



# Town Hall Tales

The second instalment of Town Hall Tales, written by George Elliott, follows. Last week's article on V-E Day was also written by Dr. Elliott, but his name was omitted in error.

**The Night the Town Hall Almost Burned Down**  
Not too many years the Town Hall had the only large ballroom in Acton. The upstairs hall was a handsome one; tall windows made up a large portion of its walls and white plaster surfaces accented by brown wood trim, lit by single milk glass light globes, gave it a simple, tasteful elegance.

For dancing, the white maple floor was ideal and years of shuffling feet hardly marred its rock hard surface. The many dances held were mostly in mid-winter when the hall's large expanse of windows could have made it a chilly place. Heat was required and supplied in generous amounts by two large pot bellied stoves, one between the two staircases on the south wall, and the other in the north east corner by the fire exit (the Willow street corner of the building adjacent to the Fire Hall). The necessary stove pipes snaking up the walls marred the hall's appearance but no one minded; keeping warm was important for ladies in light ballroom gowns and gentlemen in suits. Enough wood for an evening's heat was stacked around the stoves and someone in the crowd usually saw that they were stoked when the chill required this attention during an evening.

During the 1930's and 40's the High School "At Home" dance in February was one of the highlights of the social season. Printed invitations were prepared and each student was allowed one for his parents if they wished to attend. Those remaining, or not used, were delivered to a list of local dignitaries carefully chosen, I expect, to add lustre to the event. It was really a highly selected guest list.

This was also the occasion when prizes for academic and athletic achievements were awarded. During the course of the evening an intermission was called and a school board member made presentations to students dressed in their Sunday best, often blushing, and both proud and uncomfortable at the same time. It was that day's version of today's Commencement.

For this dance a local group was hired to supply music, often the "Merrymakers" with Elmer Smith on lead trumpet. This formal dance, as were all others, was held on a Friday night rather than a Saturday as is the practice now. A selected group of students spent Thursday evening and Friday preparing the Hall. These were usually executive

members of the Literary Society and decorating was quite a responsible job.

At that time there was a caretaker who lived at the Town Hall in a room behind the Council chamber. He did odd jobs such as cleaning up, getting wood in for the stoves and lighting fires when needed. A bit of a character, Jimmy Robertson, had come to town before the first world war, was Colonel Ballentyne's batman during it, and was a veteran afterwards. He was a man of very few words and his gruff, taciturn nature was often frightening to children, some of whom he was quite fond of, and a puzzle to adults. Behind this forbidding exterior must have beaten a simple, kindly heart though. For those he knew and liked, and not many knew him well, he was helpful and considerate, going out of his way to do things for them without being asked and expecting no thanks. He said little and hid behind a dour, probably shy, Scottish reserve.

He was tough too. His clothes made no concessions to seasons; winter or summer a short sleeveless jersey sweater, a pair of work pants, and a fedora sufficed. Apparently immune to both heat and cold, it was not unusual to see him down town on the coldest winter day with bare arms.

He was, I suppose, the resident spirit of the Town Hall, hovering silently about, seeing the fires were lit and enough wood was in, and closing everything up after festivities ended. How he got the job I do not know but it seemed to me he had always been there.

In 1946 or 1947, I don't remember exactly, the week of February preceding the "At Home" was bitterly cold. At night the temperature dropped to fifteen below zero and that was in the days before Centigrade when fifteen below was really cold

and not just a slight chill as it is today.

Thursday evening before the dance High School students began decorating the Hall, Jimmy as usual slipped wordlessly in and out making sure the hall was warm. About ten o'clock or so the students decided to call it a night and return the next morning to finish the decorating and other arrangements in the hall. Jimmy was told so he would have the door open first thing in the morning and everyone walked home.

The sky was clear, stars glittered, and the snow crunched noisily underfoot. It would be another below zero night and as the town went to bed pillars of smoke climbed straight up from every chimney into the clear, cold air.

About two o'clock in the morning people in much of the town were awakened by a shrill clanging of the Town Hall bell, doubly loud in the cold. It stopped. A few minutes later more sharp clangs followed again by silence. This continued and people, either from curiosity or alarm, threw on some warm clothes and hurried down the frosty streets to see what was going on at the Town Hall.

(To be continued)



LEADING THE HAPPY V-E Day parade in town are J. M. "Bud" McDonald, Billy Middleton and high school principal Stewart. The boys' band follows with the cadet corps. They are pictured coming along Young St., after passing Ajax Engineering.



V-E DAY PARADE included the girls' platoons of the high school cadet corps. Pictured passing Ajax Engineering plant, this group includes Fran Chew (Marcoux), Shirley Ralston (Gamble), Norma Kentner (Marchment), Mary Smith (Lewcock), Irma Kentner (Coles), Helen McLellan (Jocque) and Joyce Lamb (Rowley).



RIFLE DRILL squad pictured during inspection in the park in the park in 1946 includes left to right John Barr, George Elliott, Roy Kirkness, Aldo Braida, Bill Toth and Bob Bruce.

GEORGE Elliott was Commanding Officer of the high school cadet corps. He says he was chosen because he could shout the loudest.

V-E day, inspection for cadets

In last week's Town Hall Tales, George Elliott recalled V-E day in Acton. These pictures show the parade of the high school cadet corps that day, and also the cadet corps during its formal inspection the following year. The pictures belong to Shirley (Elliott) and Jim Dills.

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MARCH PAST during high school cadet corps inspection in 1945 shows the boys, the band and the girls' platoons passing the inspecting officer, corps commanding officer George Elliott, high school principal Stewart and teacher Don McLean.



P.T. DISPLAY at the park in 1945 was part of the high school cadet corps inspection. Look behind the group on the right — that's Member of Parliament Crawford Douglas.

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ACTON HIGH school cadet corps had target practice on R. N. Brown's farm just east of town in 1945. Among the girls firing are Irma Kentner (Coles) and Fran Chew (Marcoux); behind them are Helen McLellan (Jocque), Norma Kentner (Marchment), Mary Smith (Lewcock) and Sgt. Major Sullings, the instructor. Standing on the hillside are Fred Crewson, Ralph McKeown and Ken Allen.

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REGINA	N/A	\$130	\$390
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BOYS' BAND played enthusiastically at the V-E day parade. In the group are Julian Zajac, Donald Lamb, Charlie Kingsmill and John Agar.

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