

Saanich Pioneer – John Gillespie

by Pam Gaudio

John Gillespie was born on July 10, 1887 in a house on David Street in the Rock Bay district but when he was six years old, his family moved to Epsom Drive in Saanich. Those were the days when the Tolmie Estate at Cloverdale and the McKenzie Estate at Swan Lake existed and the indigenous population was around 50,000 in Saanich and you could purchase a salmon for 50 cents.

As a youngster, John enjoyed fishing and hunting. However, when he was thirteen a shell exploded in the breach of his gun and he seriously injured his left hand, losing his left thumb and partial left index finger. The accident happened near Lost Lake, now known as Blenkinsop Lake, and getting to town was not an easy feat. Thankfully, a friend, Walter Sim, brought him to the hospital in downtown Victoria.

John had many memories of living in Saanich. He remembered seeing John Tolmie, brother of Premier Simon Fraser Tolmie, and his three sisters driving to St. Luke's Church regularly. They arrived in a commodious buggy with two seats, which was considered the Cadillac of the day. John and his sisters were prolific members of St. Luke's Church, John being in the choir and his sisters, Jane and Josette, being members of the Altar Guild.

Over his lifetime, John had a number of careers and worked long hours - nine or ten hours a day, six days a week. In 1910 under the direction of Colonel Holmes, he surveyed a section of the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway, which ran from Upper Campbell Lake to Crown Mountain. Two years later, he helped survey timber at Gold River. When he returned to Victoria, he worked as an iron-molder at many foundries including Adams and Ramsay's and the B.C. Foundry, later known as Yarrows. He made many of the City of Victoria's blue light standards.

John loved to be outside, so a career change had him working winters for the Municipality of Saanich in the Waterworks Department. In the summer months, he operated his own beekeeping business and he eventually became the Provincial Bee Inspector from 1936 to 1941.

John met his wife, Edith Anne Banning, while she stood in the rain waiting for the city bus. He walked over and put his umbrella over her head for shelter and it was love at first sight. They were married at St. Mark's Church on Boleskine Road on June 4, 1921 by Reverend Hitchcox. Edith, a bookkeeper, was a native of south Wales and came to Canada in 1906 and to Victoria in 1911. Together they were the proud parents of five sons: Jack, William, James, Biddie, and Robert (Bob) who became a well-known Saanich Councillor.

John and Edith were married 49 years. Edith outlived her husband by twenty-five years and died at age 99 on March 19, 1996. John died January 20, 1971 and is buried in the Gillespie family plot



*John and Edith Gillespie's
headstone in St. Luke's
Cemetery*

Photo credit: Pam Gaudio

along with his father William, mother Mary Anne, his sister Mary who died of cholera, and brothers James who was accidently run over by a loaded hay wagon and Robert who died of a lung disease.

John and Edith are buried the Gillespie family plot in Row E, Plots 1-3, along with John's parents, and sister Mary, and brother James. John's brother, Robert, is buried in Row C, Plot 17.

Source: St. Luke's Prescription, Fall 2017