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By G.E. Mortimer

This Week's Profile

Passengers stared down from the deck of the Victoria-Vancouver boat, scarcely believing what they saw. Twelve miles from the nearest land, a lone man was serenely paddling a canoe westward through a heavy swell.

The ship's whistle blew three blasts in greeting. The massive figure in the canoe, dwarfed by the expanse of sea and the ship towering above had been recognized from the bridge.

He was Walter Henry Lambert, the sea going teacher on his annual canoe voyage from Vancouver to his summer home near Victoria.

No ordinary man would be identified by a ship's officer in the middle of the Strait of Georgia and hailed with a signal reserved for VIP's. But

then, no ordinary man would turn up in the middle of the Strait of Georgia in a canoe anyway.

SCHOOL MASTER

During 40 years of teaching in B.C. schools Walter Lambert was a stern taskmaster who drove his students to the limit of their ability. For 28 years of that time he had charge of the radio electronics centre at King Edward High School in Vancouver.

Some men escape from their worries by playing golf or climbing mountains. Walter Lambert found relief from the tension of the classroom by heading out to sea alone in a canoe.

That was how he happened to pass a ship on this occasion, during one of his 30 lone journeys across the gulf and the straits.

Chances are that if he appeared in the Arabian desert or on a street in Bangkok, someone would run toward him with a shout of greeting. His graduated have gone all over the world. In school he called them “apes”, “brats”, and “blithering idiots”. They loved him.

KIND THOUGHTS

A few weeks ago, he retired because of ill health and came to live permanently in his former summer home at Milnes Landing. Letters poured in bearing strange postmarks from men high in the armed forces, the civil service, scientists, executives of great corporations and plain radio men paying tribute to his fine qualities as a teacher and a human being.

“I know I speak for...thousands of your students when I express my deep gratitude for every hour in your presence,” wrote W.H. Jeffery, vice-president and general manager of Philco Radio Corporation of Canada.

“Yours is the magic touch that inspires the hand that uplifts, the courage that gives leadership. I wish you the happiness you so richly deserve. I thank God that I am one of your boys.”

His ex-students held a reunion in his honor and gave him a booklet containing their signatures, a citation and a handsome cheque.

HONORS CODES

The ex-tyrant of Room 19 was a crew cut giant who spits out his words like bullets and greets a new acquaintance with a bone crushing handshake. Along with technical knowledge of radio, he was always much concerned to impart the punctilious code of manners and Christian faith by which he lived.

Throughout the school system he was known for his iron discipline and the high standard of performance which he demanded of his students. Once he expelled a student from his class for clearing his throat at the wrong time.

To emphasize his points, he roared at his students, jabbed them in the ribs with a fore-finger, slapped them on the back, and caught them in bear hugs that threatened to splinter their bones.

KEPT IN TOUCH

They responded to this treatment by giving him class presents of bicycles, gold watches and pedigreed Alsatian dogs for Christmas and by winning their way into important jobs after graduation. Years afterwards they still kept in touch with him. The pictures of ex-students filled three walls of his office.

Students who made perfect marks were rewarded with a box of chocolates or a Saturday afternoon of fence building, camping, canoeing and Mrs. Lambert's home-cooked food at the Lambert home in North Vancouver.

Always a fresh air enthusiast, Mr. Lambert flung open the windows of his classroom even in bitter weather. According to some accounts, he has been seen at the open window with wisps of fog and even flurries of powdered snow swirling around him. Once he lectured from a balcony with snow falling on him to prove that the students' complaints of the cold inside were baseless.

He declined to accept girl students, looking upon radio as a man's preserve. He lectured his classes against drink and other evils. Upon

graduation each student received from him a copy of the “New Testament” with one of his favorite texts underlined: Romans 10:9-10.

SCHOOL DAYS

He was born in London in 1893, the youngest in a family of three. He had one brother and one sister. Children started school young in England then. Walter Lambert first went to school when he was four years and eight months old. By seven he had learned much of French, German, English, arithmetic up to vulgar fractions, chemistry and geometry.

“No algebra,” he says. “That was to come at age eight. Nothing extraordinary about all this though. Every other ape my age was doing the same thing.” He has long contended privately that the Canadian school system is too slow and gentle.

His grandfather farmed 640 acres in Yorkshire. He great uncle was a partner in the firm of Lambert and Wilson, grain brokers and commission merchants.

His father was an agent for that firm in many European countries, trading in flax and grain. His family accompanied him. Walter Lambert was withdrawn from his school in London to go with his father on the theory that travel would increase his fluency in French and German.

He insists that he is a poor linguist and that his brother Bernard Charles Lambert (30 years a missionary in China) and his sister, Mrs. Lambert Ritchie of Victoria, are brilliant at languages by comparison.

For business reasons the family emigrated to Canada in 1911 and settled near Nanaimo. “We tried to grow potatoes, but we grew tombs for wireworms,” he says. The Lamberts subdivided their 10-acre property and came to Victoria with the proceeds.

Walter Lambert worked for a time as a janitor. Meanwhile he wrote his intermediate teacher’s examinations and was hired to teach at Porcher Island near Prince Rupert. He was just 19 years old. Among other things he recalls that the school building was carried out to sea three times on high tides, and trustees of the school board were once treed by wolves.

After that: Tolmie Public School in temporary quarters, the basement of the Baptist Church on Douglas, Hazelton B.C. (55 below, powdered snow oozing through the chinks of his cabin home), Port Essington and Salmon Arm High School, where he was principal.

During the First World War he joined the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve, in which he learned his radio work, and served in the navy's signals branch.

After the war he became vice principal of Macdonald School in Vancouver for a year.

In the years that followed he alternately worked as radio officer in deep sea and coastal ships, taught school and attended University of B.C. For some time he was senior radio officer in the 26,000-ton Dollar Line ship Robert Dollar, and circled the world in that ship. He was radio officer in the Princess Kathleen.

For three years he was director of public instruction at Anyox.

He passed examinations for his highest teacher's certificate with top marks in B.C. The university waived the first two years and let him start in third year. During his time at U.B.C. he was given an instructor's job.

After he resumed teaching he continued to serve as radio officer in ships during his summer holidays. He logged a total of 750,000 miles at sea, serving eight years altogether in over 50 ships.

AT RADIO CENTRE

Late in 1925, W.K. Beech principal of Fairview High School of Commerce, organized the radio electronics centre, and in the following year Mr. Lambert accepted a post as its first teacher. For 20 years he handled enrollments ranging up to 300 day and night class students without assistants, office or telephone.

Before the end of the 1939-45 war he had trained over 2,000 men—500 of them officers. His graduates were serving against the Axis powers on land, sea and in the air. One group of 27 went directly into air ferry command as radio officers.

Others were radio navigators, signals officers, aircraft warning operators, technicians in the radio factories. Scores gave their lives.

In the middle of the war, an assistant and a secretary were appointed to take some of the load off Mr. Lambert's shoulders.

MISSION AGENT

His brother, Bernard Charles Lambert, was an accountant who became secretary-treasurer of Victoria Machinery Depot, then against the entreaties of his employer decided to become a missionary in China, a field in which he distinguished himself as a mission business agent. In forwarding the Gospel, he followed his father and mother, who were both brave Christians of an evangelical bent. They organized outdoor meetings in Victoria.

Walter Lambert's brother returned to Canada after a perilous escape from the Communists is now helping the Shantymen's Mission at the remote settlement of Ceepeecee.

Mr. Lambert's interest in canoeing began in England. "Being alone in a canoe is the nearest approach to complete mundane freedom," he says.

He took up canoeing intensively as an escape from the anxieties of his work and the sleeplessness that has plagued him for much of his life. Curiously enough he managed to sleep in his canoe. Three of his Vancouver-Victoria runs have been non-stop—which meant that he made shift for 27 hours in the canoe without touching shore. He cooked on a primus stove and slept at anchor or adrift.

In his 16-foot canoes Tenebris I and Tenebris II he has crossed from Vancouver to Victoria in every month except February.

He made one run with his leg in a cast of only three inches of freeboard for the canoe. In Vancouver, people did a double take when they saw him heaving through choppy tides of the Lion's Gate with a full-grown Alsatian dog at each end of the canoe and bicycle amidships.

ROUGH PASSAGE

In 1945 he took his canoe through west coast waters on a 300-mile cruise that touched Port Alberni, Sechart, Ucluelet, Port Effingham, Bamfield, Clo-ose, Cape Beale, Renfrew, Jordan River, Victoria, Lime Kilns Light on San Juan Island, Active Pass and Ladner. Part of this cruise was the so-called graveyard run from Cape Beale to Renfrew.

Returning from the Vancouver-Victoria run, he shipped the canoe by CPR and traveled in comfort. He is full of praise for the efficiency of CPR officers and crews.

He has made 20 Georgia crossings at night, usually by compass, once steering by star and the mountains; and three cruises through the open Pacific from Vancouver to Tatoosh Island by way of Victoria, Slip Point, Clallam and Neah Bay. He spent five weeks canoeing in the Flattery area, making 12 roundings of Cape Flattery and two roundings each of Duncan Rock and Duntze Reef.

He has cruised across the Strait in dense fog, paddled 18 miles along the ocean coast in fog, steering only by the sound of the surf; narrowly escaped being run down by steamers, dashed on rocks and swamped in half a gale.

ACROSS STRAIT

After he had crossed from Victoria to Port Angeles in thick fog, an afternoon newspaper hit on the idea of sponsoring a canoe race over the same course. Eleven canoes got an elaborate send off. Only one reached Port Angeles.

The newspaper came perilously near sponsoring a mass drowning.

Walter Lambert still goes canoeing, but he no longer makes the long trips. Taking life a little easier at the age of 61, he treasures such documents as his United States customs clearance which authorizes him as master of the "Canoe Tenebris (BR.) of (Nil) tons burden, mounted with (no) guns, navigated with (one) men, wood built," to clear for Victoria with ballast and stores aboard.

And Walter Lambert, the man who paddles his own canoe,
remembers the sudden gasp of a blackfish surfacing close behind, the crash
of the Pacific breakers and the roar of 100 sea lions off Carmanah.

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