

## Streetcars and interurbans

*They helped define  
Vancouver. But what  
happened to our rolling  
stock when rail gave  
way to rubber?*

Built locally in 1905, interurban 1207  
now carries passengers between  
Science World and Granville Island.



Photo from the Henry Ewert Collection. Reprinted with permission.

by Greg Klein

Between 1890 and 1958 about 600 streetcars and interurban trains criss-crossed the city, extending as far as New Westminster, Burnaby Lake, Steveston and Chilliwack. Nearly 200 of them were built in New Westminster, some beautifully constructed with Douglas fir and cedar. Of the 600, only 10 remain.

Yet they played an integral role in Vancouver's formative years. They strongly influenced settlement, development, industry and leisure. Street railways and the city enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, according to historians Heather Conn and Henry Ewert. Their book, *Vancouver's Glory Years: Public Transit 1890 to 1915*, was published just last month and provides a fascinating look at the social history of an exciting period.

But if streetcars and interurbans were

so important, why weren't more of them saved, if only as mementos?

The demise resulted from the Rails-to-Rubber program of the 1940s and '50s, in which B.C. Electric phased out streetcars in favour of trolley buses. By 1955, Vancouver streetcars were history. Three years later, so were the interurbans. Private automobiles were both a cause and effect. Rapid transit fell into cryogenic slumber until SkyTrain opened in 1985.

Metal-body streetcars were sold for scrap. Wooden-body streetcars and interurbans were torched. "From 1949 to 1955 there were daily conflagrations at the Kitsilano Shops under the Burrard Street Bridge," Ewert says.

Why? "Heritage, nostalgia or environmental concerns were ideas no one heard of," he explains. "During the war people were too busy trying to stay alive. Then they wanted cars. It's amazing that even

10 out of 600 were saved."

Three of Vancouver's interurban fleet went to museums in Ottawa, California and Oregon, and a locally used streetcar now sits in Nelson, B.C. Another local streetcar forms part of the Old Spaghetti Factory in Gastown and a third resides in the stadium at North Vancouver's Mahon Park. Two local interurbans are being restored in Burnaby and Steveston. And two more have been fully restored and put back into service by the Transit Museum Society (TRAMS) on the Downtown Historic Railway.

DHR has been running from spring to autumn for six years, funded by the City of Vancouver and operated by TRAMS volunteers on a former CPR freight line between Science World and Granville Island. Plans for an extension from Science World through Chinatown and Gastown to Stanley Park, and east to the Vancouver Museum, depend on Heritage Canada forking over the funds.

The Steveston Interurban Restoration Society is preserving another car from the Vancouver-Steveston Sockeye Special line. SIRS chairperson Michel Brisebois says

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The granite sets, or cobblestones, of Frances Street bear witness to the Georgia East streetcar line, which started its 20-year run in 1906.

Dec. 7 **Christmas Tea at the Neely Mansion.** An Historic Seattle event at one of King County's most ornate homes. 1-4 p.m. \$15 members, \$20 non-members. Pre-register: (206) 622-6952.

Dec. 9 **Stimson-Green Mansion and Dearborn House.** Tour two of Seattle's most stately, historic residences with Larry Kreisman. Second Tuesday of each month, 1 p.m. Pre-register at (206) 622-6952.

Dec. 11 **Women of Vancouver: The Early Years.** Jolene Cumming leads visitors through the history galleries, discussing the lives of Vancouver women before 1914. Free with admission to the Vancouver Museum. 7:30 p.m. 1100 Chestnut St. (604) 736-4431.

Dec. 13 **How to Look at Neighbourhoods.** John Atkin explores some districts that aren't always associated with history and heritage. \$5 Vancouver Museum members, \$10 non-members. 10 a.m. Meet at westbound 99B-line bus stop on Broadway just west of Cambie. Tours continue in January. [www.johnatkin.com](http://www.johnatkin.com)

Dec. 15 **Women of Vancouver: The Early Years.** Jolene Cumming leads visitors through the history galleries, discussing the lives of Vancouver women before 1914. Free with admission to the Vancouver Museum. 1:30 p.m. (604) 736-4431. 1100 Chestnut St. [www.vanmuseum.bc.ca/event\\_gallerytalks.htm](http://www.vanmuseum.bc.ca/event_gallerytalks.htm)

Jan. 15 **Heritage Vancouver presents: New Money for Old Things.** See page 4 for details.

### Ongoing events and attractions

**Walking Tours with John Atkin.** The historian and heritage advocate has a schedule too busy to list here. Does anyone know Vancouver better? [www.johnatkin.com](http://www.johnatkin.com)

**Hidden Treasures Tours.** Explore the depths of the Vancouver Maritime Museum basement, where 95 per cent of the museum's artifacts are stored. Tours take place Dec. 9 and 11, and most Tuesdays and Thursdays from January to April. Free. 4:30-5:30 p.m. 1905 Ogden Ave. Contact Marian Toft to pre-register: (604) 985-7566 or [donorrelations@vancouvermaritimemuseum.com](mailto:donorrelations@vancouvermaritimemuseum.com) [www.vmm.bc.ca/programs\\_hidden\\_treasures.htm](http://www.vmm.bc.ca/programs_hidden_treasures.htm)

**Chinatown Walking Tours.** Tues.-Sun. 11 a.m. & 2 p.m. \$6 adults, \$4 seniors, students and kids. Chinese Cultural Centre, 50 East Pender St. Call (604) 658-8883 to confirm.

**Industrial Designers' Show.** Architectural Institute of B.C. An exhibition of recent industrial design ending Dec. 12. Jan. 9 to

See [www.heritagevancouver.com](http://www.heritagevancouver.com) for the Lower Mainland's most comprehensive list of heritage and history-related events

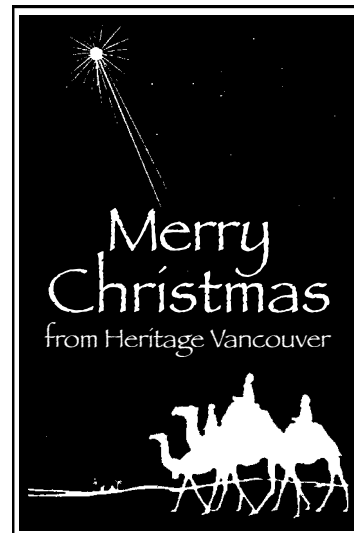
## mark your calendar

Feb. 20: Sustainability 2003-2004. A showcase of design that integrates a viable economy, protection of the environment and social well-being. Mon.-Thurs. 9-5:30 p.m., Fri. 9-1 p.m. Free. 440 Cambie St. (604) 683-8588. [www.aibc.bc.ca/](http://www.aibc.bc.ca/)

**Roedde House Museum,** 1415 Barclay St. Tour this 1893 Queen Anne Revival house. Wed.-Fri. 2-4 p.m. \$4 adults, \$3 seniors, students and children, free for kids under 5. Phone (604) 684-7040 to confirm, arrange group tours or inquire about concerts and special events. Afterwards, walk along Barclay Heritage Square.

**Irving House,** 302 Royal Ave., New Westminster. Tour an 1865 home. Sat.-Sun. 12:30-4:30 p.m. By donation. The adjacent museum opens the same hours. The house and museum closes from Dec. 22 to Dec. 26.

**London Heritage Farm,** 6511 Dyke Rd., Richmond. Tour an 1898 house and 4.6-acre farm. Sat.-Sun. 12-4 p.m. By donation. Contact (604) 271-5220 or [londonhf@telus.net](mailto:londonhf@telus.net) to inquire about weekday group tours or teas. The house closes from Dec. 22 to Jan. 31. Nearby sites include Britannia Heritage Shipyard Park, Gulf of Georgia Cannery, Steveston Museum and Steveston village.



### Join Heritage Vancouver

Individual membership \$25, Family \$30, Corporate \$50, Patron \$100.

Members receive a monthly newsletter and reduced rates for Heritage Vancouver events.

**HERITAGE VANCOUVER**

[www.heritagevancouver.org](http://www.heritagevancouver.org)

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# Westminster Abbey's Corbusian influences

Westminster Abbey Chapel  
34224 Dewdney Trunk Rd.,  
Mission, B.C.  
Gardiner Thornton Gathe  
& Associates 1951-55

**F**ounded as only the third Benedictine monastery in Canada, Westminster Abbey relocated to its present site on rolling green hills overlooking the Fraser River in 1954. Architect Peter Thornton began plans for the overall complex in 1948, and from 1951 to 1955 his partner Asjborn Gathe designed the chapel and bell tower. Construction of the chapel proceeded at a painstaking pace until its completion in 1983.

Gathe's chapel is the physical and spiritual focal point of Westminster Abbey. Its strikingly irregular structure shows strong Corbusian influences, with thick reinforced concrete walls



zigzagging inwards and outwards in a sawtooth pattern and penetrated by narrow slit windows. The concrete walls curve inward at the top to form elliptical diagonal beams supporting a vaulted ceiling; combined with the sawtooth walls, Gathe believed this configuration would produce ideal acoustics.

The abbey's crowning glory is the central bell tower, containing 86 stained-glass windows by German artist Lutz Haufschild. Totalling over 7,000 square feet of glass, the windows are coloured to represent the four mythical elements: blue represents water, brown represents earth, violet represents air, and red and yellow represent fire.

## References

Liscombe, Rhodri Windsor. *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver 1938-1963*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1997.



Photos by Andre Kroeger

*The Canadian Architect*, June 1985.

*JRAIC*, December 1953.

*Progressive Architecture*, February 1958.

*Western Living*, March 1985.

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it's too early to say when the job will be finished. A number of factors come into play, he says, but "if money was no object, it could be done pretty quick."

SIRS wants the vehicle in motion, he says. But attention currently focuses on body work and the interior, which makes it "easier to sell the story and raise money."

Visitors are welcome to drop by Chatham Street and No. 1 Road Saturday mornings, where volunteers usually toil between about 9 a.m. and noon.

Denis Brown says his group, Friends of Interurban 1223, has promised the City of Burnaby to finish restoration by September 2006. "We're actually ahead of schedule, although we did the easy work first. Our mandate is to restore the interurban to

museum condition, not running condition, then return it to Burnaby Village Museum." Visitors may drop by Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, from 9 a.m. to noon, at 6857 Royal Oak Ave.

If rail lost out to rubber, you won't hear TRAMS calling for vengeance. Besides



Photo by Dianna Ewert. Reprinted with permission.

**Beauty in motion: Trams 1207 and 1231 are still rolling after all these years.**

running two refurbished interurbans and working on a Belgian streetcar, TRAMS restores vintage buses.

"We have 12 that run," says chairperson Dave Asselin. "Others need considerable work. We probably need about 50 to 60 years of work to repair the buses we have." TRAMS has about 100 members, with maybe 25 or 30 active volunteers. Some of their buses are rented for

special events, like the Vancouver Museum's Neon Tours and Secrets of the City. Others are popular with movie crews.

Local interurbans, meanwhile, can be seen in miniature at the Granville Model Trains Museum on Granville Island. These scale models are "very accurate," according to Ewert. "The chaps who did them, like most modellers, are Swiss watchmakers/fanatics."

A little-known resource is a BCER video with historic footage of Vancouver streetcars. Back in 1950, a B.C. Electric employee filmed Vancouver's streetcar system extensively. TRAMS provides nearly two hours of this footage in VHS for \$20. A DVD will be released in about a month, Asselin says. More information is available at [www.trams.bc.ca/tram0802.html](http://www.trams.bc.ca/tram0802.html).

Maybe, as Ewert says, it is amazing that as many as 10 out of 600 vehicles were saved. For their preservation, we have to thank some dedicated organizations and hard-working volunteers — and for putting all this in fascinating perspective, historians Conn and Ewert.

## Vancouver Museum gets \$2-million boost

Courtesy of the Canada/B.C. Infrastructure Program, the Vancouver Museum is getting a \$2-million infusion. The cash comes from a \$15-million commitment by Ottawa and Victoria for 16 infrastructure projects in B.C.

The money will go to the third stage of expansion of the museum's permanent galleries. "We have massive underground storage for our collection," says museum CEO Pauline Thompson. "With about 100,000 objects in the collection worth approximately \$45 million, the infrastructure project will allow us to get more of that collection on exhibit."

Revitalization plans include the expansion of the permanent Vancouver Stories Galleries, which illustrate the history of Vancouver. The next phase will include galleries about the 1960s and 1970s.

## Visit often!

[www.heritagevancouver.org](http://www.heritagevancouver.org)

If you haven't seen our Website for a while, you're in for a surprise. Even if you haven't seen it for a week or so, you're in for a surprise.

The Heritage Vancouver site is updated frequently, with vital information about our organization, our issues, our activities and lots of neat stuff about Vancouver.

So come back often. You'll find it's worth repeat visits.

## report card

### Stanley Park Pedestrian Overpass

Built in the early 1920s, this graceful structure reflects the early development of the Georgia Street entrance.

Leading to the Lord Stanley monument, the overpass was designed as a grade-separated crossing over Stanley Park Drive. The concrete bridge features an arched span and concrete railings topped with rusticated granite surmounted by post-top lamps.

Parks board staff would prefer to build a new overpass rather than maintain the historic one.



## Hey, man... Got any artifacts?

To help tell the stories of our recent past, the Vancouver Museum is looking for artifacts, photos and memorabilia of '60s and '70s Vancouver. Curator Joan Seidl seeks items for reproduction, donation or loan. Do you, or does someone you know, have any of the following items?

Photos of social action or protests taking place in Vancouver during the '60s or '70s.

Ephemera such as posters, flyers, notices, etc. for '60s and '70s Vancouver activist groups such as Greenpeace, SPEC, Protest Project 200, Stop the Freeway, Save Gastown, opposition to the Vietnam war, women's liberation, gay rights, etc.

Photos of you or your friends in hippie clothing, or of homes with hippie-style furnishings, in Vancouver.

If you can help or have suggestions for other sources, please contact Joan Seidl at (604) 736-4431 ext. 373 or [jseidl@vanmuseum.bc.ca](mailto:jseidl@vanmuseum.bc.ca).

## Our speaker series continues into the New Year!

Thursday, Jan. 15, 2004

### New Money for Old Things

Representatives of The Land Conservancy discuss their innovative organization and its new role in deciding how provincial heritage grants are handled. Find out who's handing out the money, and how. Representatives of the Heritage Society of B.C. will also join the presentation.

Thursday, Feb. 19, 2004

### Looking Back and Forward

Here's a retrospective look at the many

influential projects funded by the former B.C. Heritage Trust over its 25-year history, including some of the province's best restoration work. The future role of the province and Ottawa will also be examined, with a look at the Historic Places Initiative, an important new federal program.

Thursday, March 18, 2004

### Vancouver's Heritage Commission

This volunteer group advises city council on heritage projects and policy. Did you know they have influence in other

ways? Former commission chairpersons will offer insight into their work, their influence and the role of politics in heritage preservation.

Thursday, April 15, 2004

### The Future:

### Where Do We Go From Here?

A panel discussion with various experts on what the future holds for heritage in Vancouver and throughout B.C. and the rest of Canada. Quite simply, this is about what's going to happen next.

HERITAGE  
VANCOUVER

All talks take place at 7:30 p.m., the third Thursday of each month, at the Vancouver Museum, 1100 Chestnut St. The Vancouver Museum galleries will also be open to our members and guests on those evenings.