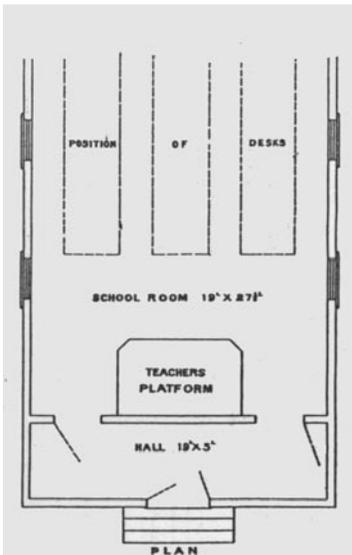
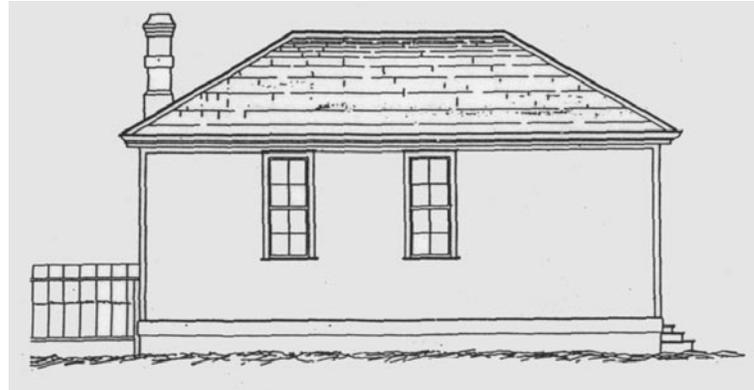
The first annual meeting of the Gabriola United School District was held on August 17, 1936. Mr. W.A. Slater was elected as chairman, with Mr. R.B. Law serving as secretary. The immediate business on hand was the acquisition of a bus and driver to transport the children back and forth. A tender was submitted and accepted from William Coats in this regard and Mr. Coats went on to serve as bus driver for the next four years.

One of the more memorable experiences enjoyed by the students during this time was a bus trip down to Victoria to see King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their Canadian visit. The bus that they took is the one shown on the front cover of this issue of *SHALE*. They were driven by Mr. Coats and accompanied



Sketch for an autograph book by William Kennedy, teacher at the South School in 1932. From "Gabriola Three Schools' Reunion" by Peggy Lewis Imredy, 1984.

Gabriola Archives 1996.019.012 (p.12)



Another one-room schoolhouse plan, similar to the South School. A typical classroom in 1915 had cast-iron leg desks, which were nailed to wooden runners for moving and cleaning. Each desk would have an inkwell in the top right corner.

For reading, the teacher and the community brought books, magazines, and any other reading material they could find. In the classroom, there would be a world globe, a large rolled up map, pointer, blackboard, ruler, and compass.

From "Gabriola Three Schools' Reunion" by Peggy Lewis Imredy, 1984.

by their teacher, Miss Calverley, and for many of the children, it was their first extensive trip off the island.

Teaching at the North and South Schools during this period was Aina Hooper (née Ruuska) and Ethel Piper (née Calverley). Both teachers maintained their positions for a period of years. Mrs. Hooper, who taught for nine years between 1930 and 1939, remembers receiving her salary of \$70 per month. Out of that, \$1 per day was paid out for room and board, almost one-half her salary. Mrs. Hooper also recalled social events, such as the annual Christmas

concert, that the teachers were totally responsible for organizing. Obviously, the time and effort involved in teaching at a rural school far surpassed supervising the day-to-day activities.

In 1940, the transportation contract came up for tender once more and this time was awarded to the Veteran Sightseeing and Transportation Company of Victoria. "Frisco" Jack Easthom drove the bus for several years after.

Two years later, the trustees received a letter from the Department stating that both the North and South Schools had fallen off in

### **A Description of the Interior of the School**

As most of you have become familiar with the appearance of the outside of our school [South School], I thought I would write a word picture to show you the interior.

It is divided into one large room and a front hallway. On a sunny day, the room is quite pleasant. The boards, of which there are four, shine out clear and black. Everything seems to take on a merry shine, from the thumb tacks in the pictures, to the metal tops on the ink bottles.

The room is a large one, seating twenty-six pupils comfortably. The desks are placed to face the road. Light enters from the south side of the school and from the back.

At the rear of the room, there are two book cases, one open and the other closed. The books are neatly placed in rows. There is a library table, a science cabinet, and a supply cabinet placed at the back of the room too.

The room is heated from a heater placed in the centre of the room.

I feel our school room here is quite as pretty and pleasant as any rural school in the country.

Billy Cox, Grade VIII, ANECHO, Xmas 1938

attendance to the point where they ran the risk of being reduced in status.

It was decided shortly after that the North School would be closed and those students be bussed down to the South. The blackboards from that school, along with "fifty rolls of toilet paper" and other items were taken down to be used at the South School. Gabriola had returned to having only a single one-room schoolhouse.

The North School was re-opened about 1947. During this time, the schools of Gabriola officially became part of Nanaimo School District No. 68.

Claude Campbell, a resident on Gabriola Island, became School Inspector for the Nanaimo District in 1952, succeeding Mr. Plenderleith. On his urging, Lily Gray was persuaded to come out of retirement and teach at the South School. Mrs. Gray had formerly taught at the Harewood School before her marriage to Robert "Dorby" Gray, and had a solid professional background. During her teaching years she persisted in upgrading the level of

achievement in her classes. Mrs. Gray believed in teaching well, thoroughly and no person was going to call her students "country bumpkins".

### **The modern era**

In 1954, a new site was chosen for the school. The South School was finally closed permanently, and 11.2 acres was awarded from the Crown to build a new one-room school at the present site of the Gabriola Elementary School. The North School was used during some years to take the overflow from the new school, but eventually, a second room was added and no more classes were held in the little North School. The Women's Institute acquired the school, where they now house a local museum and library. It is also used by various organizations for meetings. The South School became St. Martin's Anglican Church, before falling into disuse and being demolished in 1988.

Eric and Audrey Chamberlain arrived in Canada in 1957. Both had several years of

teaching experience in their native England and were anxious to continue the profession in their new country. After considering the alternatives, such as Rhodesia and Australia, the Chamberlains decided that their paths led toward Canada. Mr. Chamberlain taught for two years at the Harewood School in Nanaimo, but Mrs. Chamberlain was also anxious to resume teaching, so Eric approached the School Inspector, Claude Campbell, on the question of a vacant position for a husband-wife team. Mr. Campbell told him of a possibility of Gabriola as Mrs. Gray, who was then Senior Teacher, was planning her retirement.

In 1959, the Chamberlains commenced teaching on Gabriola. The school then had two rooms and “a small sort of storage space in the middle, which was also the staff room, the medical room, and the anything-else room”. Mr. Chamberlain noted that upon their arrival they were regarded with a mixture of apprehension and relief. The apprehension was quite normal, as most newcomers to the island have “always been greeted with a certain amount . . .” The relief was due to the fact that the husband-wife combination seemed to indicate a solid commitment to the community, and this indeed proved to be true.

About this time, Peter Bell began driving the school bus, and continued until 1977.

The school continued to grow and Eric Chamberlain was promoted to Principal and Audrey continued working on a part-time basis. The Principals following Eric Chamberlain were Ed Sandland, Peter Skipper, Marie Harel, and David Elmore. Linda Case was the latest Principal, but has had to take long-term medical leave, and Ruan Dumler currently has the job.

Now, there are nearly two hundred children attending the school, and many additions

have been made since the one-room school was deemed adequate. There are eleven classrooms, a computer lab, art room, office area, gymnasium, and multi-purpose room, which includes a kitchen from which the lunch program operates. There are twelve teachers on staff as well as several educational assistants. No longer can a school be built by community effort, with a small grant of \$500 being ample for a fine building.

In June 2003, Heather Gray retired after teaching at the Gabriola Elementary School for twenty-eight years. Her family has a long and proud linkage with education on Gabriola. ◇

## Acknowledgements

Most of the information in the article is from my book, *The People of Gabriola—A History of Our Pioneers*, pp.171–183, published in 1982, but thanks are due to the Gabriola Museum Archives for permission to use photographs and other material from their extensive collection of school records, and from their Gabriola School Project 2000–1, 2002–3.

Thanks also to local historians Barrie Humphrey and Lynda Poulton, and to teacher Kate Reynolds (Scott) at the Gabriola Elementary School, for provision of additional detail.

The original plans for schools, which have been adapted in the drawings on pages 12 and 19, are likely to be found in the British Columbia Archives in Victoria, but, if so, their call numbers are no longer known.

## *Additional useful reference*

Bev Godfrey, *Gabriola Schools, 1874–1991*, unpublished MA Thesis, University of Victoria, February 1992. A copy is held by the Gabriola Museum Archives (1996.048).

## *Editor's note*

*June is a very busy lady these days and in editing her submission I may have introduced errors that are not hers, for which I apologize.*