

IEEE Victoria Section 50th Anniversary
August 18, 2006

The Victoria Section was created as a local organization of AIEE on October 5, 1956. Unfortunately, records have been lost, so recalling the early days becomes a challenge in recollection. On April 1, 1956, I moved from Vancouver, where I had been Toll Plant Extension Engineer for BC Telephone Company to Victoria to take the position of Assistant Chief Engineer for the Public Utilities Commission, and because I was a Member of AIEE, I was naturally associated with other members of AIEE. I cannot remember the actual inauguration of the Section, but I was certainly involved. My recollection is that it was a very small, very isolated group, comprising mainly engineers from BC Electric Company and BC Power Commission- later to become BC Hydro- a few from private practice, and myself from BC Government. Names that come to mind are O.B. Bass, Andy Anderson, and Cam Spratt. O.B. was the person who made the gavel for the Section.

It is significant to note that almost coincident with the formation of the Victoria Section; in fact, the month before, saw the turn up for service of TAT-1, the first Trans-Atlantic telephone cable. Up to that point, such telephone service as there was between Canada and Europe used expensive and unreliable radio channels, and so it ushered in the era of modern global communications. In our present world of high speed internet, i-pods, and broadband communications facilities, it seems incredible that within the life of this Section it was a difficult and chancy business to make a phonecall from Victoria to London.

The American Institute of Electrical Engineers and the Institute of Radio Engineers were merged in 1963 to become IEEE. We can look back with great satisfaction to recognize how quickly and smoothly this good idea was completed by engineers. One could speculate that if we had chosen to ask lawyers to organize this for us, we would still be waiting for a first draft of the agreement !! Though I cannot remember for sure, it seems that I must have been the first chairman of the new Victoria Section of IEEE, because I have a certificate dated May, 1964, thanking me for my services as Chairman, and I do know that I was Chairman for a second time in 1983-84. The merger brought greater strength to the Section with the addition of former IRE members like Doug Chorlton and Alex Stewart. Ben Manning, Earl Byrnes, Don Morison, Don Jacobs and his wife, both of whom were engineers, all made significant contributions to the Section. Jim Collins had joined in the mid 1970's and it was Jim who, at the conclusion of my term as chairman, presented me with a handsome memento of an encapsulated limited edition US postage stamp issue honouring four famous Electrical Engineering inventors.

The advent of trans-oceanic telephone service signaled the demise of long distance telegraph and one of the fallouts was closure of the Bamfield repeater station. Victoria Section members felt that the technology and equipment used there were both fascinating and historically important, so a committee was struck under the chairmanship of Alex Stewart - and later, myself- together with Don Morison and Ben Manning, and four retired operators from the station to create a permanent working display at the Victoria Maritime Museum, under the guidance of Col. Symons, the Museum Curator. This display remained for many years, but unfortunately in the late 1990's, due to funding cutbacks and changing customer interests the display was discontinued to accommodate the downsizing.

The establishment of an engineering faculty at the University of Victoria was a turning point in the stature of the Section. Among other things, it brought to Victoria an influx of highly qualified and experienced electrical engineers. It is a whole other story as to how all this came about, but suffice it say to that for a period of time there was in British Columbia a Ministry of Universities, Science, and Communications. The minister in charge was Dr. Pat McGeer, and I was Assistant Deputy Minister, Communications. It was a period of expansion and geographical dispersion in educational facilities around the province, and one of the initiatives was to add an engineering component to UVic's course options. The feasibility study was conducted by a Civil Engineer from Ontario and his report recommending the addition reflected his background. In the process of implementation, UVic convened a selection committee in 1982 to choose a Dean of Engineering. The selection committee was comprised mainly of department heads of existing faculties, none of whom had much familiarity with engineering matters, but included also two professional engineers recommended by the Association of Professional Engineers of British Columbia. Joe Cunliffe was one of these; I was the other. In the course of our deliberations, it became clear that Joe, who was a Civil Engineer, was thinking along the lines of the new faculty being oriented towards civil engineering; however, I felt that the University of British Columbia already had a well established civil department, and that UVic's new faculty should be distinctly different. Using the example of the Swiss strategy of concentrating on watchmaking, where physical size was small, but value high, I argued that a similar strategy would be appropriate for Victoria, partly because of its geographical isolation from mainland British Columbia. From my communications background, I felt strongly that electrical engineering, specializing in micro-electronics, communications, and computer engineering would be a much better choice for UVic, and managed to convince my committee colleagues to this position.

As a result, we chose Len Bruten to be the first Dean, and he did a splendid job of starting the new faculty on a winning course. Len was strongly motivated to move things along quickly, but unfortunately discovered that the government was long on promises but short on delivery, so he resigned after a short time. The selection committee convened again, and we were very lucky this time around to have Eric Manning accept the position of Dean. One of the fortunate consequences for the Section was the recruitment of Vijay Bhargava to a senior position on the faculty, hence membership in the Section.

With his extensive experience in IEEE matters, Vijay lifted our sights far above our former expectations. It was his leadership that led to the Section sponsoring the first IEEE Pacific Rim Conference on Communications, Computers, and Signal Processing. This was held in the Empress Hotel Convention Centre on June 4-5, 1987. Victoria Section had never attempted to stage an activity of this magnitude before, but a conference executive committee was formed and went to work. Because of its historical significance, I would like to record here the names of that committee. Conference Chairman was Vijay Bhargava, and the other members, in no particular order were: Perry Hunter, Pan Agathoklis, Joe Young, Jim Collins, Aaron Gulliver, Alan Strachan, Lawrence Pitt, Bill Cooke, Warren Little, Dave Gregson, and myself. It was a grand affair, and a resounding success; and it is at this high point in Victoria Section activity that I will end my commentary. The remaining history is probably more familiar to you than to me.

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