

# Vancouver Historical Society

## NEWSLETTER

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### Daughters in the City: Mennonite Maids in Vancouver, 1931-61

#### May Speaker: Dr. Ruth Derksen

Mennonites, latter day Western European Anabaptists (conscientious objectors, non-conformists who went against established church doctrine by re-baptizing adults), first began trickling into Upper Canada from the United States in the 1780s. A century later (the late 1800s) communities of Mennonites responded in vast numbers when this religious group was enticed to uproot from Europe and southern Russia, with the promise of free farmland in Canada, guarantees of religious freedom and exemption from military service. This invitation was a radical departure from established Canadian immigration policy, but it attracted about 8,000 Russian Mennonites to settle the unploughed future farmlands of Manitoba. The next wave of Mennonites into Canada in the mid-1920s was comprised of refugees escaping the terror of the emerging Communist regime.

It was under these circumstances that young Mennonite women — mostly adolescents — began to arrive in Vancouver from across Canada in the late 1920s to early '30s, seeking work as domestic servants. This was a

distinct cultural shift for them as most were still negotiating their way within the greater society which was much different from their own religious based, protected, and circumscribed one. Further, and added to the young



**Some of the Mennonite women who worked as domestic servants in Vancouver.**

Photo: Ruth Derksen collection

women's anxiety, their desperate families owed a substantial debt to the Canadian Pacific Railway for their journey. The young women needed the strength and adaptation to fit in and yet not compromise their principles outside of the protected communities.

Our May speaker, Ruth Derksen, has chronicled the remarkable stories of these young women and the hundreds

who followed them in the next three decades. From archival records, interviews and historic photos, she has assembled the history of two Girls' Homes (Maedchenheime or Mädchenheime — with umlaut added) established in Vancouver to support and protect the working girls.

She reveals that these indomitable young single women were pioneers of their community as they broke through the barriers of the "evil city," the English language and the upper-class British culture. Significantly, they shaped the settlement patterns of not only Vancouver, but also western Canada. With careful scholarship and fond respect, Derksen pays tribute to their impact and their long lasting legacy.

Of Mennonite descent herself, Vancouver-born Dr. Ruth Derksen is author of *Daughters in the City: Mennonite Maids in Vancouver, 1931-61*. Having gained a PhD in the philosophy of language, she currently teaches at the University of British Columbia.

*Bruce M. Watson*

## President's Notes

As I reflect on my experience as president of the Vancouver Historical Society for this, my final President's Notes, I think first of the pleasure that I have experienced as president. The two years have been both rewarding and fun.

I think especially of my good fortune in choosing this time to be active in the VHS. The Society has never been stronger. Four of the Board members who provide the stable core of the executive, Jim McGraw, Elizabeth Hawkins, Bruce Watson, and Scott Anderson, connect the Society of today to the regeneration process that Paul Flucke set in motion more than a decade ago. They include Jim, our superb Newsletter editor; Elizabeth, who adeptly manages the membership records; Scott, who continues to lead as Treasurer and Incorporation Day Luncheon organizer; and Bruce Watson, who since he joined the executive in 2005 has served as president for three years, run the speaker program since 2011, and keeps the Society's story accessible and alive through his important contributions to the website. Michael Kluckner has brought to our deliberations the insights that emerge from his extensive connections to the historical and heritage communities in Vancouver. He is a wonderful choice to be our next president. Eve Lazarus organized a very successful Christmas book sale this year and connects us to the broader community of popular historians in Vancouver, and Kellan Higgins, our genial secretary, has provided valuable technical assistance. Florence Sung and her husband Alan are two of the Society's most enthusiastic supporters, both through the Board (Florence) and as volunteers. Indeed, a number of volunteers have kept everything running smoothly, including Katie Adkins, Amber Anderson, Margaret Dinwoodie, Elizabeth Walker, Jo Pleshakov, Jeannie Hounslow, Mary Gavin, and Diane Switzer. What a wonderful team they have been.

My thanks for support and assistance go out as well to Heather Gordon and the staff of the City of Vancouver Archives, especially Jeannie Hounslow; Patricia Owen and Duncan MacLeod of the Vancouver Maritime Museum; Janet Morley at Vancouver Heritage Fairs; and Wendy Nichols, Kellie Haines, and the staff of the Museum of Vancouver.

Finally, I would like to thank our generous donors and members who make possible our dialogue with Vancouver history through the Society's monthly talks, newsletter, and field trips. It has been an honour to serve.

**Bob McDonald, President**

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## Firefighters' Funeral Procession

*Continued from back page*

Look closely at the photo to see the many details. The photographer might be standing on top of a streetcar at the Prior Street carbarns on the northwest corner of Prior and Main. The carbarn was where streetcars were serviced and stored between assignments. Note the tracks leading into the carbarn from Main Street. The carbarn had opened in 1904 replacing an earlier facility one block north. There is an old discarded streetcar seat set up against the shack on the left, a cozy spot to while away the hours for passersby or where a streetcar employee might take a break. A lone boy beyond the shack watches Vancouver Police Department officers on horseback and others on foot lead the procession with the firefighters following. The policemen are wearing the British "bobby" style headgear. As the police department motorized, the hats would be replaced by a flat style more suitable for riding in cars.

A few men and women with young children watch the procession from the east side of Main.

Just ahead (unseen) of the procession on the east side of Main, the Great Northern and Canadian Northern Railways were busy building their side-by-side new terminals. (The Canadian Northern building is still there better known to Vancouverites as the Pacific Central train and bus terminal.)

The tiny building on the east side of Main houses the Anti-septic Cleaning and Pressing company although I have yet to locate any mention of it in city directories. There appears to be an "812" on the sign, which is most likely its address as it is in the 800 block on the "even" side.

Then there is the advertising sign on the side of the building to the left touting Coca-Cola: "Delicious and refreshing. Sold everywhere 5¢ Relieves Fatigue."

Today, this area would be unrecognizable to someone from that era. While the last of the transit workers at the Prior Street carbarns moved out in the early 1950s, the building and later additions lasted until the very late 1960s. The building was then demolished to make way for the new Georgia/Dunsmuir Viaducts whose eastern end now crosses Main at this location on an overpass. The viaducts were constructed to replace an earlier Georgia Viaduct and to become part of a system of downtown highways that were never built. There has been much talk recently that today's Georgia Viaduct might itself soon become part of Vancouver's past, like this scene from 97 years ago.

## Election of Executive at May AGM

In its role as Nominating Committee, the current VHS Executive is pleased to submit the following full slate of nominees for the 2015-2016 Executive to be elected at our May 28, 2015 Annual General Meeting (AGM):

<b>Michael Kluckner</b>	<b>President</b>
<b>Eve Lazarus</b>	<b>Vice President</b>
<b>Scott Anderson</b>	<b>Treasurer</b>
<b>Kellan Higgins</b>	<b>Recording Secretary</b>
<b>Robert McDonald</b>	<b>Director</b>
<b>Jim McGraw</b>	<b>Director</b>
<b>Brenda Peterson</b>	<b>Director</b>
<b>Bruce Watson</b>	<b>Programs</b>
<b>To Be Announced</b>	<b>Director</b>

All terms of office are for one year beginning June 1, 2015. Additional nominations will be accepted at the AGM provided that the nominee is a current VHS member and is present.

Financial and other reports will be tabled at the meeting for the membership's approval.

**As this is the AGM, please note the meeting for members will start a half hour earlier at 7:00 p.m. The talk, which is open to non-members, will start after the membership's AGM finishes at 7:30 p.m.**

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## BCHF's Online History Bookstore

Many interesting books have been written on various facets of British Columbia history but they are not always available at your neighbourhood bookstore. You may not even be aware of what *is* available. Now you can browse and order them online.

The B.C. Historical Federation's Website Book Store now features over 100 books on many aspects of B.C.'s exciting and colourful history.

Most books are self-published by different historical societies around the province. Check out the selection at [www.bchistory.ca/publications/store/index](http://www.bchistory.ca/publications/store/index) then view the Book Store inventory. Books can be purchased online through the Federation's Paypal link.

## 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, September 24, 2015

**Raincoast Jews: Integration in British Columbia**  
*Speaker: Lillooet Nordlinger McDonnell*

The speaker will explore the lives and contributions of five leading Jews living in British Columbia between 1860 and 1970: Cecelia Davies for her charity work in early Victoria, Hannah Director who rose in a small mining camp to become head of the school board, Leon Koerner the Czechoslovakian refugee who was associated with the lumber industry and became known for his philanthropy, Harry Adaskin who started the first UBC music school and Nathan Nemetz who rose to become the first Jewish chief justice of British Columbia. Emphasis will be placed on how their Jewish heritage shaped their professional legacy and contributions to Canadian society.

Thursday, October 22, 2015

**Vaudeville: The Great White Way**  
*Speakers: John Atkin and Tom Carter*

Many people think of Granville Street as "the Great White Way" or entertainment district of Vancouver. In fact, Hastings Street was the original where vaudeville flourished at the many theatres like the Pantages, the Rex and the Columbia. Vancouver was very much on several vaudeville circuits so there was never a shortage of acts to grace the stage. Vaudeville was a form of theatre started in the 1880s that featured several different acts in one show, everything from dancers, comedians, jugglers, singers and more. Silent movies and then the talkies gradually pushed vaudeville off the stage of many theatres. Historian John Atkin and artist Tom Carter explore a bygone era in this fascinating look at a world of dreams, escape, wonders and thrills.



# Peek into the Past

with Jim McGraw



**Vancouver firefighters' funeral procession on Main St. 97 years ago on May 13, 1918.**

City of Vancouver Archives AM54-S4-: FD P18.4

This scene shows a sad occasion in a part of the city that has changed dramatically in the 97 years since the photo was taken. Vancouver firefighters are in a funeral procession to mourn the loss of four of their colleagues killed in the line of duty.

The four died on Friday, May 10, 1918. They were Firemen Otis Fulton (age 35), Donald Morrison (33), Lieutenant Colin McKenzie (31) and Captain Richard Frost (44). It is the greatest loss of firefighters' lives in a single day in the fire

department's history. (The second worst was when three members of the department died fighting a fire on September 14th, 1945 in the McMaster Building on Homer Street.)

Firefighting in those days was an inherently dangerous occupation but sometimes not at the fire scene itself.

These men died as a result of injuries sustained while racing to the scene of a fire. Their motorized hose wagon (Vancouver's Fire Department had completely done away with horse-drawn equipment in the previous year) collided with a streetcar at the corner of Commercial Drive and East 12th Avenue and the men were thrown from the hose wagon.

Their funerals were held on Monday, May 13, and this photo most likely shows the funeral procession on its way to Mountain View Cemetery on Fraser Street.

Sadly just days later on May 15th, another firefighter died in the line of duty. Fireman William Cameron (24), was struck by falling timbers while fighting a fire at a shipyard.

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## Vancouver Historical Society Executive Board: 2014 - 2015 (Elected May 22, 2014)

### EXECUTIVE

President	Robert McDonald
Vice President	Michael Kluckner
Treasurer	Scott Anderson
Recording Secretary	Kellan Higgins
Director (Membership)	Elizabeth Hawkins
Director	Eve Lazarus
Director (Newsletter Editor)	Jim McGraw
Director	Florence Sung
Director (Programs)	Bruce M. Watson

### APPOINTED POSITIONS

Archivist	Alexandra Allen
Info Line	Jeannie Hounslow
Newsletter Mailing	Mary Gavan, Diane Switzer
Tour Coordinator	Jo Pleshakov

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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