

Gordon Johnston

MAY 24, 2020

Williard Gordon Johnston, known always as Gordon, was born in Revelstoke on October 16, 1928 to Gladys Campbell, a local farm girl, and Williard Johnston, a veteran who had made his way west to Revelstoke from his native Manitoba after the Great War. Gordon was an intelligent boy who had less patience for school than for skiing. An iconic photograph of Mount Revelstoke Lodge taken in the 1940's, which used to grace the Upper Hot Springs pool in Banff, shows some graceful first tracks in the powder left by Gordon and his friends. He was a ski jumper too.



Gordon, his sister Margaret, and his parents moved to Vancouver in 1947 when he entered UBC, and he graduated as a Mechanical Engineer in 1951. He then left for his first engineering job at the Cominco smelter in Trail, but really for the skiing on Red Mountain. His Cominco buddies had pulled together some old mine timbers and cable and the electric power gear needed to construct the first chair lift on that wonderful mountain, perhaps the first chairlift in BC. Being homemade, it broke down frequently. Whoever was minding it would then sound a horn which brought Gordon and other skiers from all over the mountain flocking to do the repairs... after all, they had built it.

Cominco recovered Gordon's salary many times over when he discovered the cause of a large maintenance expense, broken axles on the lead-zinc ore carts. Gordon analyzed the track system that guided the carts and spotted an abrupt direction change that was causing metal fatigue in the axles. The track was adjusted and

the breakages stopped. He had a gift for patient analysis.

In 1952 Gordon transferred to the Cominco Fertilizer Plant in Calgary, met Dorothy Rose Smith of Drumheller Alberta in the plant cafeteria and married her in 1953. Their daughter Dorothy Jane arrived in 1954, and then Gordon moved his family back to Rossland, the birthplace of sons Will in 1955 and Paul in 1959. They were all soon enough on skis.

In 1962 Gordon took a call from his friend Harry Palmer whose Calgary family business was the Golden Arrow Sprayer Company, Gordon moved the family to Calgary and took on the post of Production Manager. Golden Arrow was a quintessential western Canadian manufacturer, building its own agricultural sprayer pumps and tanks and sprayer arms with its own aluminum foundry and fabrication shop. The kids got to tag along when their dad needed to drop by the factory on a Saturday, which was always a big deal. Golden Arrow was also providentially located beside the Dad's Cookie factory in those days, and Gordon used to bring home brown paper grocery bags full of broken cookies purchased for 25 cents a bag. The discount was more than lost in eventual dental bills.

In 1964 Gordon moved the family to Edmonton and another engineering design job, and in 1966 the family camped its way across the country to Montreal, attracted by the prospect of being there through Expo 67, the epochal world exposition which was the family's continual weekend haunt throughout a glorious summer. While in Montreal, Gordon took a job at Bechtel, a large engineering firm which had the contract to design the steam oil separators for Alberta's first oil sands project. Gordon used to bring home blueprints and explain to the children how the process was going to work. And apparently it did.

In the autumn of 1967, the family returned to Calgary and Gordon was once again in charge of the engineering aspects of life at Golden Arrow. Unfortunately, in the late sixties the Trudeau government of the day presided over a temporary

but poorly managed wheat glut and many western Canadian agricultural service businesses were bankrupted, including Golden Arrow. Leaving that behind, in the summer of 1970 Gordon and Dorothy took their three kids on a month's holiday around England and the Continent in a tiny camper van with a warning on the dash: "This vehicle is not intended for speeds above 55 miles per hour."

When we returned to Calgary in the autumn, Dad was ready for his mid-life crisis and he took a job as close to his heart as would pay a salary - he became Operations Manager at Lake Louise ski resort. That entailed having the family commute to a cabin at Lake Louise for the weekends and then back to school in Calgary during the week. Dad loved it but Mom didn't ski and various other factors made that dream job come to an end the next year.

Dad then tried being a life insurance salesman, and a more unlikely one was probably never seen. He lacked the commercial inclination and sales talent that he would have needed, and soon returned to his engineering roots at the respected oil patch consulting firm of Reid Crowther. One of his favourite projects there was overseeing the creation of a miniature pilot plant for separating helium from natural gas. The unit was built inside a large trailer and could be towed to a gas field to collect helium at the wellhead.

Late in the 70's, Gordon ventured out on his own, taking over the ownership of A2, a fabrication business which built pump jacks, those large rocking structures which lift oil out of oil wells. He was close to building 5 of the largest pump jacks ever seen in Alberta, and had everything invested in the project, when another Trudeau government created the National Energy Program, which bankrupted the oil service industry in Alberta. Within weeks hundreds of oil rigs had been loaded onto trailers and were headed south across the American border. No one was buying pump jacks.

Despite the setbacks, Gordon was not particularly political and never uttered a harsh word about it all.

Gordon headed back into salaried engineering as the 80's progressed. Gordon and Dorothy made a road trip to Vancouver in 1986 to visit son Will, daughter in law Norah and toddler grandson Hugh. After a brief visit they were headed to the Tsawwassen ferry when their car was rear-ended by a large truck and Dorothy was killed instantly.

That tragedy left Dad understandably stunned and bewildered and when a friend offered him a Calgary refrigerated-trailer repair business which couldn't turn a profit, Dad took that on as a challenge. His friend was right: the business really couldn't turn a profit, money always mysteriously dwindled, and finally Dad discovered that the manager and bookkeeper were embezzling cash. That company had to be wound down.

Through all his reversals and challenges Gordon remained his kind, gentle, intelligent, earnest and resolute self. He was a patient tutor to his children in their school years. He was widely liked. He had a delightful dry sense of humor. He continued to enjoy skiing. But the years after Dorothy's death were understandably hard, and a collision with a moose in 1994 while driving near Golden BC nearly killed him and required months of recovery.

In 1995 Gordon's cousin Earl Campbell introduced him to Erna McVean, and a happier match could not have been found. They married in 1997 and had 23 years together, at first in Calgary, then moving to Kitchener Ontario to take over the parenting of Erna's grandchildren Che Lynn and Jordan for a time. There was Dad in his seventies, back to dropping kids off at school and tutoring them on their homework. Two years later Che and Jordan rejoined them at a farmhouse near Pincher Creek, Alberta and the childrearing continued for several years. By 2013 the hands-on grandparenting was done and Gordon and Erna moved to

Kelowna.

Five happy years passed in Kelowna, and Dad was preparing a lecture on planetary motion and climate for the local "Society for Learning in Retirement" group when his first stroke occurred in January 2018. His last two years were notable for his struggle with the limitations set by that stroke on his conversation, memory and vision. He was given to explaining his frustrations by saying "I've only got three eighths of a brain." Erna's companionship gave him the best quality of life imaginable for the length of their marriage, but especially when his stroke increased his care needs. Despite good medical care, a second devastating stroke hit him on May 20th, 2020 and he died at 1 AM on May 24th.

This brief biography can't begin to do justice to Gordon. He was bemused and a bit unworldly. He was ready for the end of his life but his death has wrenched a chunk from each of our hearts.

Gordon is survived by his wife Erna, daughter Dorothy, son Paul, son Will and his wife Norah and their children Hugh and Lise, stepson Jason McVean, stepdaughter Pauline McVean and her children Che Lynn and Jordan, sister Margaret Perry and her husband Tremayne and their extended family, and brother-in-law Bill Smith.

You are invited to leave a personal message of condolence for the family.

Messages of Condolence

I am sending my deepest condolences to Erna Johnston.

— **Anna Kettleon**

what a wonderful tribute to my old friend.He was the mechanical guy and I was the process guy in Smelter Development..you are so right about his attitudes and personality ...sadly we have been out of touch[as thy say] for these many years..Happy to see that he enjoyed the pleasure of such a large and grand family....surely a reward for a good life well lived...best wishes to his family and many friends..it has been an honor to have known this fine human being.....regards colin and pat {2016}

— colin duncan

To Erna and Erna's and Gordon's families I extend my sincere condolences. I met and enjoyed Gordon in classes at SLR. He was such an interesting and gentle gentleman. Gordon and Erna made a good team. I am so sorry the first stroke robbed him of some of his self-expression. He will certainly be missed. Erna, I hope there is some comfort in knowing so many others are thinking of you and your extended family.

— Elo Fox

I was sad to read of the passing of my second cousin, Gordon Johnston. I wish to send my condolences to all members of his family and in particular to my second cousin Margaret Perry on the loss of her brother. Gordon's mother, Gladys Johnston and I were first cousins and as my Dad did not marry and have a family until late in life I ended up in the age bracket of the next generation. In fact I was born only 6 months and one day before Gordon's birth. Although I had a lot of contact with my cousin Gladys and her husband Willard Johnston I did not have much contact with Gordon although I did see him often at UBC where we both graduated in 1951. I think the last time I saw him was at Williard and Gladys' 50th wedding anniversary celebration held at Margaret and Tremayne Perry's home in the 1970s. In the 1980s my late wife and I attended the same church as Gladys did in Marpole and so I saw her almost weekly. I am sorry I lost touch with Gordon but I see by his obituary just how busy and productive a life he enjoyed. All the best to all, Gordon McOuat.

— Gordon McOuat

I knew Gordon for a short time but his passion for science was very evident. He shared his knowledge with our science class at SLR. He was a gentle and very soft spoken man. My condolences to his wife Erna and family
Ingrid

— Ingrid



<https://www.myalternatives.ca/obituaries/johnston-gordon>

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