

Sketch of a West Pointer – John Matkovich



John's father emigrated from Yugoslavia to Canada in 1924; his mother, brother and sister did not arrive until July 1938. John was born at home on Union Street in May 1939. When he was 2 years old, the family moved to their first home, one of only two houses in the area that was surrounded by a foundry, truck assembly plant, paper factory and flour mill; it was a short distance from many sawmills on the waterfront. During the war, Liberty ships were being built two blocks down the street; 2,000 workers walked past their home every night. John's father was a logger and spent a lot of time away working in camps, so John spent most of his time with his mother, who did not speak English. Needless to say, John's grasp of the English language was questionable, so he was failed in grade 1.

Some early memories: milk being delivered by horse and buggy and biting off the cream from frozen milk bottles with two friends who lived

in the only other house in the area; going to school for the first time in 1945 and running home almost immediately. John says, "It was the price you paid for spending 6 years attached to your mother." He remembers lacking social skills and always being in trouble in primary school. At Christmas time, he would put his shoe in the window hoping to get an orange and perhaps a few walnuts. But one year he awoke to find his shoe filled with chicken bones! His older brother (by 15 years) thought it would be funny. Imagine the reaction of a 6 year old!

John was industrious and always had a job, starting with a paper route at age 12, until he was 53. When he was 13, he delivered his papers and then sold the News Herald in front of the Waldorf Hotel until about 11 pm and then got up and went to school. On Friday and Saturday nights he sold flowers from his mother's big garden – again at the Waldorf. He recalls the separate entrances to beer parlours, one for men and the other for ladies and their escorts. John could make \$100 a night selling flowers, which was as much as his dad would earn in a month, doing a labour job. John did this for about 3 years to support his family; by then his father was sick and not working much. The Waldorf area was good to John; he collected beer bottles every Saturday and Sunday morning and would use the money to go to the theatres just past Main Street. He might have ten dollars in his pocket while his buddies were lucky to have 25 cents. He would give some of his proceeds to his mother but always kept some for himself so he could maintain his life style!

After the family moved to 2nd and Nanaimo in 1954, John got a job delivering telegrams for the CNR. He worked 2 hours each day and made \$1.20. He would ride his bike from Templeton High School downtown and back home again Monday to Friday; he suggests, "Try selling that one to a teenager today!" John remembers that he was 16 when the family got their first television set and Christmas tree. He attended Vancouver Tech, a tough school in those days. After getting fired at CNR, John delivered telegrams for the CPR, and then got an inside job. He'd work from 4 pm to midnight Monday to Friday, getting home at 1 am and then going to school the next morning. John lived in a rough part of the world and says he could have easily ended up at Main and Hastings – but by then he had a hard idea of life. At age 20, he took an electrical course at Vancouver Vocational Institute, continuing to work nights at the telegraph office. It was a nice job because he could also spend time in the local pool hall, making more money shooting pool than at his job!

He doubled his salary with CPR to \$320/month (big bucks in those days) installing equipment. He totally financed and repaired a beat-up house the family had purchased, and also wired houses for extra money.

For 3 years, starting in 1960, John was a commercial fisherman. His hi-light story occurred one summer day when they were waiting for the fishing to close for the week (every Thursday at 6 pm). While talking to the skipper of the seine boat, an old Croatian who loved to tell stories from the past, John spotted many fish on the water surface. So immediately they made a "set"; this angered John's brother because they had just cleaned the nets for the weekend - and now were going to get them all dirty again! They caught enough fish that with his share John was able to buy a brand new car, a '62 Chevy 4-door hardtop! When he got home from fishing one October weekend, his father told him he had a phone call from BC Tel. John got the job that he had done a book report on in grade 9. He did everything from installing radio microwave equipment on mountain tops across B.C., Alberta and the flat lands of Saskatchewan to equipment engineering, main frame computer systems and eight different management positions. He met many people, especially the girls of Saskatchewan. He retired in 1993 with a full pension and appreciates that it still shows up on the 27th of every month, 25 years later! He did tax returns with an accounting friend and did all the maintenance work for the 63 unit townhouse complex where he lived for 24 years. His last task there was in mid-July, after he had moved to a retirement complex, one kilometre away.

In 1965 John married one of those Saskatchewan girls, Doreen, and they had two children – David and Leanne. Doreen fell in love with the mountains so they moved to the Deep Cove area in 1966 and then to a townhouse in the same area in '94. John feels very fortunate that he retired early so they could do a lot of travelling, covering much of the world. Life changed when Doreen got sick in 2005 (she died in 2011).

John started playing golf when he was 30, getting in about five games a year, and had a handicap as low as 15 about ten years ago. He joined West Point in 2008. When asked about shooting his age, John quipped, "I'm 79 this year and shot 79 twice at McCleery – about 20 years ago – does that count?" One of his favourite memories is beating Peter Coyle in the first round of the Club Match Play Championship about 8 years ago; John was #16 seed, Peter was #1. While playing in Reno with eight friends, John was giving the gears to one of his buddies in a nearby sand trap. The ball came screaming out of the trap, striking John on the ankle bone; guess who was crying and who was laughing now! Favourite golfers are Chi Chi Rodriguez, Greg Norman and Phil Mickelson – but Phil wouldn't play in Canada, which didn't sit well with John. Golf courses he likes are Chateau Whistler for its location, Waskasu (Northern Saskatchewan) for its special layout and Hangman's Canyon in Spokane, with tee boxes over canyons and a lake for their driving range.

John was involved with many organizations. As a member of the North Shore Kinsmen Club, he held every officer position, including Zone Governor, and became a life member of the national organization in 1979. He helped re-establish the Mt. Seymour Little League, coached teams for 5 years and was the league equipment manager. A few of his 10 year-old players live in his neighbourhood, are in their 50s, and still call him Mr. Matkovich. He was a member of the North Shore Winter Club, coached hockey and curling, and served on the board. When the club went into receivership, John negotiated the financing on a Labour Day weekend to save the club that is still running today. Wine has been a big part of John's life; from 1983 to 2017 he was noted for his wine-making skills. This was no U-brew outfit. He belonged to an organization with 320 members all over B.C. There were competitions at the club, provincial and national levels. His club this year will buy about 20,000 pounds of grapes! He has enjoyed judging wine competitions for about 15

years and taught various wine courses, including how to make good wine, the chemistry of wine and cellar maintenance.

John's favourite vacation occurred in 2005 when he took 13 couples to Croatia, his homeland. They did a 2 week private cruise from Pula to Dobrovnik on a 100-foot power sail boat with a crew. People still talk about that trip and John is taking his son next year, returning to his grandparents' home. John says that the village resembles the one depicted in "Fiddler on the Roof". Second on his list is Cape Town, when he took 12 couples, all friends, on their own bus from Johannesburg to Cape Town, covering many game reserves and wineries. He remembers going to Tanzania and visiting three game reserves and asks: ever have four lions sleep around your vehicle, watch cheetahs setting up for a kill, or been nose to nose with an angry elephant?

Prepared by Lorne Lindsay from John's material - July 2018