

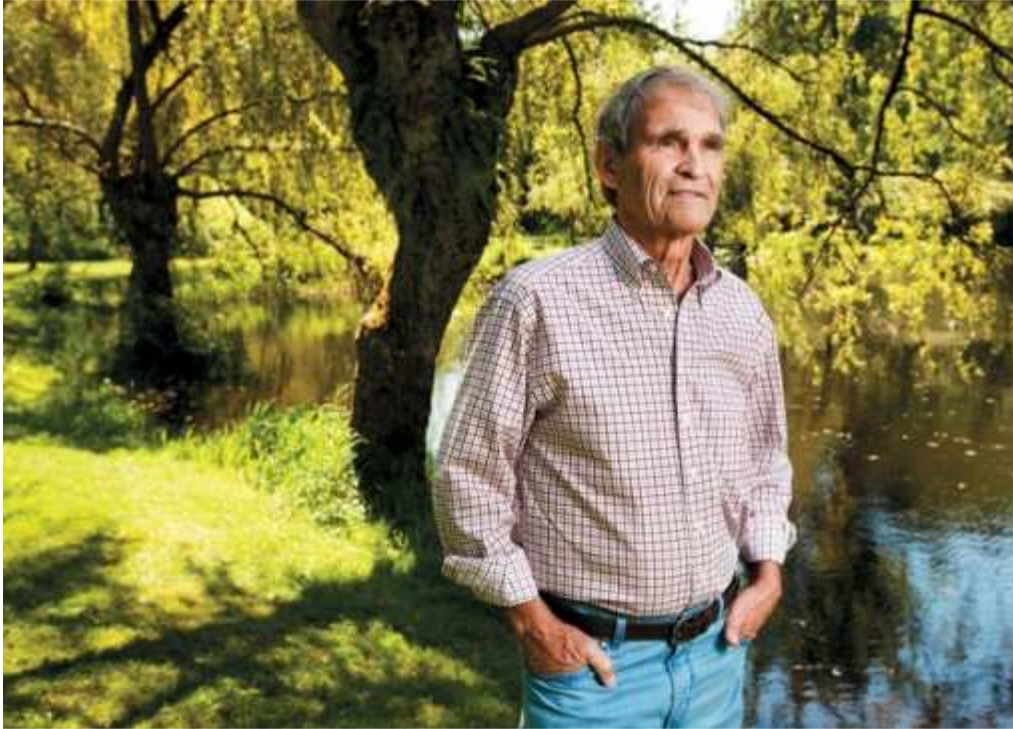
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Life and Times of VANOC Chairman Jack Poole

Gary Mason

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**He lived long enough to see the Olympic flame [lit in Athens](#), but not long enough to see it arrive in Vancouver. Jack Wilson Poole, the chairman of the Vancouver Organizing Committee, [died in Vancouver](#) in the early hours of October 23, 2009. He was 76. This profile originally ran in July 2009.**

**[Photo Slideshow](#)**

**The Extraordinary Life of Jack Poole**

IT WAS THE ONLY MOMENT in his life when Jack Poole questioned whether the challenge he faced was simply too daunting. The one time when he needed to hear the pep talk rather than give it.

It was September 2007, and the developer and chairman of VANOC was a patient at Virginia Mason Medical Centre, a Seattle hospital. Poole had recently been diagnosed



with pancreatic cancer, the deadliest of all forms of the disease. The survival rate is less than five per cent. Virginia Mason is known for a treatment protocol that combines heavy blasts of radiation and chemotherapy – a therapy so radical it's not offered in Canada. But it boasts a survival rate of 55 per cent.

“They give you radiation every day for 40 days,” says Poole, at his downtown Vancouver office overlooking Burrard Inlet. “And they give you chemo three times a week on top of it. It puts you on your knees.”

He was sick to his stomach every day, violently heaving. Halfway through his stay, he developed an infection. He lost 30 pounds. Friends who came to visit him, including his partner at Concert Properties Ltd., David Podmore, and VANOC CEO John Furlong, barely recognized the man they had come to know and care for so deeply. “After getting through the infection, I was pretty weak and I said to the oncologist, ‘Is there a case to be made here for just saying enough’s enough?’” the 76-year-old Poole recalls. “He said, ‘Listen, we’re playing for big stakes. You’ll get through this, I promise. We’re not going to quit.’”

Poole didn't, and months later – back home in the Olympic spotlight, back in the arms of those he loved – he got the best news he could receive: he was cancer-free. If he's still cancer-free when he goes in for his checkup this month, there is an 80 per cent chance he's cured. “There is a part of the whole experience that is exciting, believe it or not,” he says, offering a wry smile. “It's a fight and it has to hurt. Every time you win something, it has to hurt a bit, doesn't it?”

Jack Poole is a man who's won more often than he's lost. Today he stands atop the Vancouver establishment, a legendary builder and businessman with some of the most impressive corporate connections in the city. His close friends are many and include everyone from Premier Gordon Campbell to Canaccord Capital chairman Peter Brown to construction magnate Hugh Magee, and he engenders a fierce loyalty among them all. Poole's chairmanship of VANOC will likely be the final entry in one of the most impressive work resumés in the country. That is why, with the Olympics closing in, it's a perfect time to take a closer look at what has been an extraordinary life.

THERE IS PROBABLY no better place to start than Mortlach, Saskatchewan (population 254), where Poole grew up in a house with no indoor plumbing or running water and no electricity. He was a Depression baby, born on April 14, 1933, to Edith and John Poole. John was a grain dealer who gave his son almost five per cent Cree blood and a Métis status of which he would be forever proud.

Poole idolized his parents, even his alcoholic father, who ruined many a Christmas by getting drunk before noon. But away from the bottle, John Poole instilled in his son two important values: don't be quick to judge others, and live your life with integrity. He regularly bathed his son in praise, which helped build a high self-esteem not common among children of alcoholics.

Jack Poole and his two older siblings went to the same two-room school from Grades 1 to 12. He enjoys telling others that he graduated second in his class; there were only two in it (he finished behind classmate Helen Forbes). The younger Poole developed into a big, strapping kid and a promising hockey defenceman. His father, and others, told him he had NHL potential. But then, when he was 15, everything changed.

Poole was working on a highway paving crew for the summer outside Lloydminster. The construction camp was a few miles from town. One night Poole and a few friends decided to walk to the big city for a little fun. It was dark. Sixty years later, Poole still recalls the sound of the car engine and a fan turning. He turned in time to see a silver fender. Next thing he knew, he was in a ditch.

“I looked down at my leg and there was just skin holding it on,” says Poole matter-of-factly. “My right foot was turned at a right angle. I was covered in gravel. My immediate thought was, ‘That's the end of hockey.’” Meantime, my best friend, Bert Kilbach, was lying on the ground in horrible shape. The car's hood ornament

went in his back and out through his chest. He got killed, I got broken and the other two got off scot-free. It was a lesson in what can happen in life, how your life can change in just a flash.”

That next year, Poole would learn that his high school girlfriend, Marilyn Pollock, was pregnant. The young couple quickly got married, giving birth to a girl named Gwen; another girl, named Anne, would follow two years later. By this time, Poole had enrolled in civil engineering at the University of Saskatchewan. Poole had worked on construction sites since the age of 14. The dust from job sites got in his blood. For him there was nothing quite like it, and when he went to school there was no question what he wanted to do: get educated so he could one day run those job sites he worked on as a young man.

Poole was 22 and living in Calgary when Marilyn gave birth to the couple’s third child, a boy named William John. He was born with myelomeningocele, the most severe form of spina bifida, a malformation of the spinal cord. The child’s spinal cord and lining protruded from an opening in the spine. Doctors told Poole the child could live six weeks or 30 years. “But it would never be a life,” says Poole, who would have two more daughters – Judy and Kelly – in the years following. “I had a terrible decision to make. I didn’t want my wife to see the child anymore, to know that. There was a Catholic facility in Calgary that looked after cases like that, so after they released him from hospital I picked him up and took him there. His head grew . . .”

Poole spreads his hands to approximate the size of a watermelon.

“It was a terrible thing to see. It was awful. He never had a life. It was a terrible thing to have to deal with. But I just couldn’t see bringing him home. It was hopeless.” Little William John would die nine months later.

Poole had a bank loan at the time. He was making \$400 a month working as a trainee in Gulf Oil’s clerical division; the health facility in Calgary was charging \$100 a month to take care of the child, which was more than he could afford. He went to the bank to explain his problem, and his banker said he’d put the loan on ice until Poole had the money to pay it off. “It was a real lesson for me,” he says. “Never keep secrets from your banker.” Poole supplemented his meagre salary at Gulf Oil by selling Fuller Brush door to door, making more money doing that part time than he earned at his office job. But there was nothing about the sales life that tempted Poole to do it for a living.

Finally, in 1956, Poole made a move into what would become his life’s calling: the home-building business. He got a job heading the construction division of Engineered Homes in Edmonton. Seven years after he started, Poole opened up a West Coast office based in Vancouver. The company soon won a bid to build a hundred homes for Endaco Mines in Fraser Lake, but partway through that contract Engineered Homes encountered financial problems. Management wanted Poole to return to Calgary. He didn’t want to leave Vancouver, so he began looking for a partner to buy out the contract Engineered Homes had in B.C. and start a company of his own.

That’s when he found Graham Dawson. Poole had never met the renowned builder before – Dawson’s father built the Burrard Street Bridge – but one of Dawson’s companies was subcontracting sewer and water work for the Engineered Homes project at Fraser Lake. Poole’s Fuller Brush days prepared him for the cold call he would make on Dawson. “I said, ‘This is what I’d like to do. We can buy the business by taking over their payables and still make a \$90,000 profit.’ I said, ‘I don’t have any money, but I’ll sign over everything I’ve got’” – which at the time was title to a house in West Vancouver.

Dawson would put up the money. Poole would run the business. And so it was that Daon Development Corp. was born.

In the beginning, Daon built housing in resource towns from Prince Rupert to Port Alice. The story goes that Poole’s company hired a young worker named Gordon Campbell as a general labourer on a housing project at Babine Lake. The one-day premier was paid \$2.84 an hour for his first real job. Years later Campbell would be

instrumental in choosing Poole as chairman of the Olympic operation, leading the two friends to joke that Jack Poole gave Gordon Campbell his first job and Gordon Campbell gave Jack Poole his last.

Daon eventually became a development empire with 900 employees, five offices in Canada and nine in the U.S. The company built tens of thousands of homes in both countries and acquired tens of thousands of rental apartments it converted to condominium ownership. It also developed several million square feet of office, retail and commercial space.

The spectacular rise and equally stunning fall of Daon is one of the most celebrated stories in Canadian business history. And there is nothing quite like hearing it told by the person who was at the centre of it. He could take the story on tour. In fact, in 1984 he gave a presentation in Toronto to the Urban Development Institute on what happened that those in attendance still talk about, so open and honest was Poole about the travails of the company and the personal impact it had on him.

The abridged version goes something like this: Big development company borrows billions to build projects throughout North America. And then interest rates begin climbing to unforeseen levels. “We built the company on debt,” says Poole. “We were extremely successful but had not factored into our plans the recession of 1982 and interest rates of 23 per cent. Business stopped. You couldn’t sell anything and we owed \$2.3 billion to 47 banks and couldn’t pay the interest.”

Poole was, understandably, a mess. His predicament was making him physically ill. The meetings with the banks were often loud and angry. “One meeting it was getting pretty rough and nasty,” Poole recalls. “And at one point they’re making it pretty clear; it’s like, ‘You know we’re going to put you under on Monday, don’t you?’ And I remember saying, ‘Look, I grew up in a little town in Saskatchewan. I didn’t have electricity until I was 17. No running water. I came from nothing. And I can go back to that. I can. But if you want me to stay and work this thing through, I will. If you don’t, I’m happy to leave. But don’t threaten me.’”

After that, the whole mood in the room changed, Poole remembers. Any time things got hostile in subsequent meetings, Poole’s lawyer, Ken Levanthol, would take him aside and say, “Tell them the ‘no electricity’ story again.” With Levanthol’s help, Poole put together a plan that saw the company go into protection but not bankruptcy. It took two years and \$23 million in legal fees to find a way through it all, with the banks essentially taking shares in the company. But they would all get their money back eventually. “My personal wealth went from a paper worth of \$100 million to a negative worth of \$5 million,” Poole says.

At the same time, his marriage of 33 years was falling apart. When he and Marilyn finally divorced in 1983, Poole lost pretty much everything in the settlement: the big house in West Vancouver, cars, money (he got the debts). Looking back, Poole says he will never forget those who stuck by him when it was easy to run or turn their back. He also remembers those who didn’t – some of whom, he says, even have the nerve to phone him up today. “Looking for Olympic tickets,” he says with a laugh.

THE YEARS IMMEDIATELY following the collapse of Daon were some of the most challenging – and happy – of Jack Poole’s life.

It was around this time that he was introduced to Darlene Young, who was working for the public relations firm McFarlane, Morris and Peacock. The two struck up a romance that would help stabilize Poole’s life at a time when he needed all the calming influences he could find. They married four years later, in 1987.

Darlene, as it turns out, was friends with Paul Manning, the one-time Liberal whiz kid and speech writer for Pierre Trudeau. She worked on both of Manning’s failed federal campaigns in Vancouver for elected office. Through Darlene, Manning and Poole would become good friends. Maybe it was through osmosis that Poole caught the political bug himself.

“Not a lot of people know this story,” Manning tells me one day over coffee at the Hotel Vancouver. “But Jack almost became the leader of the Liberal party in B.C.”

It was the late '80s and the provincial Liberal party was a moribund institution, led by a little-known economics professor and pig farmer from the Sunshine Coast named Gordon Wilson. Poole had been recruited by some people to replace him.

As the Social Credit party under Bill Vander Zalm continued to self-destruct, Poole quietly set up a team to study the situation and brief him on issues. He put together a campaign team. Among those working behind the scenes was Colin Hansen, who would later become provincial finance minister. When Social Credit MLA Kim Campbell resigned her seat in Point Grey to run for federal politics, many of those around Poole advised him to announce he would be running as a Liberal candidate in the byelection. A campaign bus was ordered. A readiness plan was put in place.

“We were going to take Jack on the road with the Cloverdale Rodeo Band,” Manning recalls. “We were going to travel the province signing up new members for the Liberal party. Jack was going to give great speeches and even sing a few songs.”

An announcement was drafted.

But something told Manning that his friend had an underlying reluctance to make the jump. The fact was, it was likely going to take two elections before the Liberals under Poole would be any kind of force in B.C. politics. That was quite a commitment of time. While there were many around Poole who felt his good looks and charisma – not to mention his business experience and grasp of most issues – made him a political star-in-waiting, Manning wasn't so sure. Poole was a cut-to-the-chase guy who always took the most direct path to whatever he wanted. Politics didn't work that way.

Politics is the art of compromise, and Manning thought that aspect of it might drive his friend crazy. He eventually talked him out of running. “And Jack has thanked me ever since,” Manning says. “And it paved the way for Gordon Campbell to eventually take over the party anyway. So it worked out for everyone.”

Poole admits now he didn't have the mental makeup to be a politician. “In the end, I don't think I had the jam or the stomach for politics,” he says. “There are parts of it that just aren't any fun at all.”

Around the time of his brief flirtation with politics, Poole was introduced by Canaccord's Peter Brown to a young developer named David Podmore. Podmore, who headed the BC Pavilion Corp., had made a name for himself through his work for the provincial government on Expo 86. Poole and Podmore hit it off immediately. In fact, Podmore began working for Poole the day after they met, and a couple of years later, on June 1, 1989, the two formed VLC Properties, a company designed to build rental properties in Vancouver on land provided by the city. The company capitalized that fall at \$27 million and went on from there.

VLC eventually became Greystone Properties, which eventually became Concert Properties Ltd., an evolution born of various tax strategies related to the pension investments that were the foundation of the company. VLC had promised to build 2,000 rental units a year in the city but never achieved that goal. It stopped after 1,800 units were constructed on properties under long-term lease from the city. The company couldn't build any more because the city stopped providing the land.

Originally, VLC started as a “public-private-pension” venture, with joint ownership from the province and city, two Canadian banks, 26 deep-pocketed individuals (including real estate developers Bob Lee and Milan Ilich) and 26 pension funds. When Poole and Podmore started investigating what was the most appropriate way for the pension funds to be invested in real estate, they concluded the company should be created as a tax-exempt

real estate corporation eligible only for investment by pension funds. So in 1992, the company converted to just that.

From its modest VLC beginnings, Concert now boasts working capital approaching \$750 million and an asset base of just under \$1.5 billion. Poole says Concert will never become as big as Daon was – and he wouldn't want it to be. "It's a much different balance sheet," he says. "It's not leveraged that way. I'd never go that route again. Over half of our current balance sheet is cash equity."

For Podmore, Poole became an invaluable mentor who would teach him many things, such as the art of boiling complex issues down to their most basic terms. Through the way he conducted himself, Poole also taught Podmore the importance of more ethereal qualities such as loyalty, trust and honour. "When we first formed the company in 1989, I was called executive vice-president and Jack was president, CEO and chairman," says Podmore, beginning a story he says illustrates the kind of person Poole is. "He said to me, 'Look, in 1992 we're going to make you president.' After that I completely forgot about that conversation. It didn't matter to me.

"Well, on June 1, 1992, the three-year anniversary of the company, Jack walks into the office and says, 'Well, it's June 1, 1992, you're now the president. And you get my office.' I said, 'You're my partner; you have to stay here.' He said, 'Nope, you're going to be president and CEO and you can't have the old CEO hanging around with everyone thinking all your decisions are ultimately mine.'"

So Jack Poole moved out.

PODMORE'S STORY about the handover of power at Concert explains, in no small part, how Poole has managed to attract such a diverse and fiercely devout group of friends over the years. There's his vacation gang, which often goes on bike tours in Europe and includes Nelson Skalbania, Peter Brown, Bob Lee, Bob Edward and all their wives. Then there are his buddies at Western Corporate Enterprises Inc., a Vancouver-based company that looks for investment opportunities in other businesses, which Poole co-owns with Bill Levine, David Mindell and Ross Turner. (Poole is a partner in several businesses, including marinas, auto dealerships, shopping centres and golf courses.) And then there is another group of friends that includes David Podmore, Paul Manning and John Furlong – individuals with whom he mixes business and pleasure.

What strikes you when you listen to any of them talk about Poole is the near reverence they have for him. "I think of him sort of like John F. Kennedy back in his day," says Hugh Magee, chairman of Gwil Industries Inc., over the phone one day. "Kennedy had that international reputation for charisma and everybody loved him. Well, Jack's that way. And he also has this uncanny ability to walk in late on a discussion or debate and destroy the whole thing with a one-liner of logic." A friend and business partner of Poole's for 38 years, Magee continues: "I really think everybody wants to touch Jack, and they all want to be touched by him too. It's a charisma that's not explainable. He draws people to him."

Bob Lee tells the story of how the Pooles, who are among the top philanthropists in B.C., had donated \$3 million toward the purchase of a surgery robot for Vancouver General. But a little more than \$2 million more was needed for operating costs. "So Hugh phoned me up and said, 'Let's phone 23 people up and get them to donate \$100,000 each and we've got the \$2.3 million.' So we came up with a list."

The pair raised the money in three days.

"You'd only do that for someone like Jack," says Lee.

There are a few characteristics of Poole that all the friends I talked to remarked on. One is the fact that none had ever seen him complain or feel sorry for himself, no matter how bad things were.

John Furlong recalls the day Poole told him he had pancreatic cancer. “It was like he was telling me he had a pimple on his nose or listening to someone describe how he changed the oil in his car. He was telling me about the outcome and survival rate for the disease, and he was emotionless. He was going to battle it and wasn’t going to allow himself to think about a negative ending. As I listened to him talk, I couldn’t help thinking about an old saying of my father’s: If I was twice the man I was, I’d be half the man he is.”

At a party for Poole’s 70th birthday, Peter Brown gave a toast to the friend he described as a “country boy in a big city costume.” He called Poole a mature man with a boy’s heart, complex yet simple: “A man of strong principles who avoids confrontation . . . a delegating perfectionist and a perfectionist at delegating.”

If you’re looking for enemies of Jack Poole, you’ll need to look hard. In Vancouver you won’t find anyone willing or wanting to say a negative word about the man, except perhaps Chris Shaw, spokesperson for 2010 Watch, who believes Poole represents the corporatist agenda of the Olympics.

“[Poole] was chosen because the bid is completely about getting money for special interests from the public purse and he has shown an ability to do just this,” Shaw told the Vancouver Sun in a 2003 interview.

But in the broad circles Poole has moved in over the years, most everyone who has dealt with the man has become an admirer.

“He’s impossible not to like,” says Lee.

IN JULY 2001, Poole was 68 and enjoying semi-retirement, dabbling in some business ventures, playing golf in the Fraser Valley and looking after Hycrest – the sprawling, 20-hectare estate he and his wife own in Mission – when his phone rang. The provincial government was looking for someone to lead Vancouver’s bid for the Olympics. Premier Gordon Campbell suggested the search committee consider Poole.

Poole didn’t know a thing about how you went about winning an Olympic bid. “Actually,” he says laughing. “It was worse than that. I’ll admit to being a total fraud in terms of anything to do with the Olympics. I’d never even been to a Games. Watched them on television, but that’s about it.”

The committee had found its man. And Poole agreed to take the job for \$1 a year and pay for any expenses out of his own pocket.

While no Olympic organizing committee ever escapes controversy in the years leading up to the Games, VANOC has encountered fewer firestorms than almost any committee in the last 50 years. Ask Poole about some of the tempests surrounding these Olympics, however, and the competitive juices begin to roil. Mention a particular issue, such as the casino at Hastings Racecourse complaining about the money it’s going to lose having to shut down during those two weeks next February, and Poole sits straight in his chair and clasps his hands and offers one of those smiles that says, I’m going to have to watch myself here.

“We’re in a provincial election campaign,” he says. “That’s what all this shit is about. I was so angry with the way [Great Canadian Gaming Corp., owners of Hastings Racecourse] played that situation because that was part of the lease deal it signed two years ago, for God’s sake. It was a commercial transaction between it and the city. They knew they wouldn’t pay rent for the time the Olympics were on. Suddenly, it’s VANOC saying it can’t operate. Someone feeds it to the NDP. That stuff kind of sickens you, it really does.”

And don’t even mention what are and what aren’t true Olympic costs. The f-bombs start flying and somewhere in his tirade he’ll be saying, “Why not throw Golden Ears Bridge into the costs too, and the Mary Hill Bypass and the Lougheed Highway if it makes you feel better? People talk like some of this stuff would never have

been built, like the RAV line. That's crazy. We need more rapid transit in Greater Vancouver. The Olympics were the catalyst to get it done."

One of the early controversies Poole had to face was over one of his first decisions: hiring the relatively unknown John Furlong to handle day-to-day operations. Poole still bristles when he's reminded of Canadian IOC member Dick Pound's public rebuke of the hiring, saying it was nothing more than a political appointment. "[Pound's] reputation was such that nothing would surprise you," Poole responds. But he remains confident that Furlong's leadership over the past seven years has been key to the success of VANOC: "One of the things God gave me was the ability to recognize talent, and it's been one of my great strengths. Anything I've achieved is because of the people I've hired to do it – and John's a superstar."

Poole had no intention of remaining as chair of VANOC until the Olympics began. After Vancouver won the bid; he thought he'd hang around another year and then hand the job off to someone else. Well, Furlong was having none of that. The pair made too good a team. Then when Poole was diagnosed with cancer in 2007, some thought that might signal his exit – but 18 months later he was back in the spotlight, looking awfully wan and colourless at first. For someone who takes such pride in his appearance, it couldn't have been easy to step back into the public looking the way he did. But Poole never hesitated.

"It probably helped my recovery to get back on board," he says today, appearing far healthier than he did earlier this year. "I looked like a cadaver there for a while, but it was important I get back to work. Now we're almost there."

Poole unfolds himself from his chair and walks over to the wall in his office where there is a black-and-white picture of a town street that looks like it could be Tombstone, Texas. It shows a solid string of old clapboard buildings.

"It's downtown Mortlach," says Poole. "That building there used to be a grocery store, and that was a billiards hall. I think that was a hardware store at one time. That's the church."

He studies the photo for a few seconds.

"Seems like a long time ago now."

Then he turns and laughs.

"I guess it was."