



## **REMEMBERING**

# **James Sanderson**

January 2, 1919 - September 21, 2016

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James Kenneth Sanderson was born on January 2, 1919, in the coal mining village of Cudworth in Yorkshire. He died September 21, 2016, in Cerwydden Care Home in Duncan.

Kenneth was a man of keen intelligence, which he used to puncture bureaucracy and authority where he saw it being abused, and a storyteller. He grew up in poverty and fought in World War II, but when he spoke of his life, it was always to share clever anecdotes of moments of humor or mischief, never sadness.

Kenneth's childhood in a large, poor family told on him throughout the rest of his life. He had bow legs from rickets, and he looked up the meaning of the word "malnourished" when he overheard a doctor using it to describe him. He learned about gardening and raising rabbits and chickens, because his family had to do such things to supplement their food. His father's laziness, in Kenneth's opinion, kept him from supporting the family.

Most boys in the area went down the coal mine at age 14, but Kenneth did well on the 11 Plus exam and was sent to grammar school. Kenneth was intelligent enough to perceive the injustice in how schoolchildren in those days were treated, or even abused—they were caned if they were late or had the wrong answer, or hadn't finished their assignment. Of course, for poor children, getting to school or finding time to do homework was sometimes more than they could manage. Kenneth dealt with this injustice by being difficult and the class clown. He constantly disrupted classes, except for the classes of a teacher he thought treated children well.

After Kenneth graduated, there were no jobs to be had in Yorkshire, so he went to London with half a crown in his pocket and holes in his shoes. He got a job at a ship's chandler as an accounting clerk, for long hours and little pay. He hated London. He was looked down on for his Yorkshire accent, he was lonely, he had no

money to see any of the sights, and life in a big city was wearing for someone used to the countryside of Yorkshire. The one bright spot was his landlady. She'd had a job playing piano during silent films, and of an evening she entertained her boarders by playing and teaching them the songs. Even in his 90s, Kenneth still sang songs he'd learned from her. He had a rich tenor voice and a wonderful sense of pitch, but didn't think he was much of a singer because his older brother was so much better.

Kenneth attempted to find a job back in Yorkshire, but was dogged by bad luck—he spent all his money traveling to an interview, only to discover that the interviewer, a former classmate who'd always gotten worse grades than Kenneth, had sewn the job up for himself. Then, when he returned to London, he found the Chandler had fired him for interviewing somewhere else, and made sure he couldn't receive unemployment insurance. Finally, his brother-in-law hired him to help paint houses in Yorkshire until he could find a better job.

By this time, however, Kenneth had read the signs that war with Hitler was coming, and he decided it would be better to enlist then rather than waiting for a draft. He joined the RAF, something he later said was one of the best things he ever did. He went in a young naive boy and came out a man, albeit a cynical man when it came to governments and bureaucracy. He served in France and India, running operations rooms for bombers. Kenneth made sergeant easily, and some suggested he become an officer, but he always resisted. The class system was strong in the RAF and he had been passed over other times because of his Yorkshire accent. In this case, he made the decision himself, and wanted nothing to do with being an officer and a part of the authority that could be easily abused.

As in his school days, the tales Kenneth told revealed how he came to have a reputation for being quite a character, or even an outright troublemaker. When in France he was billeted in a barn. At inspection the next morning his superior officer, who had spent the night in a house, reprimanded him for not having his poncho hung up. When he protested that there was nowhere to hang anything, the officer told him to "use his ingenuity." Kenneth's sotto voce reply? "I can't hang it on my bloody ingenuity!"

Then there was the typewriter affair. He had to use a very old typewriter, about which he complained loudly. During a move the typewriter fell off the truck and broke. He was assessed its cost, but he refused to pay, saying he had nothing to do with transporting it. He was called up before an officer, and after protesting his innocence, he said they might as well court martial him, because he would never pay. Of course, Kenneth knew that court martials involved a lot of time and expense, so they were not entered into lightly. In the end they charged him a small fine and told him to get lost. When he went to pay the fine, the paymaster said it was so small it wasn't worth bothering with. So Kenneth never even paid the fine.

During the war he married his wife, Celia, which he said was the other best thing he ever did in his life. Her intelligence and love of learning was an equal match for his own, and she acted as his true partner and support throughout the nearly 73 years they spent together. They had two daughters together, Olwen and Lorna.

After the war, he trained as a teacher and got a job in a Yorkshire village school but

he was restless. The war had taken him to India at the end of a great famine, greatly changing his outlook. With rationing still going on in England, he wanted to move to somewhere where he could own land and grow his own food. Following an ad in a farming paper that promised agricultural work, he emigrated to Canada, coming to Fairbridge. Things did not turn out to be so easy, with no agricultural work actually available, and his teaching certification withheld by the British Government until he paid back the money he'd received as a veteran toward his college tuition. But Kenneth did not give up, and got a job at the sawmill at Honeymoon Bay. He was soon promoted to yard foreman at night. He was even able to buy himself a small car and taught himself to drive. Eventually, he and his wife were able to purchase the land he'd hoped for, first a small farm on Richard's Trail, and then a larger piece of land at Cobble Hill.

When he was finally able to get his teaching papers sent from England, he got a job at Cowichan High School. He liked the students but was not happy with how the school was run, so was pleased when he was transferred to Fairbridge Elementary. He was very well-liked by his students. As one student put it, "he made school fun, but you had to behave." Cowichan Station School was his next assignment. He became principal there, but was able to also continue working in the classroom, which was what he really enjoyed. Because of his childhood as a "difficult" student, and his ideas on how students should be treated, he forged a reputation as someone who could help students who were having difficulties of their own. Many years later, those students still remembered him fondly.

It was during this time that he developed a bowel obstruction, which required surgery. During the surgery he was found to have adhesions from an appendix that had ruptured in the past. It probably happened during his time in India, when he had a severe bout of abdominal pain, but rather than being treated, he was told he was malingering! The surgery marked the beginning of a string of medical problems that lasted his whole life. They resulted in his decision to retire from teaching, and greatly affected his quality of life and his relationships in the long term. His older daughter remembered him as an involved father during her early years, whereas his younger daughter only remembered him as constantly feeling ill.

Kenneth threw himself into his land after he retired from teaching. On the days when he felt well, he farmed, and up to the day when he was physically unable to, he walked the land regularly with his dog. One of his daughters swears that he came to know every tree individually. As he grew older he became concerned that there should be someone to take care of the land, make sure that the trees were protected, and ensure the land would never be built on. He and his wife decided to donate their land as a park, and five months before he died he was able to sign the documents giving the land to the Nature Trust of BC as a park with the name of Sandersons' Royd. Royd is the Yorkshire word for a clearing in the trees.

He lived the last few years of his life at Cerwydden, where he appreciated how well they took care of him, but always missed his land. He said that even when he wasn't well in his house, he could always look out the window and see the trees, and he missed that. Once his wife died, he soon followed her. To the end, he was always mentally sharp, teasing the staff and undoubtedly telling them tales of his childhood and the war.

In his grandchildren's memories, he will always be striding down the trail, dog ranging eagerly ahead, as he points with his walking stick to each tree—which had come down in the last storm, which he was thinking of chopping up for firewood for his stove—and telling stories.

In lieu of flowers, Kenneth would have been pleased if you would donate to Nature Trust of BC

([www.naturetrust.bc.ca](http://www.naturetrust.bc.ca)) for Sandersons' Royd.

