



GLEN KASK PHOTO

Gordon and Muriel Windebank look over some of the newspaper clippings, photos and accounts of their father and great-uncle who pioneered in Mission.

Windebanks true pioneers

They recorded a number of firsts in old Mission City

by Glen Kask

With a school, a street and a business all named after them, it is easy to guess that the Windebank family helped pioneer Mission.

The brother and sister who still carry the family name in Mission, Gordon and Muriel, talk easily about their great uncle Hori Windebank who was a silent partner in several of the enterprises of Mission's first developer, W.J. Horne.

"Uncle Horie" was the enterprising businessman who developed an electrical plant and water system for the central Mission area. He built a dam near Cedar Valley Street and 14th Avenue, on a creek that is now being filled in and covered over.

He ran a pipe to what has now become First Avenue and ran turbines in the building that became known as the Thomas Motor Inn.

"The power was to provide refrigeration so he could make ice cream for his cafe," said Muriel. "He also provided power and water for the rest of the area.

Muriel's father, William James Windebank, came to Mission from England in 1911 to work in the electrical company for his uncle Hori. He brought his wife and child with him and the couple had a second child in Mission. His wife, May, died at an early age and W.J. moved his children back to England and he enlisted to fight in First World War.

After the war he returned to Mission and met a woman from England who was working in the bank in Mission. They were both staying in Hori's hotel and met in the hotel's cafe.

That hotel was later to cause one of the most serious rifts between the two branches of the family.

W.J. was firmly on the side of temperance, abhorring the use of alcohol, while Horie's hotel held the first liquor licence in Mission.

Dorothy and W.J. were married and had three children plus the two children who were brought back from England.

By 1922 W.J. was in business for himself doing electrical work for the growing community. An accident on Mt. Mary Ann in 1922 crushed his leg, but he begged the doctor not to amputate. His leg was saved but he had the rare "privilege" of being in Mission's first hospital at the same time his wife was there delivering their son, Gordon.

The electrical business grew to include radios, heating, sheet metal, plumbing, refrigeration and washing machines.

"He had the first crystal radio set in Mission," said Gordon. The business grew at a number of rented locations throughout the downtown area and it thrived until W.J. took up politics.

"It wiped out the business," said Gordon. "We had been doing all the work for the street lights and a lot of work for the local government and we had to give that all up when he became mayor. It was a big chunk of the business."

He became the chairman of the village commission for Mission City and when the community's status changed in 1958 he became the first mayor of the Town of Mission.

"That year, 1958, was a highlight for mother," said Muriel. "It was the centennial of the gold rush and mother got to go to all the ceremonies and outings with the mayor."

Dorothy died in 1961 and W.J. died in 1969.

"Dad felt very honored to have the school named after him," said Muriel.

While he was in high school, Gordon worked in his father's shop and took up full-time duties when he graduated. Later he took some electronics courses and when the Second World War came along he tried to enlist, but was turned down because of his poor vision in one eye. Instead, he was sent to Sea Island in Richmond, to work for Boeing, building bombers and flying boats.

After the war he returned to the store until he sold the business and retired in 1977. That retirement lasted seven months before he was asked to work for the school district installing alarm systems and doing other electrical work.

His "temporary" job lasted until he turned 65 in 1987. He says he enjoyed the school district job, despite being called out by the police every time a false alarm sounded in the middle of the night.

Muriel went through school in Mission and went on to Normal School where she trained as a teacher.

For 10 years she taught in Nakusp, Maple Ridge, Mission and Victoria. In 1953 her dad asked her to help out at the store and she has stayed every since — right through four owners.

She followed in her dad's footsteps at church but where he had been a Sunday School superintendent at St. Andrew's United Church she became the organist, and stayed with the task through 39 years. Last year she retired as organist, but continues as a member of the church choir.

"I love to sing more than I love to play," she said.