Oak Bay – An Unauthorised History

by Corinna G.

Oak Bay, Once the haven of First Nation families, smugglers, rumrunners, and ghosts, is now a pleasant, unassuming village, a friendly, slightly genteel but highly independent community that has survived for more than one hundred years.

The first white men arrived at Oak Bay in 1842 when the Hudson's Bay owned brigantine, The Cadboro, dropped anchor just off shore. Sixteen years later, the tranquil coastline was transformed into total chaos as thousands of gold-hungry adventurers swarmed over the border from Oregon and California to join the Fraser River gold rush of 1858. Along with the gold- seekers, gamblers, and camp followers came the pirates – trigger-happy men from the American west -- who attacked, robbed, and often killed those would-be prospectors attempting to cross the Straits of Georgia. The gold rush brought the rich who came to speculate and the poor who came to accumulate. For both, the fear of robbery or death was merely the price one paid in pursuit of gold at rainbow's end.

Gradually British law and order prevailed and the coastline settled down, at least until the prohibition laws were passed in 1920s. Then, smuggling liquor into the United States became big business. As well as several pick up points on small islands dotting the shore-line, there was a smuggler's rendezvous at Spoon Bay in the heart of what is now Uplands.

Initially the area of Oak Bay was divided into five giant parcels of land, the main chunk of which was owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. The rest of the territory was shared by John Tod, J.D. Pemberton, Captain William McNeill, and Isabel Ross. These original owners gradually sold off pieces of their estates, until,

by 1906 there were two-hundred-and-forty-three registered land- owners within the Oak Bay boundaries. In that year approximately half their number joined forces to petition the Provincial Secretary for the incorporation of Oak Bay as a municipality. The petition was granted and on July 2nd, 1906 Oak Bay achieved its independence and gained municipal status. Four days later, five men, the candidates for council, met and decided amongst themselves who should stand and who withdraw. Thus, they obviated the necessity of an election. Democracy was by-passed again when, two years later, thirty-five leading property owners set to choose a reeve, thus avoiding 'the expense and annoyance of an election.' It appeared that none of the other two-hundred-and eight eligible voters raised any objection to this arbitrary selection of their civic leader.

Shortly after the incorporation of Oak Bay, the first municipal employee was fired because he had become too fat and unwieldy. The employee, an elderly horse shared his stables with Oak Bay's only policeman. The constable in question is on record as having complained to council because he could "feel the raw wind whistling through the walls of his sleeping quarters."

The highlight of early Oak Bay society was the addition of the Mount Baker Hotel. Built, facing the spot where the Marina stands today, the Mount Baker was designed to serve as a hostelry for the wealthier members of the gentry. A gala ball was held in honour of it's grand opening on June 7th 1893. Eight years later, the Duke and Duchess of York (later George V and Queen Mary) stayed there for several days. Hearing of the impending royal visit local residents began transporting their best linens, china, and furnishings to the hotel as they feared the regal quarters would be too Spartan and unwelcoming for their Royal Highnesses. A year later, one of the Hotel's guests, feeling no pain, decided to raid the wine

cellar. Whilst consuming the Hotel's stock of vintage booze, he inadvertently set fire to the building, which rapidly developed into a mighty blaze.

The oldest golf course on the Pacific coast was opened in 1893 when fourteen 'gentlemen' formed the Victoria Golf Club. An agreement was made with Pemberton Estates for the playing rights over ninety acres above the shoreline overlooking the Olympic Mountains, These rights were extended for three seasons only. In the fourth season – summer -- the land was reserved for grazing cattle. The first clubhouse for the gentlemen golfers was a converted piano crate.

The oldest existing private house west of the Great Lakes was built around 1850 on Heron Street by one of the original landowners, John Tod. Tod, an émigré from Scotland, was known as a strong, fearless individual with a gentle sense of humour. The first nations people referred to him as 'the great Tod' and superstition had it that he could neither be killed nor outwitted. During his long life he married seven times. Three of his wives were First Nations women and one was an unknown singer. When Tod finally settled in Oak Bay, he built his house overlooking the water and became increasingly involved in local and provincial politics. He died in 1882 leaving a legacy of $35,000 plus a ghost.

It wasn't until 1929, when a Mrs Turner took occupancy of Tod house, that the ghost first came to light. According to reports of the time, Mrs Turner never saw the spectre but could feel its presence constantly beside, behind, around her. After fifteen years of ghostly pursuit, she finally sold her home. She had had enough of her invisible roommate which had become, in her words "very tiresome."

The next owners, a Colonel and Mrs Evans, moved in early in1944. The Colonel, a pragmatic individual, dismissed the tales of hauntings and spooks as so much hogwash until he saw his rocking-chair moving furiously of its own volition and

his hats flinging themselves off the coat rack in the hall. He was finally convinced when, on Christmas day of 1944, he and his wife woke to find all their carefully arranged cards and ornaments in a neat pile on the living room floor.

A year later, two guests, airmen from the RCAF base in Pat Bat, were staying overnight. One of them woke to find a First Nations woman crouched in the corner of the room, her arms outstretched, mumbling words he was unable to hear. As quickly as she came, she vanished. The airmen, without even stopping to say goodbye to their hosts, fled. Stories of the hauntings aroused much interest amongst spiritualists and mediums all over North America and the Evans' were inundated with mail such as the letter addressed simply to Col. Evans, the Haunted House, Victoria. The letter was delivered without difficulty by a pre-computerised post-office.

The ghost was finally laid to rest in 1952 when workmen, installing an oil tank, unearthed a skeleton of what was later identified as a First Nations female. It was rumoured that one of Tod's wives had been insane and was kept locked in her room. One joker summed it up "if a man has seven wives, one of them is bound to come back and haunt him."

Another of Oak Bay's colourful residents was a First Nations poacher, Jimmy Chicken who lived with his family on Mary Tod Island (locals referred to it as Jimmy Chicken Island). Jimmy's wife, Jennie, caused a stir the day, on being given a bright red petticoat, she stripped to the buff in the middle of the busy street in order don on her new undergarment.

An early reeve of Oak Bay was Francis Mawson Rattenbury, the well-known architect and reprobate who scandalised the community when he left his wife for a young, attractive songwriter. Rattenbury and his young bride left for England and

some years later became the centre of an even greater scandal when Alma Rattenbury was tried for complicity in the murder of her husband by the hired boy. Her trial and subsequent acquittal made headlines on both sides of the Atlantic and was more recently the subject of Terence Rattigan's hit play, *Cause Célèbre*. . Oak Bay made its mark in sports as well. In 1922, Lester Patrick built an indoor arena and it was there that the very first hockey game on artificial ice was played. It was also, in the Oak Bay Arena, that the first pro Hockey Team, outside of the big three (Toronto, Montreal, New York) was formed. Horse racing fared less well in Oak Bay although there was a race-track at Willows Beach until the end of the Second World War, and the sport was followed avidly by crowds of punters. However, the Willows track developed a poor reputation when it was discovered, in 1922, that crooked games were afoot. This discovery led to many abortive attempts by the City Fathers, to close the track. Finally, in 1945, with a change in Provincial legislation and the municipal zoning laws, the Willows Race Track was closed and the sport of Kings over for residents of Oak Bay.

There is still an element of the lawlessness that prevailed in the 1850s and beyond which occasionally comes to light. Such as the time when someone or something planted a huge bed of Marijuana seeds behind the Oak Bay Police station. When it was discovered, the cop shop was red with embarrassment but the locals were observed sniffing the air appreciatively as the luxuriant crop went up in smoke.

Oak Bay continues to be proud of the eccentricities of many of its inhabitants and stories of residents' quirks and defiance of rules are highly prized. There is the man, who in full knowledge of the law bordered his property with a Japanese style fence a full two feet taller than the proscribed limit. His battles with the municipality went on for months but he finally wore the civic fathers down and

was permitted to keep his charming, but illegal, addition. There is also the lady who managed to run a small, but successful dairy industry from a home no larger than the average city lot. And then there's the crusty gentleman – a regular at the now defunct Snug (the only bar in B.C. entitled to be called a pub) who removed his beer tankard from its customary hook and stormed out in a high dudgeon after being told, one crowded Friday evening, that he would not be permitted to drink standing up. Fortunately, his feud with the Snug was short lived and his tankard soon returned to its own special hook waiting to be taken down for a nightly fill of draught ale.

Today, even though condominiums outnumber cottages and concrete highways replace cart tracks, the village of Oak Bay still retains a hint of pre-war unhurriedness and charm. The village street is lined with trees and small businesses such as Wendy's Flower shop, Ivy's bookshop, and Barclay's jewellers. It also has one of the busiest libraries in Canada next door to an active, lively Senior's Centre. And, once a month, in the summer, as the sun sets, its streets are filled with visitors from downtown Victoria and beyond who come to listen to live bands, watch a magician make balloon animals and to buy homemade and handmade goods from the lively market vendors.