

Searching for Tess Trueman

Searching for Tess Trueman — An Historical Snapshot by Bill Engleson

<http://www.engleson.ca>

Part One

I live on Trueman Place. It is a short road in a small subdivision on Denman Island. The subdivision was developed by Dr. Tess Trueman sometime in the 1970's. My house was built in 1978. That's a sort of a time capsule clock clue.

This is how I began a separate essay a short while ago. I had intended to write about Dr. Tess Trueman in my signature monthly soon-to-be-mothballed Flagstone mini-column, an occasionally humorous, two-hundred-word discourse about this and that but mostly about nothing much in particular. Very Seinfeldian, I thought, though others may disagree.

Nevertheless, I *was* intrigued by Dr. Trueman. My sense was that for many lifers on Denman she was a contentious figure or, for the nascent newcomers, me included, a relatively unknown quantity. However, my initial attempt at pithy lilliputian jocularity didn't work all that well — *numerous Bess Truman quotes were available but no Tess Trueman quips popped up* — so I opted to write something slightly longer and perhaps more engagingly informative about her. If nothing else, it would satisfy a literary itch.

Initially, there wasn't much to work with online. Born in 1925, she died in 2015, a few days short of her 90th birthday.

This comprehensive passage from her obituary offered useful data, a valuable timeline, and a good jumping off point.

...Tess's life was guided by her sense of duty, her curiosity, loyalty and dedication to all her endeavours. Born in Red Deer, Alberta, the youngest of 5 children, Tess joined the Canadian Women's Army Corps after her high school graduation. At the end of WWII, she was discharged from the CWAC with the rank of Captain and enrolled in the University of Alberta in Edmonton. In 1953 she graduated with her M.D. Several years later, after post-graduation studies and residencies in Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal, she was a qualified obstetrician and gynecologist. Tess was one of the first female OB/GYN specialists in Southern Alberta. She had a private practice, taught at the medical school in Calgary, and treated patients at Foothills Hospital. By the mid-1970's, it was time for Tess to slow down a little, and she semi-retired to the Comox Valley. She lived on Denman Island and was instrumental in creating the Seniors Centre on Denman Island which is named after her. In her semi-retirement, Tess became a land developer on Denman Island, and several of her Alberta colleagues acquired vacation homesites from Tess. Tess thought that the drier climate of the B.C. Interior would be more conducive to pursuing her love of golf and tennis, but a few years of Shuswap Lake winters were enough, and Tess returned to the Comox Valley...

There are two noticeable reminders of Tess Trueman on Denman: the name of the very short street I live on, Trueman Place, and the large carved signage, Tess Trueman Hall, for a time, hidden by foliage and currently positioned on the northeast side of the Denman Seniors and Museum Society lawn, delightfully, perhaps even provocatively, almost staring northward at the iconic and resilient Denman Community Hall just up the road. I should note here that the Community Hall and more specifically the back-to-the-landers of the day who essentially commandeered the Hall and with whom Tess allegedly had some difficulty were referenced in a BC Lottery Fund application she made in the spring of 1982 as she sought various sources of funding to bankroll the construction of the DSMS. In that application, she offered this somewhat

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unprophetic rationale for applying for government gambling proceeds largesse: *“Since the existing “Community Hall” is 73 years old and likely to either fall down or burn down at any moment, the completed project is expected to take over most of the adult activities of the 600 residents of the island as well as the many summer residents and visitors...”*

During the period of time that the DSMS building was under construction, renovations were also proceeding at the Community Hall, possibly to forestall the falling down and/or burning down that some, or perhaps only Dr. Trueman, may have prophesized.

More recent renovations about a decade ago guided by the energetic Margie Gang, and other five-year touch-ups before and after, have extended the life of the Community Hall even further to the communities benefit. Denman now has two mutually semi-adjacent venues that serve a multitude of activities.

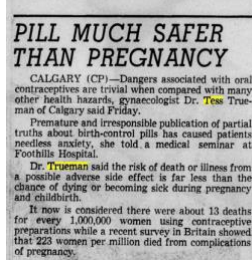
In any event, my quest to search out some information about Tess Trueman and possibly tell a portion of her story jumped into gear, after my quickie initial internet hunt, by phoning and/or speaking to a few random long time Islanders to get their impressions/remembrances.

This was by no means a comprehensive process, nor was it intended to be, but it garnered a breadth of views. I offer these non-identifying recollections anecdotally, loosely, not as definitive as a more finely honed piece of research might attribute. Rather, they are more a scattering of opinions that captured moments in time.

Earlier Days

Several Denman locals, those who were children when Tess was at her Denman peak for example, have suggested that she was somewhat of a scary apparition. This was reinforced by a few others I’ve spoken to, adults in Tess’s time, who, for example, pretty much unanimously acknowledged that she was a person of robust opinions about child rearing in the 1970s. One circumspect informant suggested that the new hall came into fruition partially because the children of the back-to-the-landers could not keep their allegedly unhygienic hands off of the seniors carpet bowling balls.

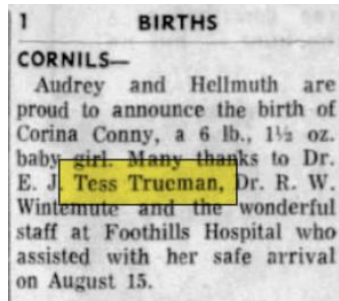
I was advised by another informant that Dr Trueman had concerns about the popularity of home births during the 1970’s. and didn’t hold back in sharing her thoughts on the subject. The following news report from the May 28th, 1970, Vancouver Sun reinforces for me her professional willingness to dialogue about the risks of pregnancy versus the alleged risks “associated with oral contraceptives.” Though the article doesn’t mention home births per se, I think it reasonable to conclude that she would have likely argued that hospital births were a



somewhat safer option than home births.

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Curious to see what else might be available from newspapers of yore and having a soon-to-expire access to Ancestry newspapers worldwide, I sought out as much as possible about Dr. Trueman in the ether sphere. She proved to have quite a presence over the years in Alberta news accounts. For example, there were numerous applauds to her from a host of families with newborns thanking her for her care and concern. This August 1968 announcement is but one of many thanks to appear she received:



The following clipping from the December 6th, 1962, Calgary Herald clearly establishes how professionally accomplished Dr Trueman was in an earlier phase of her medical career.



Woman Obstetrician Becomes A 'Fellow'

A Calgary woman doctor was one of four candidates from Alberta who recently became Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

Dr. Tess Trueman, specialist in obstetrics and gynaecology successfully completed exams and last week was awarded the title.

Only 13 Canadians were successful in passing the examinations this year.

"The examination results were announced last week," said Dr. Trueman, "but the actual convocation ceremonies take place in Edmonton in January at the annual meeting of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons."

To receive the fellowship doctors must have at least five years of approved training. They then apply to write the examinations which include four written and three oral exams.

With the fellowship Dr. Trueman reached the top in her profession. "This is the final degree in 16 years of studying," she explained. Dr. Trueman received in 1958 her specialist

lege Hospital in Toronto, and another year as senior resident at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal.

Returning to the University of Edmonton Dr. Trueman became senior resident and taught obstetrics and gynaecology.

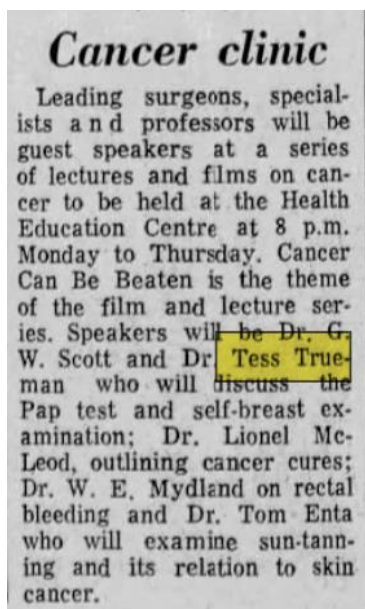
Dr. Trueman enjoys practicing in Calgary. "I deal mainly with young women," she explained. "happy young women."

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Some years later, this brief announcement appeared in the June 2, 1969, Calgary Albertan. These newspaper tidbits speak, I believe, to the high regard Dr Trueman was afforded.

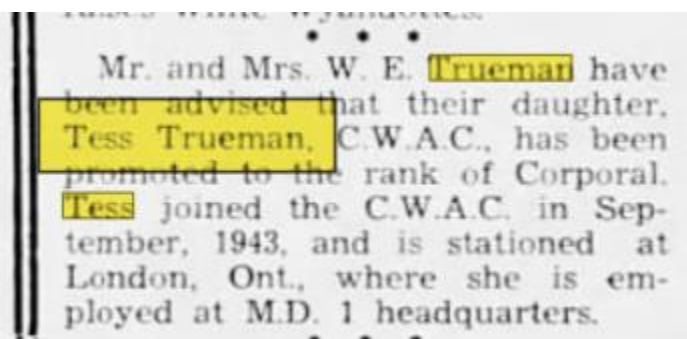


Even Earlier Days

For decades, local papers have published the names of children and young people, people of all ages, who have engaged in sports, school sports, extra-curricular sports of all kinds.

As a youngster, Tess played softball. Other news snippets over the years as well her obituary, document the range of sports activities she both played and excelled in. Among them, fencing and tennis top the list.

As noted in her obituary, she joined the Canadian Women's Army Corps (in 1943 when she was eighteen) and served in Ottawa and then at some point, likely 1945, returned to Alberta just before the end of that terrible war.



She rose through the ranks, achieving Corporal status in September 1943 and later, 2nd Lieutenant and, at war's end, Captain.

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2ND LIEUT. EVELYN G. (TESS)
TRUEMAN

C.W.A.C., who recently graduated from Officers Training Course at Kitchener, Ont. Lieut. Trueman enlisted in the C.W.A.C. in August 1943, taking her basic training at Vermilion. She took the Vocational Training course at Edmonton and from there she went to Toronto for a course in Advance Administration. Upon completion of the course she was posted to H.Q., M.D. No. 1 at London, Ont. After working there for more than a year she was recommended for a commission and went to the Officers Training course at Kitchener. Lieut. Trueman has been posted to Calgary where she will assume her duties after spending a furlough with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. E. Trueman. She has two brothers in the service, Flight Lieut. G. S. Trueman of the R.C.A.F. stationed in Montreal, and Sgt. J. S. Trueman with the Loy Edmonton Regiment in Holland.

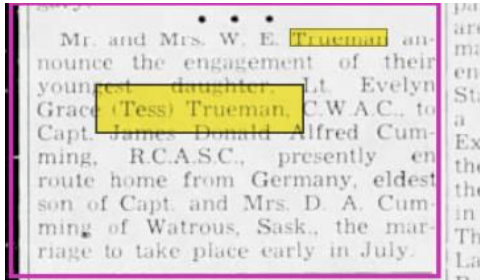
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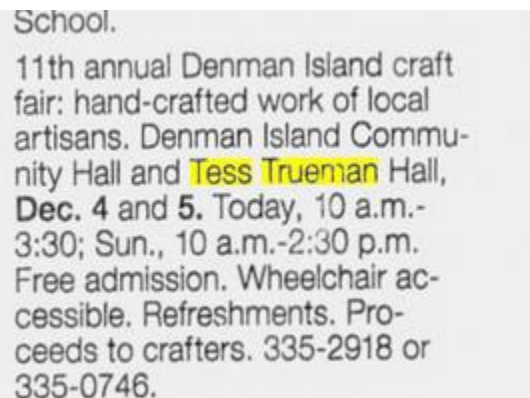
The Post War Years



In June of 1946, Tess became engaged to Captain James Donald Alfred Cumming of Watrous, Saskatchewan. Though the marriage was set for early July, a few weeks after the engagement notice appeared, I could find no record that the nuptials actually occurred. I could find no internet trace of her long-time companion, Ann Watson.

The next few years would see Tess attend university and begin the long journey to become a physician. As noted here and there in this article, Dr. Trueman had an auspicious career but my intent, beyond capturing aspects of her pre-Denman world was to present a meaningful snapshot of her impact locally. Though I have strayed somewhat from that intent, it was, for me at any rate, a pleasant diversion. Whatever else Tess Trueman was known for, remembered about, on Denman, she is best known as the prime initiator of the Denman Activity Centre, formally known as the Denman Seniors and Museum Society and perhaps, colloquially, historically, whispered about by a few, the Tess Trueman Hall. So many names for one complex.

I should note here that this announcement of the 11th annual Denman Island Christmas Fair (*known apparently then as the Denman Island Craft Fair*) which appeared in the Times Colonist on October 26th, 1993, harkens back to a time when the Denman Activity Centre was still referred to as the Tess Trueman Hall



At some point, there appears to have been a shift away from referring to the hall as the Tess Trueman Hall. I will leave it to others to inform about that. Suffice it to say the DSMS has a wealth of appellations not unlike numerous Islanders. Whether it is called “The Seniors” or DAC (The Denman Activity Centre) or the DSMS, it is the same place and a boon to the community.

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Quaint aspects on the Creation of the DSMS (Denman Seniors and Museum Society)

(n.b. I do not intend to give a blow-by-blow description of how the DSMS came into fruition but rather highlight moments that appealed to me.)

With his characteristic graciousness Barry Landeen, the DSMS archivist, afforded me two sessions of a couple of hours in November/early December perusing three folders of documents pertaining to the creation of the DSMS. Additionally, he shared a video to be released in the spring that included a delightful commentary from potter Gord Hutchens about Tess Trueman and her support. As he notes, “She was one of my really good customers.”

Correspondence on file offers some sense of how involved Tess Trueman was in the building/planning/fund raising for the DSMS.

In one letter dated March 31, 1980, she states “...we feel the project will contribute to harmony in the community. We will all be seniors some day...”

Some months later, on October 15th, 1980, the DSMS was incorporated. For the record, the following people were listed on the incorporation papers: Evelyn Grace Tess Trueman, Winnie Russell, Ruby Millard, George Souter, Doras Kirk, Dorothy Rist, Billie Jo Imlach, Elizabeth Souter and Edith Wright.

Early the next year in a January 23rd, 1981, letter to the Deputy Minister of National Revenue, Tess noted “...I usually have a live-in housekeeper but at present am unable to find one and my phone goes unanswered a great deal of the time...”

I found this a charming aside that bespoke of how busy I have to imagine she was. I think it important to also note that though 1981 wasn't all that long ago, it was forty-five years back in time and a world away from the ease that exists *(and here I offer my tongue firmly in my cheek)* these days in terms of communication.

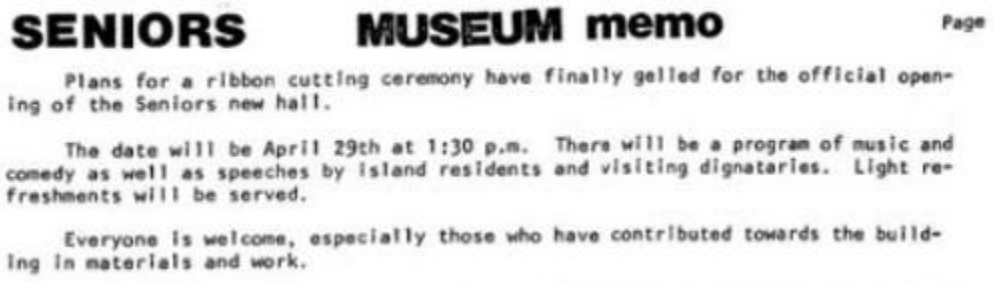
Jumping ahead in time to October 1, 1982, in a letter to P. Vipond, Trust Officer at Four Bentall Centre, a potential funder, Tess notes that “...at the request of the local school board, we have increased the size of the auditorium/gymnasium to satisfy their needs...”

There may be further communication between the DSMS and the local School Board but I was unable to locate any. Regardless, to the best of my knowledge, the School District did not fully utilize the gymnasium for school-based activities *(I stand to be corrected, of course)* and latter on in the 1980's a new school with a full gymnasium was built across the street from the Tess Trueman Hall. The new school and its gymnasium were completed in 1989. School District 71 Director of Operations, Molly Proudfoot confirmed that in an email mid December: “*Our records show the building with gym was completed in 1989.*”

Later in 1982, on September 30th, in a letter to BC Provincial Secretary, Jim Chabot, in what seemed like a time when grant money was somehow stuck, and the fiscal pump needed priming, Tess stated that “...I have agreed to advance \$6300.00 personally to get it underway...this being 10%...”

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An entire year or more would unfold before her efforts and the efforts of the engaged organizational creators would allow them to celebrate their achievement. As I noted in a December 2025 local Facebook Bulletin Board post, the following is an extract from the High Tides, Jan/Feb 1984 edition announcing the upcoming April 29th, 1984, grand opening of the DSMS:



Areas of Tess Trueman's life not fully examined

Someone some day may write Tess Trueman's biography but it likely won't be me. I have not pursued any discussion of her personal life other than to note that an engagement back in 1946 did not lead to the altar. While I have enjoyed searching and noting various aspect of her life, I have satisfied my curiosity or rather my curiosity has taken me as far as I wish.

Her Shuswap Years and Endowment Fund:

Though I was in email contact with the Shuswap Foundation, I was unable to connect with anyone personally familiar with Tess Trueman. That may happen down the road but I will leave those years, the mid to late 1990's, I'm guessing, as summarized below including links both to the Foundation itself and their endowment link.

<https://shuswapfoundation.ca/>

<https://shuswapfoundation.ca/our-funds/fund/dr-tess-trueman-endowment/>

Their website describes much of her life journey and includes the following.

Dr. Trueman worked very hard on community projects on Denman Island. She donated the land and worked on raising money for a very complete Seniors' center. The building has a large sitting room, office, a gymnasium which converts to a dance hall, with a stage which can be a squash court. When Dr. Trueman left Denman to move to the Shuswap, the Seniors' Centre was named Tess Trueman Hall. Tess moved to Shuswap Lake Estates in the second phase of her retirement.

She is a contributor to the Shuswap Foundation's Founders Fund, has her own Tess Trueman Endowment Fund with the Foundation, and was a Director for several years representing the Sorrento area.

Fund Type : Unrestricted

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Fund Balance : \$127,465.64 (As at 2025-06-30)

Final Thoughts

I will end with three observations.

The first: There were numerous public and private stories about Dr. Trueman’s social life, her love of bridge, her sorority/fraternity, Delta Gamma, and at least one other endowment for medical students. As important to her story as they were, I have opted just to make note of them here and move on.

The Second

I was advised by at least two Denman informants that Tess was a dog lover. There was even a vague memory that she may have had a veterinarian moment at one point but, as noted, that was a hazy recollection.

This delightful, somewhat blurry story, however, that appeared in the October 9th, 1945, Edmonton Journal captures an image I think worth including. I have transcribed the caption and added it to the Journal’s story.

“Although no friends of the canine world were on the station platform to welcome him, “Buddy,” mascot with the Loyal Edmonton Regiment did not go short for a welcoming committee. Press flashes of bits of his history preceded him across the continent making him one of the best-known individuals in the regiment. Buddy was born and joined the regiment in Utrecht, Holland. He is seen here just about three seconds after he pushed his photogenic little face out from under the trench coat of Second Lieut. Tess Trueman, sister of Sgt. J.S. Trueman of Red Deer who arrived with the Edmonton’s and who also is in the picture.”



The Third: Here is the last part of Tess’s obituary. On a personal note, I regret that I never had the opportunity to meet her.

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...Tess leaves behind her companion of 35 years, Ann Watson, and many nieces, nephews and friends. Tess and Ann travelled on vacations for many years – to the Maritimes, Barbados, Texas, Arizona and anywhere else with clear skies, warm weather and tennis courts. Tess' family and friends wish to express their thanks to Perlita Dacurin, and to all of Tess' care staff while she was at home, to Dr. Janet Green for her compassionate care and to the sensitive and caring staff at the Senior's Village. At Tess' request, no service or flowers. If you wish, a donation may be made in Tess' name to the Comox Valley Community Foundation, (cvcfoundation.org), 467 Cumberland Road, Courtenay, B.C., V9N 2C5, or to the charity of your choice. Arrangements entrusted to Comox Valley Funeral Home, Courtenay, B.C., 250-334-0707.

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