

Home Grown Thoughts and Memories

by Sam Roddan

Our family life at Ocean Park, and more particularly Crescent Beach, goes back nearly half a century. It was in this country we came to cherish our identity, find out who we really were, discover how myth and memory become part of history.

Many of our old friends now live in the mists of time. Their ashes sprinkled and their bodies buried in distant lands, but that doesn't erase stories of the Boer War, bear hunts in the wilds of British Columbia, the love of garden and beaches of our first neighbour, Tom Hallas.

And it was from other neighbours, Con and Helen Murphy whose sense of history 'and what really happened' became part of our every encounter and Con's mark still remains in the signpost he made for our home.

The history of the First World War and the Battle of Vimy Ridge were central in every conversation I had with my friend The Rev. Ralph Hardy. Ralph served in the Signal Corps and his book is a faithful record of a soldier's brutal life spent in the trenches.

"War is hell," he used to say. And because he was a clergyman, he spoke with the voice of authority of one who had been there. And like another old soldier, Miller Lougheed, who at morning coffee at Camp Alexandra often wore his Great Coat with the arm torn and ripped by shrapnel from his own battle experience at the Somme.

In the early days, (for us) George Gardiner's store on Beecher Street was a meeting place for old timers. It was here, while picking up your bacon and eggs, cheese and bread for the week, Mr. Gardiner would get out his diary and tell you what the weather was like, five, ten, or only last year, right here in Crescent or Ocean Park. I never paid cash at Gardiner's store. Every purchase was carefully recorded in a little notebook and payable at the end of each month. It was Mr. Gardiner who chased my weekly cheque from the CBC where for three years I scripted the radio program, Eventide. I was a school teacher then but I spent most of the time on a Saturday typing my script in my car at Blackie's Spit to escape the noise of our boisterous and very young family.

In those ancient days, we spent hours beachcombing toward Ocean Park. In the distance we could often see Hugo Petersen 'putting' along in his crab boat and heading for the old oyster beds to Ward's Marina. And nearby were always the Hadden boys and their crab boats laying wait for the tides up the Nicomekl. Years ago I got to know Harry Gerow, one of the many crabbers who made his home around Crescent Beach. Harry was well into his 80s, had the gaunt look of a sea rover. Hands were like baseball mitts, voice deep and rich as the fog horn off Point Atkinson.

"Most men are fogged up with hopeless dreams," he would say. "Don't know their history, can't read a chart, box a compass, tie a reef knot, keep a wife happy."

My church loyalties had always been with First United Mission in Downtown Eastside, Vancouver, but Huddy, partner and guide for many years, had a close relationship with Mrs. Johnson, longtime organist and choir leader at Crescent United. And it was here that members like the McPhees, the Wights, Anne McArthur and the Shannons were always in place in their pews.

It is impossible to 'make a long story short' but it was Jack Morrison one of Crescent Beach's best known realtors who showed us our first lot on Cedar Drive. And over the years I had good dealings with Pete Cotton and Archie McArthur, who knew the history of every lot around Ocean Park.

Crescent Park School and the Annex were busy and famous places in the early days. No one could forget Mr. White who ruled his school with the threat and power of a ping pong bat. Nor the firm but gracious Mrs. Stewart in command at the Annex. And where now is Mr. Jones who served so graciously as principal for, it seemed, a lifetime.

One of the most famous beachcombers of all time was Norm MacDonald, longtime principal at South Burnaby High School. Norm

was my first principal back in 1939. No empty beer can was safe from the sharp eye of Norm MacDonald who gave all his earnings to charity. Norm was a tough no-nonsense principal.

"Sam," he would say. "Never turn your back on a class. Keep your eyes to the front. Look the students in the eye. And never, never shut yours for the Lord's Prayer in the morning."

A long procession of men and women, most of them now gone but part of our history touched our lives ... the Charles family, Glen Senev, Norm Smith, Stu Gifford, Dr. Rose, Bill Docharty, and the Tuttle, all famous in their own right. And then there were the Sagers, the Colemans, the Kerwoods, the Herons, Bill McIntyre.

Who could forget Mac Sanford, retired teacher from Kitsilano High School in Vancouver. Mac was the official historian of Ocean Park and friend of many, especially Professor J. K. Henry, nephew of Kaye Lamb of Elgin who later, for many years was Dominion archivist in Ottawa.

Sometimes the United Church held a Sunrise Service at Easter at Blackie's Spit. Many families have quietly sprinkled the ashes of their loved ones on the tidal waters. On occasion, if it was an Easter Sunday, I imagined the white puff of the ashes helped on their long journey by the voices of the worshippers in hymns of Resurrection.

The morning shall awaken,
The shadows shall decay,
And each true-hearted servant
Shall shine as doth the day.

I have succumbed to many passions in my time ... I also know I am a poor model of religious affirmation but when the spirit does move me, I see, in the bright sun over Crescent and Ocean Park, a great and cheery congregation. And the members, like us all, saints and sinners, blessed with golden beaches, sunlit streets. Near to places they call home.

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"The public has an insatiable curiosity to know everything except what is worth knowing." — Oscar Wilde