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opinion

LANDMARKS

Girls' school one of few to last more than 75 years

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Only a few Victoria independent academic schools have survived 75 years or more. One of these, Norfolk House School, traces its origin to 1913 when Canon A.J. Doull, Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, asked Miss Julia McDermott, an English lady from Montreal, if she would like to start a school so that his daughter might receive a suitable education.

The first few classes were probably held in the parish hall (Memorial Hall and the present cathedral on Quadra Street were not yet built). Within a short time, Miss McDermott was joined by Miss Dora W. Atkins, an old school friend from Norwich High School in England. A house at 1164 Oscar Street, later demolished for apartments, became the temporary schoolhouse. There were two classrooms but only seven or eight pupils.

In 1915, the school for girls moved to a house on Granite Street which still stands. It had large windows and a good basement with plenty of light.

When Miss McDermott relinquished her position to marry F.H. Forbes, Miss Atkins became the new headmistress. Forbes died in 1925 so Julia and her young daughter returned to Victoria where Julia became the matron for Norfolk House School's rented boarding residence on St. James Street (later renamed Transit Road) in Oak Bay. It appears that the Transit Road house was later used by Ian Simpson's (Glenlyon) school.

In 1931, Norfolk House School commissioned architect P.L. James, a former associate of F.M. Rattenbury. James, whose quality of work has been compared to Samuel Maclure, designed a schoolhouse and gym on a five-acre site between Richmond and present-day Bank Street and the Depression-era cost of construction was \$2,000. Eight classrooms could accommodate 150 girls and it is worth noting that the fee for tuition and board for a Grade 12 pupil for one term was \$185. Also in 1931, all the boarders moved to the old Pemberton mansion at 615 St. Charles Street. This house was demolished in 1952.

The continuity and stability of the school was maintained with good management, fine teachers and pleasing adults. Miss Atkins, who lived until 1975 when she was 89, served as headmistress for 43 years before retiring in 1956. But her friend and colleague, Julia Forbes, died in 1933 while crossing the Atlantic.

Miss Atkins was succeeded by Miss Winifred Scott and during her time numerous additions to the school were built, including the library, classrooms and labs. The main original building, with its half timbering and residential appearance, is a focal point in the building complex of which it is an integral yet historic part.

In 1986, members of the Norfolk House School Society voted in favor of the amalgamation of the school with Glenlyon School, and, following some restructuring, Glenlyon-Norfolk School continues to operate from the two campuses.

