

The Grade 9 Entrance Exam

By Rod_Fraser



From 1874 to 1949, the Ontario government required all students who hoped to go to high school, write and pass a province-wide entrance exam. Students had to have a passing grade of 50% or better to enter Grade 9. This was not only true for Ontario; many states in the United States also required qualifying examinations to enter secondary school.

The Ontario exams tested arithmetic, grammar, spelling, geography, dictation and composition. They were a two-day affair, with the exam papers marked by individuals independent of the local school boards.

I read about these entrance exams last year — when a friend sent me Ken Weber’s article in a magazine called ‘[*In the Hills*](#)’. Ken told his readers their history — but largely in

the context of the rural one-room schools in or near Erin Township. I thought there was a bigger story to tell, so here I am — doing just that.

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Young people in earlier times could legally leave school at the age of 14 — usually after completing Grade 8 (today the age is 18). High school was thought to be for brighter students — and certainly those who were resourceful enough to pass the ‘entrance exam’.

It wasn’t easy. Many failed the first attempt. And others never passed. Here are a few of the exam questions that Ken Weber notes in his article,

“Consider this question on the 1875 geography exam, ‘Name the inland counties of Ontario lying to the west of the meridian of Toronto and give their chief towns?’”

“On the arithmetic exam in 1901, candidates were presented with questions, such as, ‘A man invests $\frac{1}{2}$ his fortune in land, $\frac{1}{4}$ in bank stock, $\frac{1}{8}$ in debentures and loses the remainder to speculation, which is \$8,000. How much was his fortune?’”

“And what of this question in Canadian history...? ‘Show as carefully as you can that in both parliamentary and municipal matters, Canada is governed by the people.’”

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While Ken Weber did a nice job in writing his article, he was too young in 1949 to write the ‘entrance exam’ (as was I). By the time he was in Grade 8, the exam had disappeared from Ontario schools. From 1950 to 1968, the only ‘departmental exams’ written in this province were the ‘exit exams’ required to graduate from Grade 13.

Fortunately, I found an individual who was old enough to have written his ‘entrance exam’ in 1949, and then [wrote](#) about the experience last year. Glen Goodhand was in Grade 8 in 1949, passed the ‘entrance exam’ without difficulty and then moved on to high school in September of that year.

Here is an excerpt from Glen’s article, ‘*Do you remember: High School Entrance Exams?*’,

“A student who was nearing the end of their last year in public school would know what to expect. Essentially, they would face four examinations, set by the Minister of Education. Normally these were taken two each day over two consecutive days.”

“These exams were written in a central location ... in my case, every Grade 8 student [from my township] ... met [at a high school] ten miles from Lindsay. There were no specifics for studying or preparation — the recollection of knowledge gained during the year was the only source from which to draw.”

Glen reported there was no graduation ceremony that year, although the local paper printed a list of those who

passed the 'Entrance'. Weeks later, his certificate arrived in the mail. It is still a prized possession.

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As mentioned earlier, there was also an 'exit exam' for high school students. From 1896 to 1968, the Ontario government required students who hoped to graduate from high school, write and pass a province-wide exit exam. Originally this test was written after Grade 12; later students wrote this exit exam when they completed Grade 13. It was difficult, requiring considerable effort and ability.

During my years of high school, those who graduated from Grade 12, after four years of high school, were issued a '*Secondary School Graduation Diploma*'. If you completed the final year of high school (Grade 13), you also received a '*Secondary School Honours Graduation Diploma*'.

Grade 13 was eliminated in 2003 — bringing Ontario into line with every other major jurisdiction in North America.

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I've had a look at a number of questions on the 'entrance exams' over the years, and I wonder if I could have passed them. Today, many are calling the curriculum in elementary and secondary school too difficult. I wonder if the opposite is true. It seems much too easy. If you consider the following

questions asked of Grade 8 students 100 years ago, you might quickly conclude young people were much better informed and educated at that time. Take a look and decide for yourself.

- Solve 5.8 plus 5.14 minus 59.112
- Find the cost of painting the walls at 12.5 cents per sq. yard, of a room 20 feet long, 16 feet wide and 9 feet high, deducting one door 8 feet by 4 feet six inches and two windows 5 feet by 3 feet 6 inches each?
- A man sold a watch for \$180 and lost $16\frac{2}{3}\%$. What was the cost of the watch?
- A school enrolled 120 pupils and the number of boys was $\frac{2}{3}$ the number of girls. How many of each sex were enrolled?
- How many steps of 2 feet 4 inches will a man take in walking $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles?
- What is a personal pronoun?
- Parse all the words in the following sentence: "John ran over the bridge"
- Define longitude and latitude?
- Tell what you know of the 'Gulf Stream'?

Some Further Thoughts

After posting this article to my website in mid-May, an elderly cousin wrote to tell me he completed Grade 8 in 1948 and didn't write the 'Entrance'. Apparently, he and his younger brother left school each year — from 1945 to 1949 — after the Victoria Day holiday (*the long weekend in May to my younger readers*). Since the 'Entrance' was an end-of-year exam, he simply wasn't there to write it.

It didn't hamper his ability to enter Grade 9 at Mimico High School in the fall of 1948. He did just that and graduated from Grade 13 in 1953. I hasten to add that my cousin was a good student and would have easily passed the 'Entrance' had he written it.

This was known as the farm exemption. Young people who were needed on the farm in the war years were allowed to leave school early each year. Since my cousin and his family summered each year on a farm property near Burk's Falls, he and his younger brother qualified.

According to Julie Magerka, a local historian who grew up in Merlin, Ontario, the farm exemption remained in place until the early 1950s.

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It's a bit odd isn't it. We know these exams existed and we know grade 8 students in Ontario wrote them from 1874 to

1949. It also seems clear the exam results were published each year in the local papers. They probably did influence who got into high school.

But perhaps not in the way I thought. It's likely students who didn't do well on the 'Entrance' decided high school wasn't for them. They chose (or were asked) to leave school at the end of grade 8. And others (like my cousin), who didn't write the 'Entrance', still went on to high school.

Whether it was the farm exemption, special dispensation for students who were ill on exam day, the independence of local school boards, or the influence of intelligent parents, it seems these rules were far more flexible in their application than I thought.

Because of all these lovely inconsistencies, this story may still have legs. I'm hoping a few readers who have some knowledge of those years, will write to fill in the gaps. I'd love to know more

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