

A Tribute to Jim Collins

by Rosalyn (Murray) Graham ('59)

The Class of 1959 lost a valued member in November when Jim Collins lost his determined year-long battle with a brain tumor. He died on Tuesday, Nov. 6, 2007 at Norfolk General Hospital. He was 66.

Jim is survived by his wife Mary Jayne, son Jeffrey Collins and his wife Corinne of Cambridge, daughter Sarah Kathleen Collins of London, granddaughter Avery Jayne, brother Robert Collins, sister Joan Bunko and her husband Walter and several nieces and nephews.

Jim was a member of a class at South that still, after more than 50 years, calls itself 9C, a close-knit group that continues to puzzle about the never-defined "social experiment" of which they were the first contingent. In 1954 London South Collegiate Institute administrators picked about 25 students to move through five years at South as a unit, on a fast track in some subjects with opportunities for extra courses and enrichment. While no one ever learned whether anyone was measuring the educational or economic results of the experiment (if it was an experiment), there is no question that there was a sense of camaraderie that survived the passing years, with many members of the class keeping in touch.

Early in 2004, Jim's comment that September 2004 would be the 50th anniversary of that group of timid 9th graders arriving at South prompted (after expressions of amazement and horror) the plan to track down everyone from the class and arrange a reunion. Jim, retired from his career as a wildlife biologist, applied the talents he had developed in years of tracking the behavior of ducks, geese and swans, and took the lead in the search. He created a ripple that began with a letter to the known names, addresses and emails, and gradually gathered in the whole group. In May of 2005 a two-day reunion in London was attended by almost everyone, from as far away as Texas, British Columbia and California. It was a happy occasion that renewed connections, caught up on 50 years of news about careers, marriages, children and grandchildren, and gave a chance to revisit some of the best memories of high school.

One long-lasting benefit of the reunion was that it captured many memories and biographical details that were recorded in a souvenir book called **Garnet and Grayer**.

Excerpts from Jim's autobiography give both highlights of his career and his sense of humor:

"Life is a journey, not a destination. On my trip I have tended to avoid the main highways, and followed the back-roads, often the roads less travelled. As a result, the journey has been on occasion a little bumpy, but a whole lot more interesting."

"I was born to be a biologist. ... When it became apparent that Mary Jayne and I were likely to be a couple, her Mother once said, 'Mary Jayne...if you marry Jim, I expect that life will seldom be dull.' I have endeavoured to ensure I lived up to that expectation. I suspect MJ will say I mostly succeeded."

Being a field biologist with the Canadian Wildlife Service and with Ducks Unlimited (Canada) gave me the opportunity to see nooks and crannies of Canada, especially the eastern provinces, that are not that easy to reach. I have spent more hours than I would care to tally peering out the side windows of small planes, counting 'things', usually ducks and geese and swans, often at very low levels, and on occasion, under 'difficult' weather conditions. Hint: If you get lost flying around southern Ontario, check the name of the nearest town painted on the water tower.

"A job opening with Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in the summer of 1978 provided me with the chance to move 'back home' to Long Point Country. This meant giving up fieldwork and moving behind a desk (for most of the time). However, MNR's Simcoe District has a fascinating array of natural resources, and lots of people competing to use them. There were lots of challenges for me, especially as I developed some skill at facilitating resolution of conflicts between groups of resource-users. By far the most interesting part of my job in Simcoe District was my involvement in management of the commercial fishery on Lake Erie. Fortunately, for me and for the fishermen, I have a great love of being on the water, of fishing in any form, and just plain 'messing about in boats'. My best 'meetings' with fishermen were held in the wheelhouse of their various boats as they went about making their living."

"The down-side of the MNR job was having to work in a big, cumbersome bureaucracy. Many of the local issues were caused by 'made in Queen's Park' solutions being imposed from afar. The centralization of power in Toronto that came

with the Common Sense Revolution exacerbated those problems. So, I was gleeful when the chance to retire early was presented across the provincial public service. "Now I'm retired and spend my time looking for things."

That was Jim's story up to the time of the reunion when he was busying himself exercising his talents as a carpenter and handyman on behalf of friends and neighbors near the home in Simcoe where he and Mary Jayne lived with his dog, her cats, and a big garden. His intention was to build a new house for them on land they had purchased near town, but then an exciting and serendipitous opportunity arose to apply his life-experience in wildlife biology, resource planning, organizational development and diplomacy. A friend told him about the search by the Creston Valley Wildlife Centre in British Columbia for a person with his talents to rehabilitate the organization, its facilities and its funding. He applied, was hired, and set off early in 2006 with his usual enthusiasm (and his dog) to tackle the project. After a productive spring, summer and fall of intense and successful resuscitation work, he came home for the winter, intending to return to the project in the spring. It was then that his brain tumor was diagnosed and his new battle began.

Everyone who knew Jim will miss his energy, his wit, and his focus and his determination. The next reunion just won't be the same. And our deepest sympathy goes out to Mary Jayne and the rest of the family.