

**Oral History Interview with John Dickey**  
**Conducted by Angela Baker, July 27, 1993**  
Transcription by Curtis Dray, February 20, 2000

AB: ...your full name?

JD: John [Harris] Dickey.

AB: And where did you originate? What's your date and place of birth?

JD: I was born in Edmonton, Alberta. My mother brought me back to Nova Scotia in 1917 and I lived for 10 years in Antigonish and then in late 1927 we came to Halifax and I've been in Halifax as a domicile ever since.

AB: So when did you come to attend St. Mary's?

JD: When we came to Halifax, I entered St. Mary's and was there for I think grade 7, and then I took grade 8 at College Street School in Halifax, which was operated at that time by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart from the Convent of the Sacred Heart on Spring Garden Road. And then I went into grade 9 in St. Mary's.

AB: Oh yes. So what year was that?

JD: That would have been 1929.

AB: '29. And it was the Irish Christian Brothers at that time?

JD: Absolutely, yes.

AB: So, what were they like as educators?

JD: Oh, they were just marvelous, just marvelous. They had a small student body. So, it was easy for them to have a great deal of time for the individual students. They were very interested in athletics and played a lot of games with the students...not so much the younger students but the college students. They loved handball, which was an Irish sport and they played handball with the students. I know my favorite professor, a Brother Lineham, had a standing bet that none of his students could beat him at tennis. And none of us could!

AB: So, what other recreation activities went on while you were there?

JD: Oh, well, they were very sports-minded and very supportive of student sports activities. They had competitive intramural sports in baseball and rugby and hockey and had high school and college teams competing in the university and high school leagues and we usually did pretty well.

AB: Oh, yes. And besides athletics, what was available?

JD: Well, they had very active debating for the students. They had a drama program, which wasn't an academic program but they put on plays and other entertainments and generally, made a pretty good student social life for the students.

AB: So, where were the students coming from that were attending university?

JD: Well, there were residential students who came from other parts of the province, from Newfoundland, from New Brunswick and a scattering of students from the New England states but of course the main student body came from the Halifax area.

AB: And, what were the family backgrounds of the students who attended?

JD: Well, they were a cross section pretty much. I don't think we worried too much about family backgrounds. We took people as we found them.

AB: Ok, so, how about the academic programs. Starting in high school, for instance, what were the kind of subjects and things?

JD: Well, they were the normal high school subjects with English, Mathematics, Languages, Geography...the regular curriculum.

AB: Was the curriculum heavy?

JD: It was a heavy workload. I think the academic standards were very high.

AB: And, moving on to the Bachelor of Arts program, what were the type of things?

JD: Well, the Bachelor of Arts program was of course...we had very few electives. We all took Latin and Greek and four years of Philosophy. So, it was a high-class program. I think we got much more of the Classics and Philosophy than the general student body get now.

AB: So, what was the role of religion in the school?

JD: There were religion classes throughout both in high school and at the university level, which were really very basic and very interesting...very well done.

AB: And, aside from the classes, what role was religion playing?

JD: Well, there was an annual retreat in the fall for all students...generally, it would be a three-day program. And then, there was a students mission crusade, which had regular meetings. There were monthly holy hours in the Chapel and that sort of thing. There was a very much more religious training and religious atmosphere

than is now possible, I think, in a university that has to be essentially an open university. But at St. Mary's, there were a number of non-Catholic students who were there for the excellence of the education rather than religion.

AB: So, did they just not take part in the religious activities of the school or?

JD: It was optional. They could take part or not. They didn't generally take part in the annual retreat or some of the things like that but they were exposed to a good deal of religious thought and activity in any event.

AB: What were the rules and regulations, the discipline that took place?

JD: Well, it was a normal disciplinary atmosphere. They required students to attend. If you didn't attend or were absent, you had to have a good excuse. They required proper dress. It wasn't a uniform situation but if somebody wasn't tidily or appropriately dressed, they made sure that that wasn't repeated.

AB: What was considered appropriate dress?

JD: Well, just clean, tidy clothes. You didn't have to have a tie on or anything like that but you had to be presentable.

AB: What other rules and that kind of thing?

JD: Well, there were no real rules as I recall. You had to attend class, you had to behave in class, you had to do your assignments and if you complied reasonably, you got along finely.

AB: What was the discipline of the school?

JD: What do you mean, what was the discipline of the school?

AB: If someone didn't attend class or didn't behave.

JD: Well, your teacher spoke to you and reminded you that you had to attend and why weren't you there and if it was repeated then the parents would be contacted and advised that the pupil wasn't applying himself and that they didn't want him to waste his time.

AB: Ok, let's just see if I covered everything. So, there weren't many students at the school at that time, were there?

JD: I think in the college during my years in the college there were probably 60-80 students and then the high school was considerably larger. I would say there would be 120, 130 high school students.

AB: Was there any type of student government?

JD: Yes, we had a student's council and also had an athletic association, separate, which looked after the competitive teams.

AB: What were some of the social events on campus?

JD: Well, in the early days when I first went there, they had a movie every Saturday night in the Assembly Hall, which was primarily for the residence students but the day students could attend if they wanted to. And that was very popular. It was in the days of the old silent movies. It was quite a thing. It was a very good way to give a social [cast] to the school and kept us from wanting to go to the movies downtown and that sort of thing, which I think was a good thing.

AB: Are there any other events or activities?

JD: Well, there would be various entertainments put on by, for instance, the Student's Mission Crusade or the Athletic Association to raise funds. We had nights at which prizes would be given for, like a bingo and that sort of thing, to raise funds for the teams.

AB: Did you ever have the parents in for anything?

JD: Well, the parents would come, of course, for the convocations and that sort of thing, but not otherwise: not on an organized basis.

AB: Convocation took place right there [inaudible]?

JD: Your right, in the building, yes.

AB: What were the physical facilities of the building like?

JD: Well, it was an interesting old building: perfectly adequate. The classrooms were not ornate or anything but they were perfectly airy and good: high ceilings. The building, of course, was one of the buildings that wasn't too badly damaged in the Halifax Explosion and it was used as an emergency hospital for quite a period of time, as I understand it. It was long before my time but an uncle of mine was a student in the high school at that time. And in the fire escape, the main fire escape, there was still on the walls painted signs that had been put there at the time of the explosion, directing people to emergency facilities and that sort of thing.

AB: Wow, quite a history to the building?

JD: Yeah.

AB: Is there anything else that stands out in your mind about the school or the teachers?

JD: Well, I think the relationship between the student body and the faculty was particularly good. And I think most of the students went away from St. Mary's after their years there with lasting friendships with many of the brothers: Brother Lineham, Brother Cornelia, Brother Ryan, Brother Garvey, Brother Roth, Brother Murphy. They were just really wonderful men and were genuinely interested in the students and became generally friendly with them.

AB: Were there any lay professors there at the time?

JD: Yes, there were a few lay professors. Jack Lynch who later graduated from St. Mary's and stayed on as a professor, who later was principal of St. Pat's High, was one. And Professor Beazley who also joined the faculty and then went on to be Head of the Commerce Faculty at St. Mary's after the Jesuits took over. They're two that I remember, particularly.

AB: I think that's about all I wanted to ask unless you can think of anything you'd like to add?

JD: No, except, I think that generally speaking, the students who went through St. Mary's developed a particularly loyalty to the school, to the institution. It was severely tested when the difficulties arose that were resulted from the Brothers leaving and being replaced by the Jesuits. But that didn't last. I think the old loyalty overcame the problem and I think there are many of the older alumni that still feel very closely attached to the institution although it has changed so radically that they wouldn't recognize it.

AB: Yeah. I see that you went back for your honours in...?

JD: What's that?

AB: Did you go back for your honours in 1980?

JD: No, the university was good enough to give me an honorary degree.

AB: Oh really? Oh, I see.

JD: So, I'm a double graduate.

AB: Oh, I see.

JD: Yeah.

AB: That's good. So do you keep in touch with the university?

JD: Oh, yes. I was on the Board of Directors...Board of Governors for a couple of terms. That's quite a long time ago. And I still am active...as active as I can be...in the alumni functions and that sort of thing.

AB: I see.

JD: Oh yes. I'm an active member of the alumni [and not on] the executive or anything like that and I like to follow the football and hockey teams and basketball team when they are active.

AB: Ok, that's great.

JD: Ok.