

# My Dad's "Only" Purchase

by Gordon Laird

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Dad arrived home with a heavy box. Dressed in a suit, as befits a bank manager, Dad was carrying a box in his arms. It was heavy. What could it be? Dad never bought anything to bring home. Dad never bought anything! Could it be an electric train? Not much chance of that. How about a toy car or truck? Be still my heart! But Dad would not buy anything like that. Because Dad never bought anything.

A five year old peers into the opened box and my heart drops. It's books. Just plain, stupid books. As they are unpacked onto the floor I begin to see some possibilities for these books. All dark red in colour, 20 books all the same, perhaps I can use them as building blocks and build a fort or a castle out of them.

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Dad was born on a farm in Ireland, a part of Ireland which today is called "Eire" or Southern Ireland. Although there was plenty to eat from the farm, cash was hard-won. Dad related how he went with his father to a wealthy relative to borrow a little cash to make up a cash shortfall for paying the taxes. Dad remembered seeing the relative take out a cheque book and write a cheque for the difference. That really impressed Dad! Instead of continuing on the farm, Dad aspired to be a banker!

In Canada Dad met Mom and they married in Vancouver in 1921. Three children were added to the family, Daphne in 1924, Doug in 1928 and me in 1931. Our growing up years were the depression years: the "Dirty Thirties".

Dad never bought a car. Mom, who had driven since she was 16 purchased the cars, even if Dad wrote the cheque. Dad never bought a house. It was Mom who determined it was time for us to move, and set the wheels in motion for the house purchases. I don't remember anything Dad ever bought. I am sure Mom pressured him into buying the suit necessary for work or for a wedding. Shirts, ties, socks and underwear would either be gifts or Mom's purchases. Dad didn't need anything. He would say, "Don't buy me something for my birthday, make

me something." He cherished a poem or a hand-drawn picture. Anything else we might buy was never used. Dad didn't buy anything!

Except this once!

What we had, I later learned, was a 20-volume set of the "Book of Knowledge".

At first I found these 20 books great toys. I could make a road for my toy cars, and by opening a book make a ramp for my cars to ascend to the next level of books. I made a castle from them. I could invent a marble game with the spaces between the books being the "goals".

When I became a better reader I began searching out the "Things to Make and to Do" section, and find "A set of Simple Tricks" or "Cutting the Magic String". After I had mastered all the tricks I could move on to "An Easy Way to Make a Telephone". I was beginning to learn about the concept of volumes and indexes. One story often led me to another story in the next volume. The page numbers continued through the books, gradually ascending until it reached page 6390 in volume 20, just preceding the General Index to the 20 volumes. This was the start for me of my personal search of libraries which put me in good stead for my later life searches in the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, the British Museum, Le Biblioteque Nationale and the Vatican Library.

The "Book of Knowledge" offers one puzzle involving a locomotive, two train cars and two low bridges, which fascinates me to this day.

There was a treasury of information included: History of Canada, Poetry, the Story of Famous Books, some scientific knowledge and facts about nature. I could read the outline of Shakespear's "Merchant of Venice". These books represented the beginning of my education.

Years later, when I became fascinated with the fictional character of Don Quixote, I realized that I had first seen the picture of my gaunt and ridiculous hero in our Book of Knowledge.

I don't remember Dad reading the books. Dad was a self-educated man, who had parlayed a grade 4 education into a broad knowledge of world events, mainly through reading the newspaper. The "Book of Knowledge" was for us - for our education.

It has been 24 years since Dad died. It has taken most of that time to reflect on the meaning and purpose of the one thing that Dad ever bought! I am beginning to understand something about his love for us and his desire for our education!