

“CANADA NEEDS YOU”: THE JAN EISENHARDT STORY

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Introduction

An old philosopher once said ‘Whom the Gods wish to destroy they first make angry’ ...I am not angry, far from it, I am raving mad, yes furious, observing with horror the decline in fitness and well-being in the western world. But I do not despair...it has happened before.²

In the words of one of our colleagues “Jan Eisenhardt is a national hero and treasure.”³ Born in Denmark in 1906, Mr. Eisenhardt has spent all of his adult life being an administrator of and role model for physically active living in Canada. His involvement has been at the local, provincial, national and international levels. At all levels, he has made a difference to Canadians.

Methodology

Using narrative inquiry, it is the intent of the authors to tell the story of Jan Eisenhardt, and to also relate the impact that Jan has had upon their lives and the impact that he, in turn, has had upon the lives of their students. Research has been described as being collaborative in nature, that is, a mutually constructed story of the lives of both researcher and participant. Narrative inquiry is portrayed as a process by which information is gathered for the purpose of storytelling.⁴ The aim of narrative inquiry is the understanding of people’s thinking and actions in the situated contexts in which they live through their stories. Narratives are seen as frameworks by which people view, understand, and make sense of their lived experiences. An important consideration for the researcher is how they locate themselves and the voice of their participant(s) in the research.⁵ Through the use of a “multimedia scrapbook”, the authors will construct their own narrative of the life and contributions of Jan Eisenhardt, using his voice, the voices of his family, friends, and colleagues, and their own voices.

Results and Discussion

Jan Eisenhardt came to Canada in 1928 and worked for the Vancouver Parks Board, first as a playground supervisor and then as Supervisor of Playgrounds.⁶ As the Great Depression deepened, Eisenhardt developed and then headed up Pro-Rec, the British Columbia Provincial Recreation Programme, beginning in 1934. This programme is often cited for its innovative approaches to both fitness and unemployment issues. There are numerous accounts of his work in Pro-Rec,⁷ however Bruce Kidd’s 1998 speech about human rights in sports, provides us with not only the details of his beliefs and his approach to delivering services:

Long before the Universal Declaration [on Human Rights], he worked assiduously to provide sports and recreation to all people as a matter of basic right. During the early years of the Depression, as director of parks in Vancouver, he restored a sense of hope to thousands of homeless men and women who rode the rods to that city, by providing havens and sports programs for them in public parks. That accomplishment led to his appointment as the founding director of a provincial program, BC Pro-Rec, the most creative, accessible and female

friendly recreation program in Canadian history. BC Pro-Rec set up free recreation centres wherever there was interest, and trained local leaders to conduct a wide range of programs in them, not just sports. Women constituted the majority of leaders and participants.⁸

By the end of the Depression (1939), BC Pro-Rec was serving 27, 072 registrants with 143 staff in 155 centres throughout the province.⁹

While Eisenhardt was in charge of the Pro-Rec programme, he was also working on the national front as a consultant to the Youth Employment Committee (Y.E.C.) of the National Employment Commission (N.E.C.). In September 1936 he met with representatives of the Y.E.C. to discuss B.C.'s scheme, to help develop recommendations regarding physical training schemes for the unemployed, and to promote the idea of federal funding for provincial projects such as Pro-Rec. His ideas were used by the Y.E.C. in its report to the N.E.C. and subsequently included as part of the thinking of the N.E.C. as it attempted to provide programs to make unemployed young people fit for work. The most well documented program is that part of the Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Program which funded the training of physical recreation leaders in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and New Brunswick by 1940. Also included in the program were projects to provide physical recreation opportunities in training camps for forestry, mining, agriculture, and various occupations. The overall aim of the program was to provide training to unemployed young people.

Eisenhardt's first appearance on the national recreation scene was certainly not his last. The influence of the B.C. Pro-Rec movement spread eastward as Alberta developed a recreation leadership training program using B.C. staff who were on loan from Pro-Rec. Saskatchewan and Manitoba soon also developed programs based on this model. His speeches and articles were cited in numerous publications. And finally, as the National Physical Fitness Act was proclaimed and its attendant organization, the National Council on Physical Fitness was developed, Eisenhardt, now Major Ian Eisenhardt, was hired as National Director of Physical Fitness in 1944. Eisenhardt's contributions were firmly based on the principle of recreation for well-being and recreation making people fit for work - work in recreation leadership and work in other fields.¹⁰

After World War Two, with the federal government's commitment to physical fitness waning, Mr. Eisenhardt worked at the international level with the United Nations. He is reported to have "worked with Eleanor Roosevelt to include parks and recreation centres in the plans for post-war construction. He was later assigned to UNESCO in Paris."¹¹ He returned to Canada to be Supervisor of Physical Education and Recreation, Indian Affairs Branch.¹²

Always a vocal advocate for his beliefs, Ian Eisenhardt found himself under scrutiny. In the words of Bruce Kidd:

...these activities, and his forthrightness in speaking out against his own government's shortcomings, made him enemies and he became the subject of a security investigation. In 1952, he was fired as a security risk, kept under police surveillance, and blacklisted with other employers. Despite repeated efforts, he was never told what the charges were against him. Though at the peak of his career, he never worked in sports and recreation again. ¹³

The story of Jan Eisenhardt's blacklisting has been eloquently told in the National Film Board of Canada film "The Un-Canadians" directed by Len Scher.¹⁴ In this 1996 film:

Speaking publicly about it for the first time, Danish-born Jan Eisenhardt tells Scher how he quickly went from being a high-profile civil servant to being thrown out on the street in 1950. Asking his boss why he was being fired, Eisenhardt was told, "You got more enemies in Ottawa than friends." "My life, my career was finished," Eisenhardt says.¹⁵

After 23 years as a public servant, providing and advocating for sport and recreation services in Canada, Jan Eisenhardt became a private citizen, first running sports facilities in La Tuque, Quebec and then working in Montreal for the Dominion Life Insurance Company.¹⁶ But he certainly did not lose his interest in fitness or in the political process - he ran for the position of mayor of Dorval in 1998.

In 1999 Jan Eisenhardt was finally recognized nationally for his contributions to Canadian sport and physical activity. In March 1999 he was awarded a special Citation of Achievement by Sport Canada. The citation reads as follows:

In recognition of your significant contribution to the development of sport and recreation in Canada. Your visionary understanding of the value of sport and recreation and your pioneering efforts have improved the health and well being of Canadians.¹⁷

In April 1999, he was appointed a member of the Order of Canada. The citation reads as follows:

His pioneering efforts began in the 1930s as Founding Director of the British Columbia Pro-Rec Program. Later, as Chair of the National Council of Physical Fitness and Supervisor of Physical Education and Recreation for the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, he continued to promote the importance of ongoing physical fitness, long before it was popular. His vision and determination led to the improvement of the health and well-being of countless Canadians.¹⁸

Vancouver, the city in which he began his professional career, finally honoured him as one of its pioneers in the summer of 2001. In keeping with his commitment to physical activity, the events included not just speeches and dinners, but also a four kilometre "I Ran With Jan" run/walk.¹⁹

Mr. Eisenhardt continued to be a role model for physically active living. In 1999 he ran in a race from his native Denmark to Sweden. In 2000 he participated in the Trans-Canada Trail Relay and is described as being "a vigorous supporter of the Trans-Canada Trail."²⁰ As recently as October 2002, Mr. Eisenhardt was featured in a front page article in the Globe and Mail by sportswriter James Christie. Mr. Eisenhardt had recently completed the 13.5 kilometre Eremitage Run in his native Denmark... a run in which he had won the junior division in 1920.

In June 2004, at the age of 98, Jan Eisenhardt was the recipient of an honorary degree from Malaspina University-College. He gave outstanding public service through his leadership of the early efforts to promote physically active living and assistance to the unemployed. He died on December 26, 2004. His leadership continues to be a model for both those who provide services and those who act as advocates for services to the less fortunate as we continue in the 21st century.

We have each been impacted by Jan Eisenhardt's work. When Susan first began teaching the Recreation History course at the University of Alberta, she used Elsie McFarland's book *The Development of Public Recreation in Canada*. Tom was one of the students in that course. Elsie referred to Jan as "the handsome young Dane"²¹ who became director of the B.C. Pro-Rec Program. Susan read many references to him in various archival collections, but knew very little about his life after his government work until Peter Donnelly and Bruce Kidd told the Sport Historians about Jan's life after being blacklisted. Finally, 20 years later we both finally met that "handsome young Dane" in May 2004 at his home in Dorval, Quebec. We sat like two little kids, totally mesmerized by his stories. We spend two wonderful days with Jan and his family when he received the honorary degree; and were incredibly moved by his presentation at the showing of "The Un-Canadians" the day after he received the degree. One of the most moving moments of Convocation for us was following the procession into the Port Theatre in Nanaimo, when we all stood to sing "O Canada". Beside us was 98 year old Jan Eisenhardt, belting out the anthem strong and clear. Tears streamed down our faces as we thought of the man beside us who had been so shabbily treated by his government yet still took great pride in his country. This New Year, we toasted Jan Eisenhardt, and others like him, who continue to inspire us and give so much of themselves to our country.

Endnotes

² Jan Eisenhardt, June 2004, Convocation Address, Malaspina University-College.

³ Peter Donnelly, email to Sport History Scholars E-mail List, 25 August 1998.

⁴ Connelly, F. Michael and D. Jean Clandinin. (1989). Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience. Toronto: OISE Press.

⁵ <http://labweb.education.wisc.edu/cni916/project/narratv.htm>

⁶ Elsie M. McFarland, *The Development of Public Recreation in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Parks/Recreation Association), 49, citing an interview with Eisenhardt in Montreal, February 20, 1967.

⁷ For example: P. Barbara Schrod, "A History of Pro-Rec: The British Columbia Provincial Recreation Programme, 1934 to 1953" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta, 1979) and Barbara Schrod, "Federal Programmes of Physical Recreation and Fitness: The Contributions of Ian Eisenhardt and BC's Pro-Rec," *Canadian Journal of the History of Sport and Physical Education* 15, no. 2 (December 1984): 45-61.

⁸ Bruce Kidd, "Human Rights in Sports" speech given at the International Sociology of Sport Association, August 1998. This address was given in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. [originally sent to Sport History Scholars E-mail List, 25 August 1998, by Peter Donnelly].

⁹ British Columbia, *Public Schools Report, 1938-39*, p. H80; see also The Homeroom "Pro-Rec" at www.mala.bc.ca/homeroom/Content/Topics/Programs/pro-rec.htm

- ¹⁰ Susan E. Markham, "Advocates for National Recreation Services in the 1930's," In *Access to Active Living: Proceedings of the 10th Commonwealth and International Scientific Congress*, ed. F. I. Bell and G. H. V. Gyn. (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1994), 87-92.
- ¹¹ Dan Smith, Director General of Sport Canada, Presentation Speech given at the Canadian Sports Awards, Toronto, 16 March, 1999 [originally sent to Sport History Scholars E-mail List, 7 April 1999, by Peter Donnelly].
- ¹² Ian Eisenhardt, "The Canadian Red Man of Today," *Journal of the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation*, June 1951. [the terminology was certainly of the time]
- ¹³ Bruce Kidd, "Human Rights in Sports."
- ¹⁴ *The Un-Canadians*, dir. Len Scher, prod. Joanne Smale and Michael Allder, 72 min., National Film Board of Canada, 1996, videocassette.
- ¹⁵ "The True North Not So Free/Two Shows Expose Canada's Dirty Secrets," *Toronto Sun*, 29 January 1997.
- ¹⁶ "Fitness Pioneer, Still Running Races at 95, To Be Honoured By Vancouver Park Board," *Vancouver Sun*, 14 July 2001.
- ¹⁷ Presentation Speech by Dan Smith.
- ¹⁸ Order of Canada website http://www.gg.ca/cgi-bin/oc_details.pl?lang=e&rec_id=1254
- ¹⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 14 July 2001.
- ²⁰ "Have fun, go for a run – at 94," *Maclean's*, 4 September 2000, website www.macleans.ca.
- ²¹ Elsie McFarland, 1970, p. 49.

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