

Vancouver Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

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The Other Western Front — B.C. and The Great War

September Speakers: Greg Dickson & Mark Forsythe

In the summer of 1914 with the boom years of explosive growth nothing more than a fading memory, Vancouver and the province were unaware of the turmoil that was about to face them for the next four years.

For decades, part of the energy driving the predominantly British population of Vancouver and British Columbia was a free ride on the coat tails of empire as it adapted the British narrative as its own. For example in the late 1890s at the time of the South African war, a group of over-exuberant and ready to defend the Empire Vancouverites managed to burn through the wood blocks at the intersection of Cambie and Hastings with their celebratory bonfire.

The brief spat in 1903 over England siding with the Americans over the Alaska boundary dispute was soon put aside when, on August 4, 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. Not only did those of British ancestry volunteer in vast numbers but even those who had no vote felt they had a stake in their country: the Indians, Chinese, Japanese and Aborigines also registered but not always successfully.

Stories abound of Vancouverites and British Columbians adjusting to the new reality. For example, just hours before the declaration of war, Premier McBride, an ardent imperialist, led the charge to defend Empire and help defend the Pacific Coast by purchasing

emotions ran rampant through the city. Paralleling the battles in the Somme, Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele-Ypres, in which Canada suffered such heavy losses, were the stories that took place locally. Mark Forsythe and Greg Dickson will share some of those interesting local stories, along with accounts from CBC listeners, about the way the war touched their families.



Soldiers marching along Pender Street sometime between 1914 and 1918. Photo: City of Vancouver Archives, Major Matthews, AM54-S4: Mil P96

The War did give Canada a sense of itself, and for three years after Armistice there was a numbness absorbing the senseless slaughter and loss. After that, Vancouverites struck off with a new sense of direction, their war stories becoming permanently embedded in the city's narrative.

two Seattle-built submarines destined for the Chilean navy giving B.C. its own somewhat short-lived unique navy. In fact, a submarine factory was up and running in Burnaby before the war was over.

Up to 1917, volunteers and, after that date, draftees would sign their Attestation papers in centres like the Beatty Street Drill Hall. Roller coaster

Greg Dickson and Mark Forsythe have written two books together on B.C. history, and are now working on a third about British Columbia and the Great War. Mark hosts B.C. Almanac on CBC Radio and Greg is a former CBC journalist and currently a communications officer with the Province of British Columbia.

Bruce M. Watson

Next Meeting: Thursday, Sept. 25, 2014 at Museum of Vancouver

President's Notes

"On Monday the (Seaforth) Highlanders marched out with 35 pipers at their head...I never saw such enthusiasm, nor such a crowd in Vancouver."

So wrote Vancouver businessman Henry Ogle (H.O.) Bell-Irving on August 20, 1914, to his cousin in England — just over one hundred years ago.

H.O. had greeted the outbreak of war with patriotic enthusiasm, a view shared across English Canada where, historian Gwynne Dyer writes, the national mood "would not have stood for anything less than full military commitment to the war." When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4 "thousands of people came out to cheer in Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton, Vancouver and Victoria." Many felt that the conflict would be over within three months.

The call to arms resonated most strongly among British-born Canadians, a fact Dyer describes as a fairly consistent pattern of volunteering that lessened from British Columbia and Alberta in the west to the more deeply rooted North American-born populations of the east. Indeed Jean Barman tells us that during the First World War, "British Columbia had the highest per capita rate (of recruitment) in Canada."

The Bell-Irving family reflected the underlying "British" identity of many Vancouverites. By November 1914, five of H.O.'s six sons had enlisted, and the sixth, a student in Scotland, did so in the middle of the war. All six gained commissions. The writer, satirist, and lawyer George Godwin, who had come to British Columbia in 1910 to grow fruit, had also felt "the powerful pull of loyalty to the Empire" and joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force, serving as an officer in France. In a recently published *BC Studies* essay on "BC Narratives of the Great War," James A. Wood notes that Godwin looked to his childhood to explain his family's expectation that one goes to war when the Empire calls. He (had) played with toy soldiers in the nursery... 'That had been the greatest fun on the nursery floor. Playing at killing'."

Time would evoke more sober reflections on the reality of war, words such as those from Wallace Chambers to his sister in May 1915: "By Jove, war is horrible." But such thoughts were for later. One hundred years ago in 1914, August and September were about duty, loyalty to Empire, and joining the fight.

Bob McDonald, President
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Peek Into the Past

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with traditional community celebrations of spring and fall. As early as 1880, Canadian workers were holding dedicated labour parades and processions in the first week of September."

While Labour Day would not become a national statutory holiday until 1894, the first Labour Day parade in Vancouver was held in September 1890 just four years after the city was incorporated.

Professor Leier continues: "*Labour Day, however, soon became more of a community holiday rather than a workers' celebration. As early as 1894 in Vancouver, businesses joined unions in the September parade."*

In the Vancouver parades, as in the many other Labour Day parades across Canada, the various unions often demonstrated the skills of their craft or showed examples of what they manufactured. They wore the uniform of their trade, or carried the tools of their trade as they marched or rode on wagons, trucks and floats.

With World War I quickly intensifying, 1914 was the last year of Labour Day parades in Vancouver.



The Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners showing off their handiwork on the Society's float in the 1903 Labour Day parade. Note their union's intricate banner on the right. The photographer is on Dunsmuir at Seymour looking west to the ornate Bank of Montreal building on the northeast corner of Granville and Dunsmuir.

Photo: Major Matthews Collection, City of Vancouver Archives AM54-S4-: F1 P2

This and That in History News

Congratulations to historian, author, U.B.C. Professor Emeritus, and VHS member **Jean Barman** on receiving the most prestigious literary award in B.C., the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award, this past June 19th. Jean's name will adorn the Writers Walk of Fame outside the main branch of the Vancouver Public Library. Jean has also received the City of Vancouver Book Award in 2006, the Lieutenant Governor's Medal for Historical Writing in 2004, and the VHS Award of Merit in 2003. She will be our Guest Speaker on November 27th (see details in the Upcoming Speakers column at right).

Journalist, popular historian and VHS Director **Eve Lazarus'** *Sensational Vancouver* has been Number One on the Association of B.C. Publishers' Bestsellers List several weeks in a row since appearing on bookstore shelves. Published by **Anvil Press**, the fully illustrated *Sensational Vancouver* tells the story of Vancouver's famous and infamous, the ordinary and the extraordinary, filtered through the houses in which they lived. Eve's previous books are *At Home with History: The Untold Secrets of Heritage Homes* in 2007 and *Sensational Victoria: Bright Lights, Red Lights, Murders, Ghosts & Gardens: Tales from the Capital City* published two years ago.

Kudos to **Howard and Mary White** of **Harbour Publishing**. Harbour recently celebrated 40 years in the business of publishing "born and bred in B.C." books. Although Howard and Mary published their first *Raincoast Chronicles* and a *Dictionary of Chinook Jargon* in 1972, they only started using the Harbour Publishing name in 1974. Harbour was the publisher of *The Chuck Davis History of Metropolitan Vancouver*, *The Encyclopedia of British Columbia* among many other titles.

Help with Newsletter Mailing

The Society is looking for a volunteer or group of volunteers to mail out the newsletter at the beginning of each month. The task basically involves picking up a box of newsletters (about the size of a box of envelopes) from a downtown location, stuffing them into envelopes that have been labelled (as provided by our Membership Director) and stamped, and delivering them to a Canada Post mailbox. The time involved is typically around 3-4 hours per month. Training will be provided, and you will be reimbursed for the cost of envelopes and stamps. Please contact the info-line (**604-878-9140**).

Welcome New VHS Members

Pat MacDonell

Eric Waschke

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, October 23, 2014

The History of the Vancouver Police Museum, Morgue, and Important Cases

Speaker: Robert Noon, Director of the Vancouver Police Museum

Once the site of the Coroner's Court, the city morgue and autopsy facilities and the city crime laboratory, the Vancouver Police Museum is North America's oldest police museum. Over 20,000 documents, photographs and artifacts dating from the mid-1800s come to life in interactive displays, while 12,000 elementary and high school students a year learn the secrets of forensic science to solve crimes. Special displays focus on the still unsolved 1947 "Babes in the Wood Murders," the 1959 autopsy of movie legend Errol Flynn, and the 1965 "Milkshake Murder" that sent a CKNW disc jockey to prison for life.

Thursday, November 27, 2014

French Canadians in British Columbia

Speaker: Jean Barman, historian, author, Professor Emeritus, University of British Columbia

From the end of the 18th to the middle of the 19th centuries, the fur trade on the Pacific slopes brought with it French as the everyday language of commerce. Many family names in First Nation communities have French origins. The same is true of names of many geographic features in the West. The predominance of the French language is not commonly known as many of its speakers in past centuries left very few first-person narratives depriving subsequent generations of the French fact. Today, French speakers make up less than 2% of the population of B.C. Learn more from Jean Barman, whose latest book is entitled, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*.

Peek into the Past

with Jim McGraw



City of Vancouver Engineering Department workers get ready to take part in the Labour Day Parade of 1914. Note the hand-drawn Vancouver Coat of Arms (used from 1903-1969) banner on the side of the Thornycroft, a British-manufactured truck. On the back of the truck are the uniformed street cleaning workers with their brooms. In the distance on the right are a horse-drawn street flusher, above which can be seen a B.C. Electric Railway freight locomotive with its raised trolley pole.

Photo: City of Vancouver Engineering Services, City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 789-16

While autumn only begins on September 23rd this year, the Labour Day long weekend is considered by many to be the true end of summer.

One hundred years ago in Vancouver, Labour Day Monday fell on September 7th. War in Europe was already a

month old although most Vancouverites certainly weren't expecting it to last for four more long years.

On the home front, organized labour was celebrating Labour Day with a parade. Parades at the time, as today, were a popular form of entertainment celebrating everything from Royal Coronations, holidays, the arrival of circuses or start of exhibitions to showing the strength of political, temperance or church groups and the military. In Vancouver as in many Canadian cities, organized labour had its own parade.

As Mark Leier, a Simon Fraser University Professor specializing in labour history wrote in a 2012 edition of *The Tyee*, an online newsmagazine [www.thetyee.ca]: “Long

before May Day and Labour Day were formally labelled as workers' celebrations, workers signalled their strength and demands in marches, processions and demonstrations. These often took place in May and September to coincide

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

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