

# Vancouver Historical Society

## NEWSLETTER

ISSN 0823-0161

February 2016

Vol. 55 No. 5

### A Week to Remember: Stories from the 1954 Commonwealth Games

February Speaker: Jason Beck

Because of the city's gentle climate, Vancouverites from the earliest days have always taken part in sports. Whether delineated socially by private clubs facilitating outlets for yacht racing, tennis or bowls or public parks or arenas for pick-up to professionally organized games, Vancouverites have been great participators. So, when Vancouver was chosen for the fifth British Empire Games to take place in 1954, the city was a natural fit.

Opened on July 30, 1954 by former Governor General of Canada, Viscount Earl Alexander of Tunis, the games were closed one week later on August 7 by the Queen's consort, Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh. This was the first year of the new name change from the British Empire Games (held on an almost-regular basis from the original 1930 Hamilton, Ontario games), to its expanded name reflecting Britain's changing role. With the exception of rowing events at Chilliwack's very straight and calm Vedder Canal, part of the 1922 Sumas Reclamation Scheme, most events took place at opposite sides of Vancouver, around Hastings Park/PNE area and West Point Grey.

Opening and closing ceremonies took place at Empire Stadium in Hastings Park while boxing and weightlifting took place at the Forum. On the other side of town, the West Point Grey area, athletes were housed at UBC where also the freshly constructed Empire Pool hosted swimming. Fencing took place at Lord Byng School while



**Roger Bannister and John Landy at Empire Stadium.**

Photo: Vancouver Exhibition Association, City of Vancouver Archives CVA 180-3607

Bowls was split between the West Point Grey and New Westminster Clubs.

By its end, 662 competitors from 24 nations had participated in the games

with Canada coming fourth in medal standings behind England, Australia and South Africa. These Games became best known for the "Miracle Mile" which took place between English physician Roger Bannister (who was later knighted) and Australian John Landy (who became the 26th Governor of that country's state of Victoria) at Empire Stadium marking the first time these runners appeared together in a competitive mile and the first time the two men broke four minutes in the same race. At the other end of the scale, Jim Peters, holder of the world's best for the marathon, entered the stadium 17 minutes ahead of his nearest rival but collapsed never completing the race and never running again. The Games left a legacy of many memorable sports stories.

Speaker Jason Beck is Curator and Facility Director of the BC Sports Hall of Fame which is celebrating its 60th Anniversary with a special exhibit. His book, *The Miracle Mile: Stories of the 1954 British Empire and Commonwealth Games*, will be released in March.

*Bruce M. Watson*

Next Meeting at 7:30 p.m., Thursday, Feb. 25, 2016 at Museum of Vancouver

## President's Notes

A recent news item noted the demolition of Empire Pool next to the War Memorial Gymnasium at UBC. A contemporary student would make sense of the “war memorial” name but might be puzzled by “empire.” Whose empire, they might ask? British, of course, as Vancouver still effectively was in 1954.

The outdoor pool was built for the British Empire and Commonwealth Games, the subject of this month's lecture, and was one of three “legacies” that benefited the city, the others being Empire Stadium and Empire Oval — the latter more commonly called the China Creek cycle track, now the site of the Broadway campus of VCC.

My father was one of the announcers at Empire Stadium during the Games, a skill he had developed in England during the war while organizing track-and-field events to occupy the thousands of Canadian soldiers garrisoned in Sussex. The voice calling out the lap times during the Bannister-Landy “Miracle Mile” was his.

Thereafter, Empire Stadium was home to the BC Lions, helping them “Roar in '54” and hosting them until BC Place opened in the early '80s. Demolished in 1993, the site had a temporary rebirth as Empire Field when BC Place got a new roof, and is becoming a city-run, community sports venue called Empire Fields, plural. Thankfully, a bit of history will persist in the name.

Empire Pool also had a useful afterlife. For example, for years it had the only 10-metre diving tower in the city. In the brief period in my teens when I was a competitive diver, I had to train on it in order to compete in the national championships. Accordingly, beginning in March, 1966, I practised from that high tower, shivering in the wind, doing handstands on its edge, spinning and flipping before hitting what seemed like a brick wall — the slightly heated water.

Just the fact that Empire Pool was outdoors speaks of an earlier era, as do those well-known photos of throngs of swimmers at English Bay. Hardy types, those Vancouverites.

**Michael Kluckner, President**  
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## March Tour of Historic Building



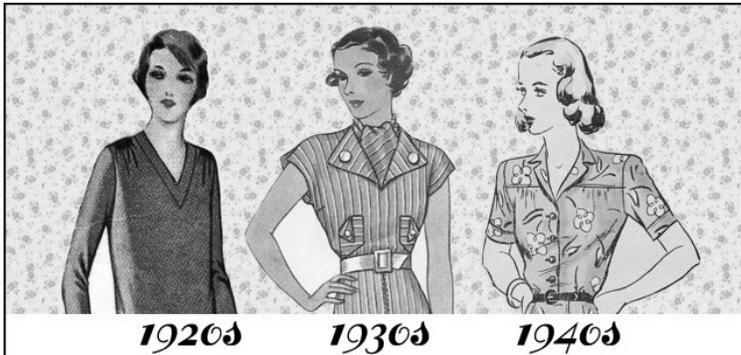
Photo courtesy of St. George's School

In 2015 the City of Vancouver, through the Heritage Commission, awarded its top honour to St. George's School for a conservation project, citing their meticulous and well-executed preservation of the original buildings. The award was given to acknowledge the extraordinary effort and resources that the School has put into the Junior School main building and the associated Boiler House. The Boiler House is characterized by a magnificent 75-foot chimney, recalling its original function as both boiler room and a laundry for the Convent.

The spectacular and historic buildings were constructed in 1912 in a Gothic revival style for the Convent of the Sacred Heart, which ran a girls' boarding school there until 1979. At that time, St. George's School acquired the building, and have used it ever since as the home of its Junior School. Some of the alumnae of the Convent of the Sacred Heart School still come back to meet at the School, in the rooms in which they studied as girls.

Enjoy a special guided tour of these spectacular and unique buildings during a visit on **Saturday, March 5th starting at 2 p.m. and ending by 4 p.m.** The location is **St. George's Junior School, 3851 West 29th Avenue** near Dunbar. Light refreshments will be provided by St. George's School. This tour is free for VHS members, \$10 for non-members payable at the start. Limited to 20 people. Please pre-register by emailing ([info@vancouver-historical-society.ca](mailto:info@vancouver-historical-society.ca)) or leaving a message with your name, phone number and/or email address at the **VHS Information Line, 604-878-0140**.

## Fashion in Vancouver Over the Decades



Look at the “people” photos of the late street photographer Foncie Pulice or the streetscape photos in the City of Vancouver Archives. One of the first things you notice are the fashions of each era. From the long skirts of the Edwardian period just before World War I to the shorter skirts of the flapper era; from men always wearing hats in the summertime to the more informal attire of the 1960s, fashions quickly changed with the years. Style in Vancouver was always “au courant.”

Take a look at what the stylish person was wearing through the years in Vancouver at this year’s Incorporation Day Luncheon. Part of the Luncheon program features a fashion presentation through the years interpreted by costume and clothing collector and historian, Ivan Sayers.

This year as always, the annual Luncheon celebrates the incorporation of the City of Vancouver on April 6th, 1886 — 130 years ago. This year’s Luncheon will take place on Sunday, April 10th, starting at 12:30, at the University Golf Club, 5185 University Boulevard. The \$35 per person ticket price (\$45 per person for non-VHS members) includes the buffet luncheon, prize draws and the Ivan Sayers historical fashion presentation. The Vancouver Historical Society will also be awarding its Award of Merit at the function.

Tickets will be available for sale at the February 25th and March 24th regular Thursday talks at the Museum of Vancouver. Tickets can also be bought by calling the VHS Information Line at 604-878-9140 or through the mail at P. O. Box 3071, Vancouver, B.C., V6B 3X6. Please remember to leave enough time for the mail to be received, processed and then delivered.

We look forward to seeing all our members as well as guests. The Ivan Sayers Historical fashion presentation is always a hit with audiences so get those tickets early to get a seat.

## Upcoming Speakers

*The VHS invites everyone (including non-members) to attend our monthly talks. The talks are free and are held at the Museum of Vancouver, 1100 Chestnut Street (close to Vanier Park) at 7:30 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of every month except June, July, August, December).*

Thursday, March 24, 2016, 7:30 P.M.

**Vancouver in Transit: Fast Forward from 1890 to 2016**

**Speaker: Henry Ewert**

The sophisticated, state-of-the-art transit that began being installed in 1890, only four years after the city’s incorporation and three years after the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway, deeply impacts the City of Vancouver today. Up to and after 1913 when the full street railway and interurban system was in place, industrial and residential areas grew up around these transit routes. However, the system declined because of a combination of vehicular traffic’s need for greater road space, the Great Depression, etc. After WWII, making room for more cars, the system was replaced with a much weaker version of what had been in place. Recently, however, the city has seen the merit of the thoughtful original plan and has revisited it as a template for a modern transit system.

Thursday, April 28, 2016, 7:30 P.M.

**Local Protest and Transnational Politics: Vietnam War Resistance in Vancouver and B.C.**

**Speaker: Lara Campbell**

Tens of thousands of Americans left the United States for Canada to avoid the Vietnam draft or to protest the war between 1964-1973. Draft resisters immigrated mainly to three major Canadian cities: Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. Vancouver became a hub for transnational anti-war activism where the student, socialist, anti-imperialist, and women’s liberation movements intersected, organized, and criticized each others’ positions on the war in Vietnam. This talk will place Vancouver at the centre of antiwar organizing by examining how local organizations and activists built support networks for draft resisters, resisted and criticized American cultural and political influence in Canada, and debated the subordination of women within antiwar and draft resistance movements.

# Peek into the Past

with Jim McGraw



Photo: City of Vancouver Archives CVA 586-4369

Quite a crowd has gathered to watch the Vancouver fire department's new 100-foot aerial ladder truck in this June 1946 photo. Interestingly the crowd has been allowed to gather directly under the ladder. Some of the firefighters are seemingly having an informal chat with the men in the Rapid Transfer freight truck between the firetruck and the sidewalk. Today, a scene like this would be completely cordoned off with the public kept at a safer distance.

The scene depicts a test of the fire department's new turntable ladder truck (the turntable allows the ladder to be turned in any direction). Another clue that this is a test is that the firefighters are not wearing helmets normally worn to a fire.

The Hotel Ambassador is at 773 Seymour on the west side of the street just north of Robson. You can see the large light-coloured Hudson Bay's department store in the distance at Georgia. The reinforced concrete hotel was advertised as "Absolutely Fireproof." Opened in 1912, the building's management at first concentrated on longer term tenants living in light housekeeping, furnished rooms. Just three years later, management decided to operate the building as a full-fledged hotel. From 1915 to 1938, it was known as the Hudson Hotel (or Hotel Hudson in its earlier years). From 1938 until its demolition in the late 1980s, it was the Ambassador. Today, an office building's underground parking entrance is approximately where the hotel was.

The 1945 American LaFrance firetruck in the photo has an open cab, at one time a traditional configuration on most North American firetrucks, regardless of climate. This firetruck was retired in 1971. Vancouver's last open cab firetruck was officially retired from active service in 1990. By 1917 the Vancouver fire department (today officially known as Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services) was the first major Canadian city department to completely motorize their fleet. The department's full motorization also beat many larger U.S. cities. Vancouver had ordered their first motorized vehicles just 10 years earlier in 1907 when many people still saw motorized trucks and cars as novelties or even perhaps a passing fad.

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