

Vancouver Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

ISSN 0042 - 2487

March 2010

Vol. 49 No. 6

Growing Up in Chinatown

March Speaker: Larry Wong

Larry Wong will take us inside Chinatown through the history of his family and that of Chinatown. Larry's father, Wong Mow, arrived in Vancouver in 1911, a young married man of 20 who paid his \$500 Head Tax and was eager to work as a tailor so he could support his wife and only son back home in China.

In 1911, Chinatown was twenty-five years old, the same age as Vancouver. There had been a Chinese presence in the city right from the beginning. Chinatown began on Shanghai Alley near the shore of False Creek, which back then touched Pender Street near Carrall Street. When the CPR was completed, a roundhouse and maintenance shop was built on what is today's Canton Alley.

Carrall Street was the main street of Chinatown. Gradually Chinese businesses and residences spread out along Dupont Street, which was renamed East Pender Street, shortly after the Chinatown Riot of 1907.

Ten years after his arrival in Vancouver, Larry's father married a

second woman, Larry's mother. She too, was subjected to the \$500 Head Tax. The First Wife never came to Canada. She remained in China to look after the First Son. Her husband faithfully sent money home on a monthly basis until his death in 1966.



Wing Sang Building renamed Yip Sang Building in 1950

Photo : City of Vancouver Archives CVA 689-9 43717

His parent's marriage was not that uncommon although they were in a minority to have families at all in Chinatown.

Larry's family lived in the back of a tailor shop on Main Street and through his eyes, we take a trip through historic Chinatown...the Chinese Freemason building that helped finance Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's revolution

and which today houses condos and the Modernize Tailor shop.

The world's narrowest building wasn't always narrow but there is a good story behind it, which we will hear. We'll learn about the Yip Sang, the oldest building in Chinatown, with photographs of the original structure and the present renovated gallery under new ownership.

There will be stories of how two teenagers built a homemade airplane behind their home on Market Alley...the young men and women who fought in the last World War and at the end gained the right to vote, which had been denied to the Chinese since 1875...the threat to Chinatown by urban renewal and more.

Chinatown itself has gone through its own recession in the last ten years but there are hopes renewed interest will appeal to a younger generation leading to a rejuvenation of the neighbourhood.

Join us for this very personal story about one of the city's oldest neighbourhoods.

Next Meeting: 7:30 PM, Thursday, March 25 at Museum of Vancouver

Preznotes

What a great party in February! Hats off to all the athletes who worked so hard to achieve their goals and make the country proud with their respectable medal count. As well, we all owe a debt of gratitude to the organizational ability and hard work of the VANOC Committee and all the paid workers and unpaid volunteers who made the place shine.

An added dimension to the Olympic Games was not only the city itself but also the pavilions and cultural events happening everywhere. The flowering trees and shrubs did their part to reflect the city's temperate climate and the citizens' enduring love of nature. Our public spaces between the vertical cement and glass structures reflected a strong public policy commitment that was in turn rewarded by a friendly, civil, respectful and very diverse Vancouver citizenry. One such public space, the temporarily bricked over David Lam Park, was an exciting place to be with great entertainment and especially when the home team was playing on the big screen. It was also great to see the aboriginal population in various pavilions showing their best on their own terms. Along with all the outward partying, the Vancouver Public Library was full as usual, which speaks volumes to the full spectrum of engagement by Vancouverites.

Through many decades of enlightened foresight and hard work, we have established one of the most livable cities around. Gifted with a great natural environment, perhaps our next goal should be to move to the next level to anchor Vancouver in its own mythology, making it a focus of the imagination. As well, with a country full of talented people, perhaps we can find additional national songs other than *O Canada* with which we can all burst forth in unison in moments of achievement.

Bruce M. Watson, President

Welcome New Members

Cecil Sigal

Neil Whaley

Last Chance for Luncheon

Our March meeting might be the last chance to buy tickets for the annual Incorporation Day Luncheon. The luncheon, celebrating the incorporation of the City of Vancouver, is being held on Sunday, April 11th. There may not be enough time after the March meeting for mail order tickets. If you plan on attending the luncheon, please bring payment with you to the March 25th VHS meeting at the Museum of Vancouver.

Historian Daniel Francis will be our keynote speaker at the luncheon. With over two dozen books to his credit, Daniel has tackled subjects from transit (Transit in B.C. The First Hundred Years, with Brian Kelly) to Vancouver's most oft-serving mayor (L.D.: Mayor Louis Taylor and the Rise of Vancouver) to the Trans-Canada Highway (A Road for Canada). Daniel also served as editorial director for the Encyclopedia of British Columbia, considered one of the most important books ever published about the province.

This year's Incorporation Day Luncheon will be held on Sunday April 11th at the University Golf Club, 5185 University Boulevard, at 12:00 noon. The food and service are always great and it's a good chance to meet with others who share an interest in history.

There will be door prizes and the VHS Award of Merit will be presented to someone who has been instrumental in preserving, documenting or sharing knowledge of Vancouver history.

Ticket prices are very reasonable — \$30 each for members and friends. As noted, tickets will be available at the March monthly VHS meeting on March 25th, or you can order them right now at Incorporation Day Luncheon, 4686 West 3rd Avenue, Vancouver, V6R 1N4 (Tel.: 604-224-7840). Please enclose a cheque made out to the VHS for the requested number of tickets.

Parking at Museum of Vancouver

Please note parking is no longer free at the Museum of Vancouver. If you are attending the monthly Thursday evening meetings, there is now a charge of \$5 to park in the museum's lot. Tickets allowing parking must be bought at on-site machines and then displayed on your car's dashboard.

Looking for Houdini's Airplane

The VHS receives many enquiries through its website. Most are referred to others but occasionally we take up the paper chase ourselves revealing yet another aspect of Vancouver history.

One of the more intriguing revealed that Harry Houdini might have made an unrecorded stopover here on June 2, 1910.

We learned this through an enquiry from the President of the Lion's Club in Digger's Rest, Australia. He was trying to locate a Voisin biplane which Houdini piloted, in what some say was Australia's first successful flight. They wanted it for the centenary of that flight and there was an outside chance that it was in Canada.



Harry Houdini's Voisin Biplane in Australia in 1910

Our further research revealed that it all started in 1909 in Hamburg, Germany when Houdini purchased a French Voisin bi-plane for \$5,000, dismantled it and, along with a French mechanic, shipped it from Marseilles to Australia. Down under, along with performing magic tricks to admiring crowds of over 20,000, he successfully flew the airplane just north of Melbourne and just outside Sydney. On May 11th, he and Bess boarded the *Manuka* in Brisbane for Vancouver where he arrived on June 2nd. (According to some there was an outside chance that he took the plane with him but more credible versions had the plane being sent to England in a crate). As the Houdinis were in transit to a further American port, they likely wanted privacy and may have stayed onboard while here. (Thanks to Andrew Martin of the Vancouver Public Library for ferreting out many of these facts.)

We eventually discovered through a flurry of e-mails with Down Under and some library research that the plane arrived

Upcoming Speakers & Events

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 pm on the fourth Thursday of every month (unless noted). Special events may be held at other times for which there may be a fee.

Thursday, April 22, 2010

Women on Ice: The Early Years of Women's Hockey in Western Canada

Speaker: Wayne Norton

The Denman Arena was not only home to the Vancouver Millionaires but also the Vancouver Amazons, an all-female hockey team. Other women's teams at the time included the Fernie Swastikas and the Victoria Kewpies. It's a fascinating part of B.C. sports history.

Thursday May 27, 2010

100 Years of the PNE

Speaker: Laura Ballance

Sir Wilfrid Laurier officially opened the first annual Pacific National Exhibition (then known as "The Industrial Exhibition") in August 1910. Many technological firsts were debuted at the PNE, including the first rotary telephone in the Pacific Northwest. A fond look back at our PNE.



Houdini hangs off Sun Building

Photo: W.J. Moore, Vancouver Public Library VPL70208

in March 1923 and hung upside down outside the Sun building.

back in England in the crate and Houdini appears to have lost interest in it, offering it for free to someone else who had crashed his own Voisin. The other unfortunate pilot didn't believe such a generous offer and so didn't respond. It was last traced in 1913 when the crate was sold. From that point it disappeared, never making it to Canada. Houdini, however, did come here

Bruce M. Watson

First Flight West of Winnipeg

100 Years Ago this Month in Richmond

On March 25, 1910 — a hundred years ago this month — the first airplane flight west of Winnipeg took place at the racetrack at Minoru Park in Richmond. The news electrified the locals, and some 3,500 people showed up to pack the stands. Flying a Curtiss pusher biplane — the engine was in the rear behind the pilot — was a visiting American aviator, Charles K. Hamilton, who put the little craft through its paces, thrilling the spectators.

On the following day, again before a big crowd, Hamilton flew 16 kilometres from Minoru to New Westminster and back, returning safely after 30 minutes in the air—a real achievement for those days. Flushed with success, Hamilton then challenged a racehorse, a local favourite named Prince Brutus, to a one-mile race, and generously gave rider Curley Lewis a head start. The horse won by ten seconds.

Hamilton, in his mid-20s, was already a hot air balloonist, dirigible pilot, and parachute jumper when he began flying lessons in 1909 — just six years after the Wright Brothers' historic flight at Kitty Hawk — under aviation pioneer and airplane manufacturer Glenn Curtiss. Within six months Hamilton had become the best-known daredevil flyer in the United States and Canada.

Writing about Hamilton's Minoru Park exhibition for the Royal BC Museum web site, Peter Corley-Smith says that "finding a surface smooth enough for the unsprung,

bicycle-wheel undercarriages of those days was not easy, and a race track usually provided an acceptable surface — besides which it invariably had a grandstand from which spectators could marvel in comfort and, no doubt, secretly hope for something as dramatic as a crash."



Charles K. Hamilton

Crashes were not uncommon in those early barnstorming days. Hamilton survived 63 of them, enduring broken legs, smashed collarbones, cracked ribs, dislocated arms, and many other injuries.

The Province waxed poetically in its description of his performance: "Like a huge bird with outstretched wings, rushing to the defence of her brood, the biplane came sweeping down the track upon its tiny wheels and in front of the grandstand the aviator caused it to rise. When the amber-coloured machine stands upon the ground with its power shut off, it looks benign in a cumbersome sort of way, but as soon as it leaves the earth it seems to have

entered its natural element. Its ascent, as controlled by Mr. Hamilton, is as gradual and graceful as the rise of an unstartled pheasant and its every move is marked by flashing swiftness and by beautiful design."

Sadly, Hamilton's career — and life — was short. But it was not his daredevil flying that did him in: he died from tuberculosis and pneumonia in January 1914. He was 28.

Chuck Davis

Vancouver Historical Society Leadership - 2009 - 2010 (Elected May 28, 2009)

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