

Vancouver Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

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Comrade Dad: A Father and a Vancouver Bookstore

April Speaker: Karin Lee

The story of Comrade Dad is a quintessentially Vancouver story. Presented as a half hour DVD followed by an engaging talk and discussion, Karin Lee presents the story of a Chinese-Canadian family's journey through a particular period in time, the late 60s to the early 80s. It is a story about conflicted family, which, with equal amounts of idealism and stubbornness, marginalized itself within the greater society of the time.

Writer/director Karin Lee reflects on her father Wally Lee and the communist bookstore that he ran on Vancouver's Skid Row from the mid-1960s until the early 1980s.

This experimental biography of archival documentary photographs and footage, explores both the person and the effect that his ideological beliefs had on his family, set within the political landscapes of Canada and China at the time of the Cultural Revolution. It is also a little known story about how a segment of Vancouver's Chinese community embraced Chinese socialism and how their idealism was affected by a changing political climate in China. This work is not only about memory and the filmmaker's relationship with her fa-



ther, but also about questioning his place within a divided political community as well as her own ideals and identity.

Karin Lee is a Canadian Academy Award (Gemini) winning filmmaker. She has directed films and videos, both fiction and documentaries about the effects of global displacement, feminism and the Chinese diaspora in North America. Her other films include *Oyster and Chocolate*; the Gemini award winning documentary *Made in China - the Story of Adopted Chinese Children in Canada*; *Canadian Steel: Chinese Grit* - a historical documentary about the Chinese who helped build the CPR; *Songs of the Phoenix* about contemporary feminists in China; and *My Sweet Peony* a short drama about cultural identity and sexuality.



LEFT and ABOVE: Scenes from Comrade Dad; ABOVE RIGHT: Karin Lee

Next Meeting: Thursday, April 26 at 7:30 pm in the Vancouver Museum

PREZNOTES

Their Book - Your Cheques - Our AGM

No long message this month, just three important short ones.

Their book: The Dunbar Residents' Association proudly announces the publication of their long-awaited *The Story of Dunbar: Voices of a Vancouver Neighborhood*. Copies will be available at a Book Launch Event to be held Tuesday, May 1, 7-9 pm, at the Dunbar Community Centre, 4747 Dunbar Street. The new volume marks the completion of a four-year project, supported in part by a 2004 grant from the VHS Research and Publication Fund.

Your cheques: Effective June 30, 2007, Canadian banks will require all cheques to be dated, with digits only, in printed boxes in DD MM YYYY format. New cheques have been printed to that standard for some time, but if you're still using old ones that read "Date _____," they'll be rejected as of June 30 — including those you write to the VHS for dues and donations! So save yourself and us a lot of trouble: be sure your cheques are up to date.

Our AGM: Circle "May 24" on your calendar — it's the final fourth-Thursday VHS meeting of the 2006-7 season, 7:30 pm at the Vancouver Museum. By popular demand, we're continuing the tradition begun last year, the "Show and Tell" session when VHS researchers share their current projects. Some may even invite your volunteer help. The evening will include our Annual General Meeting, with brief reports, the election of officers and directors for the coming year, and thank-you's to those retiring. Refreshments, too! Be there!

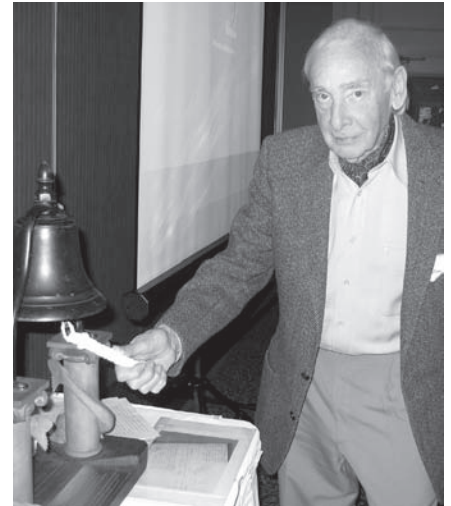
Paul Flucke, President

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Incorporation Day Luncheon

On Sunday, April 1 VHS members and guests — 180 of them — heard an intensely interesting, fact-packed and frequently funny talk by Jim Lowden, the Director of Stanley District, Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation. The occasion was the Incorporation Day luncheon, held at the University Golf Club.

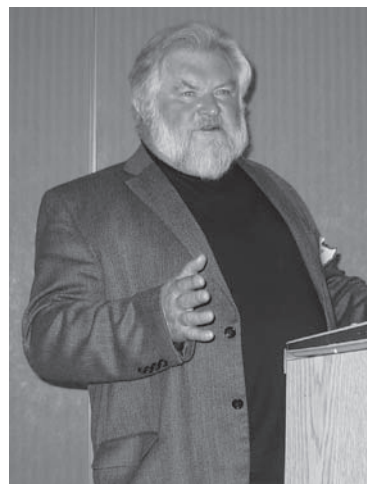
Before Mr. Lowden's talk, however, in a favorite tradition of these annual lunches, long-time member Len McCann rang the bell of the Robert Kerr. This storied vessel ended its active life in Vancouver, but not before performing a great service as a refuge for people fleeing the Great Fire of 1886. (And, not long before that, she'd done another favor for the little city: she brought us Barbados-born Seraphim "Joe" Fortes, the famous English Bay lifeguard, who had been a crew member.) The Robert Kerr today is submerged near the north shore of Thetis Island, where the Underwater Archaeology Society of BC and others explore it.



Len McCann

Jim Lowden worked for 17 years in planning at city parks, moved into his present job — which puts him in charge of Stanley Park — five years ago. He describes the 1,000-acre (405-hectare) park as one of the Big Three in North America, the others being New York's Central Park at 843 acres and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco at 1,017. Stanley Park gets more than seven million visitors a year, outstripping even Granville Island.

A hundred tour buses go through daily in season, and something like 50,000 people a day walk along at least part of the seawall.



Jim Lowden

At least they did before the big blow. One of the things we learned from Jim is that the big park is mostly second-growth timber, and that early loggers tended to leave the hemlock trees alone. That had consequences in mid-December, 2006 when high winds hit this area and caused immense damage to the park's hemlock trees. "Whenever you saw a tree that was sheared off," he said, "it was always a hemlock." Other big trees were uprooted, but it was the hemlocks that snapped.

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The park's trees are roughly apportioned this way: 30 per cent hemlock, 30 per cent cedar and 30 per cent fir. The rest is a mixture of spruce and others.

The park is leased from the federal government, and that lease is coming up at the end of this year. It'll run for 100 years. At \$1 a year.

We learned that water lilies are bad for fish, that great quantities of sand were dredged up to create Third Beach, that when the Brockton Point Lighthouse was decommissioned ownership passed from the federal government to the Park Board, that by 1920 there were 80 concerts a year in the park, that two eagles are nesting on Malkin Bowl, that the route of the park's famous miniature train was partly determined by 1962's Typhoon Frieda, that the totem poles near Brockton Point are visited by a million people a year, that the Hollow Tree may be the most photographed tree in the world, that in 1936 the park board voted against installing the Lost Lagoon Fountain, but were overruled by city council . . . and more and more.

To top it off, Jim read off an astonishing litany of ideas people have had to "improve" Stanley Park. They include a rifle range, a speedway, a stadium, goat carts, coal mining, a gas station, a youth hostel, elephant rides, luminous paint for Siwash Rock, a Ferris wheel, a floating cabaret and dozens of other outlandish ideas.

"The success of Stanley Park," he concluded, "is in what it didn't become."



ABOVE: John Atkin (left) accepts award from Chuck Davis.

The afternoon's activities concluded with the presentation to historian John Atkin of the Vancouver Historical Society Award of Historical Merit. John has been delving into the city's past for a good many years in a good many ways. One important example: in 1991 John — working with fellow historian and artist Michael Kluckner — registered a brand-new society called Heritage Vancouver. His walking tours are justifiably celebrated, and his books illuminate the city's neighborhoods. In the words of the certificate: "Presented to John Atkin . . . for his rich understanding of Vancouver's past, shared with the wider public through his tours and talks, books, broadcasts and the internet."

Upcoming Speakers & Events

The VHS invites everyone (including non-members) to attend our monthly talks. The talks are free. They are held at the Vancouver Museum, 1100 Chestnut Street (close to Vanier Park) at 7:30 pm on the fourth Thursday of every month (unless noted).

Thursday, April 26, 2007

Comrade Dad: A Father and a Vancouver Bookstore

Speaker: Karin Lee

Filmmaker Karin Lee will show and speak about her film *Comrade Dad*, the story of her father who ran the China Arts and Crafts bookstore. This quintessentially Vancouver story is about ideology and family and what it was like to live in Chinatown in the fifties and sixties before Canada recognized China.

Thursday, May 24, 2007

VHS Show and Tell

Speaker(s): To Be Announced

Our last talk of the 2006-2007 season will feature VHS members talking about projects in which they are involved. We hope to show footage from the City Reflections group's re-creation of the 1907 William Harbeck film. During the evening we will also share with you some exciting VHS plans for summer events and field trips.

Focus on Women's History

Learn and discuss women's history at monthly Herstory Café meetings. Presentations are followed by discussions and socializing.

Lara Campbell and Jolene Cumming are the organizers of this new program. Lara teaches Canadian Women's History and Gender History at SFU, while Jolene is a historical interpreter specializing in Vancouver women's history.

The next presentation will be on Tuesday, April 24th at the Railway Club (579 Dunsmuir) in Vancouver starting at 7:00 pm. Venues and dates will vary. For more information, please call Jolene at 873-1866.

Welcome New Members:

Jason Murray
Marie & Alec Ash

The Shake, The Rattle, and the Pole: Vancouver's Striptease Past, 1945 - 1980

With a title like that, how could there not be a capacity audience for the VHS on March 22nd? It was extra chair time again as Becki Ross, a professor of Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies at UBC gave a lively — and solidly researched — talk to a packed room on the history of the city's strippers and the clubs in which they performed.

She linked the rise of the stripper clubs to the end of the Second World War, when Vancouver was ripe for a rosier future. The city's entertainment district reflected that upsurge in optimism and excitement, with 18,000 neon signs a blazing symbol of the times. Clubs like the Cave, Isy's, the Palomar and the Penthouse thrived. (She showed a great shot of the Cave in 1948, with a block-long line of patrons on Hornby waiting to get in.)

It can safely be said that striptease is a subject never before treated at a VHS meeting, a talk enhanced by large images on the screen of the scantily clad ladies who danced and peeled for a living. Take Princess Lillian, for example. A self-taught deaf dancer, she learned her moves and other bits of schtick in the late 1960s from well-known Vancouver choreographer Jack Card at Isy's Supper Club on West Georgia. "I had tassels," she told Becki Ross, "and I'd make them twirl like airplane propellers. I used to have a snake in my show. It weighed 110 pounds. I played the drums and accordion on stage. I had a belly dancer costume, I did some Scottish dancing. I had a biker theme: leather and a whip. People *loved* my show. I was very Las Vegas and my show was very classy. I was an *entertainer*."

Vancouver got a reputation for the kind of entertainment it provided in those crowded, smoke-filled clubs. More and more local women began to appear on stage. We had, said the late *Vancouver Sun* columnist Jack Wasserman, "the hottest night clubs north of San Francisco." The temperature got even higher in 1972 when the provincial government decriminalized total nudity on stage. Now the clubs could feature dancers who were topless *and* bottomless.

The feature, headlining dancers were polished, erotic, well paid

... and mostly white.

East of Main Street it was a different story. There were clubs like the Smiling Buddha, the Kublai Khan, the Harlem Nocturne, places where you'd be more likely to see black dancers, girls like Choo Choo Williams, Miss Lovie and Lottie the Body. Choo Choo — who developed a Carmen Miranda style — was married to Ernie King, a trombone player with whom she co-operated the Harlem Nocturne...one of the clubs on the east side of Main that seemed to be raided more often than the white-owned places farther west. King eventually gave up the struggle after eight years of what he termed "police harassment."

Black and other "ethnic" dancers didn't earn as much as the white girls.

White or black, strip tease dancers were discriminated against: they couldn't get bank loans, found it hard to rent accommodation, found it difficult to get back into the regular work force after their dancing careers ended. On the other hand, their salaries could be two to three times what "ordinary" women workers were making. A big star like Lili St. Cyr would make \$5,000 on a weekend. Vancouver dancers were paid more than those in Vegas. Throughout the 1970s, Ms. Ross told us, dancers' wages ranged from \$500 to \$4,000 a week.

Ironically, professional entertainers who often dressed the same way — like female figure skaters, trapeze artists, magicians' assistants, beauty pageant contestants, cheerleaders and the like — faced no such disdain.

Starting May 31, and on the last Thursday of every month, we were informed, there will be burlesque shows as a tribute to the great burlesque dancers of the past. Burlesque dancer Diamond Minx, who was in the audience, promised the VHS members spirited impersonations of the super-stars — Lili St. Cyr, Sally Rand, and Gypsy Rose Lee — on stage at Celebrities on Davie Street.

See you there! - Chuck Davis

Vancouver Historical Society - Leadership, 2006 - 2007 (elected May 25, 2006)

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