

Oral History Interview with Victor O'Connor
Interview conducted by Angela Baker, 1993
Transcribed by Sarah Brennan.

Position: Alumnus

Dates associated with Saint Mary's: 1929-1932

Scope and Content: Major topics include: Recollections of the Windsor Street Campus: classes, social activities, athletics, clubs, facilities; some College history.

Transcript:

AB: There you go. Ok well let's just start by uh stating your full name.

VC: Oh, Victor O'Connor.

AB: And your date and place of birth.

VC: It's the 24th of May, 1913.

AB: Ok, so when did you first attend St. Mary's?

VC: Well, I was a ... 1929, came from St. Pat's high school, Grade 11, went into first year Arts, was combined first year Arts and Engineering.

AB: Oh.

VC: ...I was there for 3 years in the Engineering Diploma course, left there with my Diploma in 1932.

AB: Oh, yes, so it was the Irish Christian Brothers then?

VC: Yes, there was two sections of St. Mary's then... the Collegiate which is the high-school, 9, 10, and 11 grades and the college section which gave a four year Arts course and then ... and the 3 year Engineering course.

AB: There was no Commerce then?

VC: No.

AB: No?

VC: No. Not at that time. It started Science, Bachelor of Science had been given to one or two people, but there wasn't you know, sufficient numbers who were full Science classes. Commerce came later...

AB: So what were the size of your classes... about?

VC: The first year we had... about 24 altogether but 12 of us went on to Engineering, rest went on to Arts or some of them actually went off to other places... left for other reasons, residents or some other reason.

AB: So, uh, there were students, were there boarder students at that time?

VC: Yes. Oh, there were boarders at the college, yes, ... from round the province and from Newfoundland. The Brothers taught in Newfoundland and they had no university there, full university. There was a Memorial college ... which gave a diploma degree in Engineering but, I don't know, several a year, used to be several from Newfoundland but there, they were passed on by the Brothers from Newfoundland at the time...

AB: They went to high school there and then came down here.

VC: Yeah.

AB: I see, so what were the family backgrounds basically of the students at the school?

VC: Oh, covered the full range. People who could afford to go and people who had to work their way through. Covered the range. The tuition wasn't very high, was 60 dollars a year was the tuition fee.

AB: That must have been quite a lot in the 30's though

VC: Yes, I wouldn't have been able to afford it 'cept that I got a scholarship..

AB: Oh yes.

VC: But there were, many families that were.. were workin' their way through, weren't denied an education because of their financial situation particularly.

AB: Yeah, Ok, what were the academic courses like, that you were taking... what type of courses did you have to take?

VC: I think we had more fuller courses, more numbers of courses than you do now... and we had French, English, Latin, Religion, Chemistry, Physics, Philosophy.

AB: And that was Engineer's courses!

VC: And that was for the full year, Philosophy. I think was split up into two terms.. Basic Philosophy the first term and Metaphysics second term.

AB: I see.

VC: There were different, different institutions and after that instructor, they had borrowed.. a priest from the diocese to give, give that course...

AB: yeah, so...

VC: Most of the Brothers gave the courses though. They did branch out with, some of their Graduates worked there shortly after I left there, as instructors.

AB: Oh yeah.

VC: Jim Ryan became the Dean of Engineering at St. Mary's, taught there and there were others.

AB: And so what was the workload like?

VC: Well, it was a workload of 7 courses (chuckle).

AB: Was it heavy, a lot expected of you in your courses or?

VC: Oh, pretty full yes, yeah .. it's hard to remember what now.... was entailed with the courses, couldn't remember that ...

AB: Did you have homework?

VC: Oh, some I guess, but most he was making a book précis or things of that nature, we had to study up and for other books and sorry, we had Mathematics in that too in that ..

AB: Yes?

VC: And that's certainly another one!

AB: Yeah, another one (laughs)

VC: Yeah.

AB: So there were exams were there?

VC: Oh yes, yeah yeah yeah, Exams were fairly rigid... and graded, that was a normal practice.. and still is.

AB: (laughs) That never goes away I don't think. No! What were some of the rules and regulations put on you as a student?

VC: I don't know. You had to be there for attendance that was the main thing I think we had ... They started the first class with a prayer ... started a little bit earlier, but we were used to that because we had the same thing in the public schools here at the time at St. Pat's, used to go 15 minutes early for religion but we had to be neatly dressed anyway. I don't remember any particular rules.

AB: What was the discipline like?

VC: I don't recall any need for discipline, in a normal context, but everybody knew they were there for a purpose and, came there to learn and the onus was upon you to learn, you were lucky you got teacher who could help you learn, but the onus was on the student actually to extract that learning.

AB: So, what type of recreational activities went on outside the classroom?

VC: Oh, sports, we had, a fairly good sized field, there and a race track quarter mile race track laid out in there, that's where St. Pat's high-school is now in the corner there, and rugby and hockey, had, we had a, the 'Roarum' it was called - an ice rink. It was a natural ice, no, you had to wait for a cold night to get any ice and that was where they practiced really, they didn't play much official games there - there was no spectator room, you know or anything like that. There was Handball courts, eh, they were very active .. used.. (inaudible) the Irish Christian Brothers, a lot of the Brothers were from Ireland and they'd been brought up on playing Handball and so they got in that. There was tennis courts, we had usually put on one or two drama shows plays during the year and were, put in out a

magazine, "Monthly Collegian" and what else, older Sodalities, Holy Name Society, and I think something else too.

AB: Was there any type of student government?

VC: No, no, not as such. No formal government no. no. There was, remember at that time we had a new bishop here, Bishop O'Donnell, and he put a ban on any dances. Being associated with the name Saint, of course, St. Mary's, so that put a cap on... We used to have one or two dances either the Arts would have one, the Engineers would have one or two, but tended to put a cap on it anyway. But, there was some ingenuity and different societies were formed.. the Arts formed the Tau-Gamma-Sigma... at the time. It was rumored that that meant tautiem , go henna sapiensia, Talbot Hall Learning.

AB: Laughs

VC:(Laughs). It was, aping the fraternity societies Phi Cappa Phi and that, but they chose Tau Gamma Sigma. We weren't so learned in the Engineers, we have a very enterprising chap John Summers who, we'll form the Owls Club which was, stemmed from a cartoon which used to run in paper at that time. He made, made up a motto for us which was 'Grum Waymus Grustus' and That'll fool 'em. They won't know what that is because it didn't have any meaning (laughs) just his own mind that made it up. Then we put on our dances under the aegis of the Owls Club. (chuckle)

AB: So did girls come over from the convent or... to the dances?

VC: Well, dances weren't held at the college. There was no... There was no room there actually that would be amenable to holding any dances. So, other facilities had to be used ... either halls or something of that nature would be rented for the occasion..

AB: So was there any type of graduation ceremonies when you graduated?

VC: Oh, had convocation yes, ye yeah.

AB: Did they take place right at the college or...?

VC: Pardon?

AB: Did they take place right at the college or somewhere ...?

VC: Yes, yes, it was, it was a bit of an Assembly Room that would accommodate the that's where we put on plays as well. They had a stage but was never used for dances though, that I recall.

AB: Um-hum

VC: But we had the convocation there..

AB: So what were the physical facilities available at St. Mary's, the small building was it?

VC: Well, the building is where St.Vincent Guest House is now. Four stories and a basement. There was about, the width I guess of the present wooden building was up on the, on the corner of Quinpool Road and Windsor Street, across the field, and that was used partly for boarders and the Brother Superior at the time here, he was that came here and established it for that matter too, was Brother Stirling, Joe, and the wooden building got the name of Stirling Castle. (chuckle)

AB: So you're saying he came 13 years before that? To establish it or...?

VC: 16 years.

AB: 16 years before you got there?

VC: 1913, the Brothers came at the invitation of the diocese and the Kof C, the Knights of Columbus, part of the backing of it. There had been other St. Mary's before that diocese and priests used to teach, they established St. Mary's and before them there had been, but not in the university level, just on the high-school level and before them there had been another Order of Brothers. My father attended that in 1871, and we still have receipts for tuition for one quarter, 4 dollars - that was his tuition fee (chuckle)

AB: Oh my!

VC: The year was, but the quarter was, but, that's where the history of St. Mary's goes back to the they claim, goes back so far, but in those original days, it was really a collegiate.

AB: So when did it become a university... 1913 with the Brothers?

AB: With the Brothers?

VC: Yeah.

AB: Did they start in that building, or had it been, had classes been taught in that building by the priests before then?

VC: Oh, that building was built new at that time, yes. I don't know the actual history of its building, but I presume it was built new for the occasion.

AB: So what, was it in good shape when you were there?

VC: Oh, reasonable, yeah, - there's accommodation for the teaching Brothers and a number of boarders and dining room for them and as well as the classrooms, small Chapel and assembly room and the offices, the profs, the Brothers didn't have the offices of their own like every prof now demands and expects. It was, there was only about one office in the whole building I think, the .. when you met with the Brothers, you occasionally met them in the corridors and whereas now you would go to their office and bone about something you missed. Quite often the corridors, or outside the building, you would get together with them. They mixed in well with the sports too...

AB: Did you play with them then, with the Brothers?

VC: Oh, handball and tennis yeah ... they didn't play in the competitive team, like football and the hockey.

AB: So did St. Mary's play against other colleges? Dal?

VC: Well, not so much. No, more high-schools because they're bigger. Hockey did! They'd a hockey team from the college, but the bigger number of students were in the collegiate. There wasn't ... graduating year of BA's sometimes 3 sometimes 5, not much more than that you know.

AB: Not enough to make too many teams? (chuckle)

VC: No, there were a few more Engineers than there were Arts see?

AB: So, after you finished your diploma of Engineering did you go on to Tech?

VC: Yes, St. Mary's was part of the agreement with Tech with the other colleges. Dalhousie, St. Mary's, St. Francis Xavier and Mt. Allison. They would accept diploma graduates from these colleges, at Tech for a final two years. That's that was a general course. It was commonly, it was quite common amongst the associated universities - for the 3 years, but

when you went to Tech you decided upon your specialties Civil, Electrical, Mechanical or Mining at that time. That'd be the four.

AB: What did you do?

VC: Mechanical, yeah.

AB: All right, let me see, are there any events or incidents that stand out in your mind when you think back?

VC: There was another thing that developed during the period I was there, a, these are in the late 20's and early 30's eh ... most of the universities had a COTC, Canadian Officers Training Course which provided the, actually with some money and also the students with some money. They got paid what, 60 cents a day, for appearance or something at a training session, but St. Mary's didn't have one, but Nova Scotia Tech did, so there was, students came from the other universities come to Tech and they would have had some previous COTC experience and our people didn't, so, again John Summers, the enterpriser, knew some officers that were in the anti-aircraft 1stLOX Anti-aircraft. They had lost all of their men in their unit, and John Summers made a deal with them that if they would take on all the Engineering students from St. Mary's and not take anybody else, we would form their unit for them (chuckle) and that went on and we trained firing anti-aircraft guns and the summer was a two week sessions down at Fort McNabb and then Sandwich Battery, which had an anti-aircraft gun, and we fired, fired it there and I believe that went on for several years, the association, probably until they moved to the new college and there was they did form a COTC and a UNDD.

AB: UNTD?

VC: Humm?

AB: What's UNTD?

VC: Oh, University Naval Training Division. Which has been restarted again recently I think. It lapsed after the war.

AB: Anything else you remember?

VC: Well, no. I enjoyed all the time there certainly enjoyed the Brothers and held them in in great respects and my next oldest brother was more concerned about me joining the order, upon graduation. Father Edward. He graduated in 1930, he preceded me in attending St.

Mary's and I think he was manager of the hockey team, first achieved a victory out of St. FX.

AB: (laughs)

VC: That was always, Beat the X!, it was always, it still is I think, a big rivalry between... But he joined the order and went the States and New York where they had a training division up in the Hudson River, West Park and later he was in charge of us for a number of years. I do believe too that he was the first college graduate they had recruited. Usually the Brothers recruited from high-schools. That was the practice in Ireland carried on in the North American province too and they only taught in the schools. Saint Mary's they didn't have, was the first university, college that they had.

AB: Oh, I see...

VC: They have another, they have a successor to it now, in New Rochelle Iona College that was started with the group of professors that were replaced by the Jesuits when they took over in 1941.

AB: I see, they moved down here?

VC: Yes, they started a new college in New Rochelle, 'cause they had had built it up, educated and Ph.D's and it was more than they needed for their high-schools.

AB: They've gone on and got more education did they?

VC: Yes, yes, hadn't needed so much until they had university. It wasn't the practice then to have Ph.D's in high-school.

AB: No... That's good! Well, that's everything

VC: Ok.

Tape Ends