

# HERITAGE Vancouver Newsletter



## Our BC Mills Legacy

By Penny Street

If, between 1904 and 1910, you were homesteading anywhere in Western Canada, you had a tremendous amount of work to do in your first year if you and your family were going to make a go of it. You had to clear your land, plant a successful crop, and build a well-insulated home. If your homestead site was near to a railway line — and it likely would be, because you were probably planning to grow grains so you needed to be near a grain elevator — or a body of water, you could order a prefabricated kit house from BC Mills Timber and Trading Co. in Vancouver and it would be shipped to you by rail or barge from the BC Mills Vancouver factory.

BC Mills guaranteed that you would be able to assemble the house without any high-falutin' framing or carpentry skills. Like today's Ikea furniture, the house kits came with everything you needed to complete your house, including numbered, pre-painted panels, and a complete set of instructions. They guaranteed that you could assemble your house with ease. The 1905 BC Mills catalogue featured houses in the Settlers' Series and the Town House Series. Design A, the smallest house in the Settlers' Series, featured a one-room floor plan, all "living room," that measured 12 feet by 12 feet. At the

Above left:  
BC Mills Design A From the Settlers' Series Ready-Made Houses.  
"This series of our houses has been designed with a view of meeting the requirements of the incoming settler or miner, during the early days of his career in a new country, with a small and inexpensive dwelling which is capable of withstanding the various changes of climate."  
Design A cost \$100 in 1905.

Above right:  
1998 Canada Post stamp, Housing in Canada Series, "Prefabricated Housing."  
One of a pane of 9 stamps to celebrate Canada's excellence in housing structures. Canada Post emphasized that Canada had been "an early leader both in the construction of homes from highly processed wood products, and in the advancement of prefabricated wood housing. The prefab homes introduced by the British Columbia Mills, Timber and Trading Company of Vancouver were a significant contribution to the evolution of Canadian architecture."

other end of the spectrum, Design O-O-O in the "Town House Series" was two storeys, and included, on the main floor, a parlor, a library, a dining room, a kitchen, and a separate pantry, and, on the second floor, four bedrooms and a bathroom. BC Mills also manufactured prefab school, church, and bank kits. The prefab bank kit was actually their biggest seller, and the Bank of Commerce was one of their best customers.

BC Mills prefab kits came with plain panels, panels with doors, and panels with windows. The designs were ingenious. Unlike other prefabs in that era, which had a reputation of

Continued on page 2 **BC Mills Legacy**

continued from cover **BC Mills Legacy**

being hard to heat, drafty, and insubstantial, BC Mills panels featured weather-tight joints and an innovative insulated design made with two layers of wood separated with tar paper and an air space, so they were well-equipped to withstand the cold of prairie winters. Also, there was quality control that surpassed that of homes assembled outdoors in the elements; BC Mills panels were assembled and pre-painted in a nice dry indoor space, in the Vancouver factory, before being shipped out to the building site.

BC Mills shipped prefab home kits all over western Canada and as far east as Winnipeg, but as innovative as the BC Mills prefab design was, the company overestimated the homesteader market. BC Mills Timber and Trading Co. only manufactured and sold prefab houses for a few years (from 1904–1910). Although their ideas were precocious, even brilliant, the manufacturers made one serious miscalculation. It was a grand idea to provide easy-to-assemble prefab kits to settlers — exactly what was needed in the virtually timber-free prairies and the panel design was ideally suited to their climate. But the company failed to take into account the fact that most of the settlers were “dirt poor” and, much as they would have liked to, they couldn’t afford to purchase prefab homes.

In 1974, historians Ted Mills and Deryk Holdsworth wrote an occasional paper in the Canadian Historic Sites series called “The BC Mills Prefabricated System: The Emergence of Ready-made Buildings in Western Canada.” It contained an almost exhaustive inventory of the BC Mills structures still standing (in 1974) in western Canada, including Vancouver. According to their count, there were 14 in Vancouver; they missed three that we know of, two of which were the recently demolished cottages — a pair of Design Js — on Salsbury Drive. Interviewed recently, Ted Mills says BC Mills structures represent “an important historical phenomenon in Vancouver and a step in the evolution of wood marketing in BC and in the development of a value-added sector of the BC lumber industry.”

Today there are but seven. The recent loss of the Salsbury Drive houses makes protecting and saving these remaining seven critical.

• **401 East Waterfront** (formerly Dunlevy Street) was the general office, showroom, and sales centre for BC Mills in Vancouver. Now the building is home to the Flying Angel Seafarers Club, a seaport sanctuary for seafarers from all over the world. This is probably the most well preserved specimen in Vancouver’s remaining BC Mills inventory. In 1930, when



Left: Flying Angel Seafarers Club  
Right: 1860 Grant Street

the Vancouver Harbour Commission took over the building, it proudly announced: “The site on which the offices are located is one of historical value, for around it was built the City of Vancouver.” It includes a giant vault (shown in the 1906 plans) and support beams that are 47 feet in length. This building is an A on the Heritage Register and is Municipally Designated, but it is located in a vulnerable spot, right on the edge of the Port of Vancouver.

• **1860 Grant Street** was built for Edward Faraday Odlum, an early Vancouver City Councillor (and also a professor and a realtor). Odlum was allegedly the one who, reflecting on the fine views that could be had from the slope up from Park Drive (now Commercial Drive), named the neighbourhood “Grandview.” This house is not on the Heritage Register, but



1795 Napier Street

it should be. Of those identified thus far, this and the two Salsbury houses are the only BC Mills structures not mentioned in the 1974 Mills and Holdsworth inventory.



Left: 1735 East 1st Avenue

Right: 1550 (also known as 1556) Adanac Street

• **1795 Napier Street** is Vancouver’s only remaining BC Mills church. Built in 1908 on the northwest corner of Napier and Salsbury, it was, until 1977, the Robertson Presbyterian Church, when it changed hands and became a Fijian Hindu temple and cultural centre, the “Shiv Mandir Shree Sanatan Dharm Ramayan Mandali of Fiji.” The congregation consists of about 600 worshippers who trace their roots to Fiji. This building is a B on the Heritage Register.

• **1735 East 1st Avenue** is Vancouver’s only remaining example of BC Mills Design O-O-O, and, although quite rundown, is an example of one of the larger and more elaborate models in the Town House Series. Although clearly recognizable as a BC Mills house, it is not on the Heritage Register.

• **1550 (also known as 1556) Adanac Street** is Vancouver’s only remaining example of BC Mills Design L-L-L, another in the Town House Series, also clearly recognizable as BC Mills. It is a B on the Heritage Register but is in need of restoration.



515 and 521 Hawks

• **515 and 521 Hawks** are both BC Mills structures, built in 1904 for the Hastings Mill yard foreman. The side-by-side houses, like the now-demolished Salsbury Garden houses, represent a common practice where a builder put up a row of between two and five small workers houses and then, perhaps, lived in one and rented the others out. The Hawks Street houses are Bs on the Heritage Register, and both need some restoration.

## ADVOCACY UPDATE

**Salsbury Gardens and BC Mills Houses.** It is with great sadness we report the demolition of the two BC Mills prefab houses by the developer Richard Niebuhr on October 19. The largest of the garden trees, the Butternut and the Cypress, were also removed. The site had been in imminent danger since the September 2006 BC Supreme Court decision ruling against the jurisdiction of the Board of Variance to consider 3rd party appeals. The City re-issued development and demolition permits and last minute efforts to find a heritage developer willing to purchase the site from Niebuhr failed.



Salsbury Garden Site  
November 2006

**'Helen's' neon sign, 4142 Hastings, Burnaby.** (Wallace Neon, 1956) For decades, the 'Helen's' neon sign, featuring a little girl on a moving swing, has hung outside Helen's Children's Wear on Hastings in Burnaby. Helen Arnold's announcement of her upcoming retirement has plunged the landmark sign's future into uncertainty. As the sign is leased, it is at great risk of being removed when the shop closes. While it might find its way to a museum, we hope that a creative way can be found to keep the sign in the Heights — either in its current location or on another building-front on Hastings. If necessary, per-

haps a new business could modify the 'Helen's' lettering to a new business name in the same typography.

**'Cotswold' house, 3979 W. Broadway.** We are monitoring with concern the 'Cotswold-Cottage' style house, a 'C' listing on the Register. One of three 1930s homes designed with undulating shingle roofs to resemble thatch, this house has been listed for some time at an asking price that suggests redevelopment. The distinctive roof appears in need of significant maintenance or replacement. We are hoping that there is someone out there who will purchase and restore the home.

**Maxine's, 1215 Bidwell at Davie.** Currently operating as the 'Balthazar' restaurant/night club, this C-listed Spanish Colonial Revival has recently been purchased as part of a proposal to develop a condominium tower. As the development site also includes non-heritage property along Denman, there are opportunities to retain the heritage building in the overall project. Ideally, the Balthazar site should retain its use as an entertainment venue, contributing to the vibrant urban character of both the street and the building itself.

**Rougemont Apartments, 1689 Robson at Bidwell.** This 1911 bay-windowed Edwardian apartment block, designed by architect E. E. Blackmore, is not listed on the Register. The building is remarkably intact both inside and out. We are monitoring this one closely — it has been purchased for conversion to a language school and is therefore at risk of significant alteration.

**Stadacona Apartments, 601 Bute at Melville.** Residents report rumours the owner intends to redevelop this B-Register Edwardian apartment building within the next two years. It's on our watch list.

**Victory Square Park.** Victory Square is the former site of the original 1895 Provincial Courthouse. Although the structure was demolished prior to WWI, the historic perimeter trees still frame the park. One of those trees was recently cut down, raising additional concern about our heritage landscapes.

**Pender Hotel, 31 W. Pender.** We understand there are plans to redevelop this single-room occupancy hotel as a condominium. The hotel is listed as a 'B' on the Register. Only the ornate terra cotta façade would be retained in the new development. This proposal follows on the heels of another façade project, the Grand Hotel, in Gastown — once again highlighting a crucial question about our historic areas: districts or just façades?

**Chrysler Distribution Centre.** In light of the present City Council's resolution to consider big-box retail on Marine Drive, Canadian Tire has re-submitted its previous rezoning proposal for the Chrysler Distribution Centre site at 26 SW Marine. We understand the proposal includes the previous plan to retain the front portion of the 1955-56 office block, a significant early example of the Modern movement in Vancouver.

### Do You Live in a BC Mills House?

The tell-tale interlocking panels are the key. But, if a BC Mills house has been stuccoed — and many were in the period around 1949, when everyone was "modernizing" with stucco — it can be difficult to identify. For example, it was impossible to tell that the two houses on the Salsbury Garden site



actually BC Mills structures until current neighbours contacted members of the Greenius family, which owned the houses from 1918–1957. Their family photo album included early photos of the houses that show clearly the prefab panels (left)

Modernizing removed the dormers and verandas and stuccoed over the BC Mills panels (right).

Is stucco concealing the prefab panels on your BC Mills house? Check your family photo albums!

## WORDS FROM THE PRESIDENT

Once again it is my pleasure to serve as President of Heritage Vancouver. The newly elected Board of Directors are a dynamic group dedicated to fulfilling our Mission to act as the voice of built heritage in Vancouver through education and awareness.

The last year has been exciting. Our Society is in a very strong position, with a growing membership and increased financial stability. There has been a lot of good news this year: four of our Top Ten Endangered sites — the Evergreen Building, Black Swan Records, Fire Hall No.15 and the Kogawa House — have been preserved, although we have experienced one serious loss — the Salsbury Garden site — which has been desecrated. Compared to previous years, we feel that we have really made a difference through our carefully researched positions and our education efforts. We have also had a substantial impact on the debate about the governance of UBC and have blown the whistle on the University's shameful record of heritage preservation — if you can even call it preservation, as they continue to “clear-cut” their heritage buildings.

Our fundraising efforts have been extremely successful, especially an elegant event at Councillor Anton's home on September 20th. We also have a newly revised website with even more information online — check it out! And stay tuned for an exciting program of events that will be announced soon. We know that you will be impressed with what we have achieved and what we have planned.

Sincerely,



Don Luxton  
President  
Heritage Vancouver

## Thank You

On September 9, to celebrate our new partnership with the Davie Village Business Improvement Association, we participated as a sponsor of “Davie Day”, an annual outdoor celebration that closes down Davie Street. Our table, staffed by volunteers, promoted awareness of heritage issues; as well, we conducted two informative tours of the historic Burrard Street Bridge. The response confirmed the importance of partnering with community organizations to further heritage preservation.

On September 20, City Councillor *Suzanne Anton* hosted, on behalf of Heritage Vancouver, a gala fundraiser in her lovely home. Guests, who represented a cross section of Heritage Vancouver members, the community, architects, developers, business people and politicians, enjoyed a wonderful evening of conversation and fun. Superb food was provided by the generosity of

*Granville Entertainment* and beverages, supplied by the *Pumpjack Pub* in conjunction with its suppliers, *Vincor Wines* and *Okanagan Spring Breweries*, rounded out the elegant evening. This fabulous community support will allow Heritage Vancouver's public programs to expand in 2007.

This year's AGM was also an event of considerable elegance. On October 19, Alistair Kerr, the featured speaker, brought greetings from the Minister of Tourism, Sports and the Arts. The rest of the business of the meeting was handled expeditiously to allow all in attendance the maximum amount of time to socialize and discuss heritage issues. Delicious hors d'oeuvres, supplied through the generosity of *Sam Yehia*, were complemented by a delightful and extensive selection of wines, compliments of our president Don Luxton.

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## The best gifts in history!

### The Vancouver Museum Store

A hit with locals and tourists alike, the Vancouver Museum Store has an eclectic blend of art, jewelry and exhibit related merchandise, from hand-crafted First Nations jewelry to beautiful coffee-table books. You will truly find the best gifts in history.

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1100 Chestnut St., Vancouver  
(just over the Burrard St. Bridge)  
tel: 604-736-4431 ext. 387  
[www.vanmuseum.bc.ca](http://www.vanmuseum.bc.ca)

## HERITAGE VANCOUVER PRESENTS

**Thursday November 16/Panel**  
Discussion: “Does Heritage Matter?  
The Future of the Burrard Building at  
St. Paul's Hospital/7:30pm/  
Vancouver Museum, 1100 Chestnut St.  
Non-members \$5; Members free.

The potential move of St. Paul's  
Hospital from the downtown core  
— where it has been located since 1894  
— is a matter of keen community inter-  
est. Join Heritage Vancouver for a panel  
discussion of the hospital's future.

**Thursday December 7/Heritage  
Vancouver's Annual Christmas  
Party/5:30-7:30pm/Roedde House  
Museum, 1415 Barclay St./Non-  
members \$5; Members free.**