



History, Heritage and Heredity

Standing in front of his “political pics” James W Gordon (Jim) looks back with satisfaction on his 82 years and loves every minute of it.

In every community there is someone that you look at as being an absolute pillar of society - in Cobourg Jim Gordon is that man. Not born a Cobourger one would never think that he was not, so steeped in the institutions as he is.

Living in a Heritage house, on College St. And working in a Heritage building on King St he is well aware of the responsibilities that owning older houses imbue. He has put his money into

maintaining one of the oldest buildings in Cobourg. 35 King St East was built in 1837. A description from the files of the Historical Register reads *“This building was built in 1837 for William Graveley, a druggist, and shared with Dr. F. G. Callender, a dentist, one of only five in Upper Canada at the time. Graveley's son, J. Vance Graveley, later became mayor of Cobourg from 1880 to 1885. The building was sold in 1851 to J. Vance Boswell, gentleman merchant. The Boswells were a prominent Cobourg family who owned a distillery. His son, Arthur Boswell, later moved to Toronto and became the Mayor of Toronto in 1883. The Crowe family occupied this building from 1927 until 1970 as The Slumber Inn. It was also known as the Crowe's Nest, a Home Away From Home.”*

Jim tells tales about the occupants of 35 King East, when he first owned the building it was occupied by elderly ladies who were living on the cheap rents left over from the days of the “Slumber Inn”. He was often woken up to let one or more of the ladies into

the house, "Can you come and let me in I have forgotten my keys." was the plaintive cry at the end of the phone. His sense of heritage came to the fore whenever he renovated the building, he has done so twice in the time of his ownership. Asked if he found any artifacts he replied, "When the Cobourg Credit Union moved out they wanted to keep



the fireplace mantle. Pulling it away from the wall revealed a few old photographs that had once sat on the mantle but had slipped behind it - most interesting, all the people decked in their finery but typical of the day not a smile on their faces." Also his pride of ownership is exposed when talking about the responsibility of maintaining a Heritage Building, "I am really pleased to own of the oldest buildings in Town, it's an expense keeping up the verandah but we are proud to look after it." It seems that he was destined to live and work in Heritage surroundings as his first Insurance Office was in the Coronation building just a few doors away from his present location. "We rented an office that was owned by Col Foote, the famous VC recipient from Grafton, and the office next door was occupied by the then Mayor - Jack Heenan."

To understand why Jim came to Cobourg one has to listen to his history. "I went to school in Toronto - East York Collegiate - and joined the London and Lancaster Insurance Company, worked myself up to a Field Superintendent's position and supervised the Ontario salesforce. The Company had been bought out by the Royal Sun Alliance group and the corporate culture that I had enjoyed with L&L disappeared. An opportunity came up to buy into an Insurance Business in Cobourg and I jumped in." He was on his own and he has never looked back. Buying two established Cobourg Insurance Agencies: Tooter Blow's and Reg Gardiner he laid the foundation for his growing business.

When Jim arrived in Cobourg with his high-school sweetheart, Ruth - who was pursuing a career in teaching, (they met in Grade 13, and have never been separated since) and

three children he knew nobody so he set about involving himself in the community. In old Cobourg, as now, there were certain circles to move in: Church, Politics and Community. Within five years he was President of the Highland Games, involved in the Federal Conservative party, a member of the Rotary Club, a Lawn Bowler and on the Board of Trinity United Church. No social climbing for him he is still involved in each of the activities to this day.



Anybody who knows Jim knows he wears his opinions and feelings on his sleeve and as he says, "I enjoy dealing with people and take strong stands on most things; including politics. When I came to Cobourg I was advised not to say the things that I did but it hasn't hurt me." In the political vein, one can see which stripe it is that he wears. On the wall of his office is a collection of pictures that show him with Prime Ministers Trudeau, Turner, Clark, Diefenbaker, Mulroney and the present PM - Stephen Harper. An impressive collection and he is proud of it. Meeting with his "coffee-buddies" every morning at the Dutch Oven, a local coffee shop on King St., the issues of the day get a good workout. The difference is that Jim has "walked the walk"

Sitting in his office Jim talks about the Insurance business and how it now has three generations of Gordons working in it. Himself, Jamie, his youngest son, and James McCracken, a grandson split the workings of the business - a full service personal insurance and a comprehensive commercial insurance sector between them. When asked about the possibility of retiring Jim just chuckles and says he likes doing what he is doing now - working a bit, living in Florida in the winter, coming into the office after the morning coffee and leaving early. "I have no thought of retiring, I want something to do, I really enjoy dealing with the customers, providing good value and a quality product."

When talking about the intricacies of the Business he directs the interview to Jamie who explains in detail what Gordon Insurance does and how it is keeping up with the times. Jamie says “The biggest change to the Business was the introduction of computers and online interactivity. The growth of the Business



requires a growing Cobourg.” Jim echoes that point and talks about the importance of timing. “In life timing is so important. We have been lucky in our moves to Cobourg and growing the Business. You know we have never had a budget, a mission statement or set targets. What’s good for the customer is good for us!”

Asked to point out his proudest projects Jim becomes the family man. “My family is my greatest achievement. All of my children, Mark, Laura and Jamie have married locally, we are in Cobourg and settled. Between him and Ruth they have a family of nine grandchildren and one great-grand child. “Ruth and I had our 59th wedding anniversary yesterday.” he casually mentions, but you know he feels good about that. His second mention for his proudest project comes back to the Insurance Business. All he says, in his understated way, was ‘I operate a successful business.’ And so he does.

In this next year of Cobourg’s celebration, the 175th in 2012, you can be sure that Jim Gordon, as the oldest surviving Rotary Club President and this year’s President and next year’s Past President - son Jamie will be out front doing whatever it takes to promote the Town - and enjoying every moment. Just as we in Cobourg enjoy watching Jim go to it - a perfect mix of history, heritage and heridity.