

NO IDLE HANDS

From the Parlour to the Rec Room: Leisure Choices in Richmond, 1875-1955

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Printed with the assistance of the Friends of the Richmond Archives
and the
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by

MARY KEEN

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Richmond family outing to Stanley Park (ca. 1910) CRA# 1978 15 5

Leisure is the time free from work or duties. Each individual, once leisure time is available, has the opportunity to choose an activity to fill this time. Choices, whether past or present, can affect the development of a community. Such choice can be private, public, utilitarian or frivolous, planned commercial or spontaneous. Leisure choices can also follow a trend or fashion, either local or global. From the 1880's family gathering around the piano in the front parlour to a 1950's teenaged girl in bobby sox going to the Boladrome, everyone made a choice in how to spend their precious leisure time.

The first settlement patterns in the 1860s were dictated by the difficulties in transportation. As the land was dissected by many sloughs, draining into the Fraser River, these waterways provided a natural transportation route. Therefore the majority of settlers began to clear land and build houses along the sloughs and the river. Many of the early settlers were single men who, tired of seeking their fortunes in gold, or other speculative ventures, now wanted a more ordered life. Clearing

the land, building a house, and sowing the first crops kept men busy from dawn to dusk. The first winters must have been lonely, dark and wet for these men in their small cabins. The areas of settlement were isolated; Sea Island, the Slough District Mitchell Island and Steveston were remote from each other in these days of difficult transportation. The only leisure activities available to these few settlers would be gathering together at someone's cabin to share a meal or perhaps a musical evening. For the better educated man there was always the solace of reading. Hector MacDonald was known for his fondness for Shakespeare and the poetry of Burns. Once a man was settled on his land, he would either send for his family or hopefully look for a wife. A toast given for Christmas 1876 said in part

'And here may the married increase in good store,
and in all things except in their trouble,
for the single, of course, while we can't wish them
more, 'Tis our hope they'll be wise and get double'.

Family homes rapidly became the centres for hospitality in the district. If the farm or business was sufficiently profitable, a piano was bought for the parlour and many evenings were spent actively enjoying music. During this late Victorian age life was, for most people, strictly defined into the areas of work and leisure and time was not to be wasted. 'The Devil makes work for idle hands'. Ladies would spend their few quiet hours in needlework, tatting, knitting and quilting. Visits to other households were treasured as bright days on the calendar. Women would often socialize with an underlying purpose in mind such as a quilting bee or berry picking.

The head of the household, in these early days, would also have few hours for leisure at his disposal. Men would also socialize through work oriented events such as barn raising or house building but such days would be mainly labour intensive. Hunting, in other countries a prerogative of the gentry, was a necessary part of clearing the land and also a contribution to the family pantry. Fishing was both a commercial enterprise

and a private one. Some men would indulge in card playing, frowned on by the more respectable ladies.



Presbyterian Church, Sea Island (ca. 1895)

CRA# 1984 17 81

As the areas of settlement grew, the need for more amenities became apparent and the islands were formed into the Municipality of Richmond in 1879. The first school was established in 1880, in the brand new Town Hall and the second school opened in 1885 on the London property. Church services began in private homes, such as the McCleery's residence and Hugh Boyd's farm. The first church building was a small Methodist church at London's Landing in 1885, followed by a Presbyterian church on Sea Island in 1886.

Although the initial churches were considered to be mission churches and would have been financed elsewhere, much leisure time was devoted to the establishment and maintenance of both church and school buildings.

The road by-law was passed at an early Council meeting and this decision would change life for many residents. Plank roads were constructed on a grid basis all over the new municipality beginning with No.2 Road in 1883. Now the possession of a family horse would open up a much larger world for all members of the family. Mothers and children could go out visiting on a regular basis, picnics could be arranged, shopping trips to the newly established stores in Steveston and church services could be attended in all weathers.

The building of the Steveston Opera House in 1890 was the beginning of a decade of growth in leisure activities available to the residents of Richmond. The Opera House was the venue for a wide range of social events and performances. Commercial entertainment came to Steveston with the minstrel shows and visiting concert troupes. Church services, dances and community get-togethers were held in the Opera House on a regular basis. In 1892 the very first annual Richmond Agricultural Show was organized by the Agricultural Society. These annual day long shows would become highlights of the year for many and were precursors of the annual May Queen and Salmon Festivals. The Richmond Agricultural Show was a chance to see and be seen, to show off one's prowess in producing good stock, vegetables and baking, a chance for the community to come together and feel part of the progress of the municipality. Choosing to come together at these annual events meant that the average family supported the efforts of the organizers and the municipality to create a sense of Richmond as a community.

Steveston was a major centre for the fishing industry at this time and although settled by families to a great extent it



Richmond Municipal Hall (ca. 1888)

CRA# 1984 17 77

was a place of recreation for the single man. The canneries attracted itinerant workers from all parts of the province and elsewhere. These men with money in their pockets were a ready market for a host of commercial social activities. The first private social clubs were licensed in 1895 'for the mutual recreation and improvement of members'. These clubs became so popular and notorious that the following year a petition was circulated requesting the granting of liquor licences to hotels and the closure of the clubs. The first hotel was licensed in 1897 and a small building boom of hotels followed. Brothels, gaming houses, bootlegging and opium dens flourished in Steveston during the fishing season and by 1909 it was reported that there were 76 gaming houses. A considerable contrast to the leisure hour activities of the respectable majority.

Regulating the itinerant workers and their concurrent illegal activities led to the seasonal increase in police constables whose numbers would grow to 10 or more during the Steveston

summers. Games of chance were very popular including fantan, poker and blackjack. Although liquor sales in the hotels were legal, apart from the war-time period of prohibition 1916-1921, there was always a flourishing trade in bootleg whisky. These traders in illegal alcohol were often well-known to the police and were fined on a regular basis or put in jail. They still carried on their business with varying degrees of success. The leisure activities in Steveston were generally commercially based to appeal to men with money to spend in the pursuit of pleasure. The choices were becoming more diversified and were influenced by the male segment of society. In 1909 another facility was built in Richmond to encourage the spending of money on fleeting promises.

The Minoru Racetrack opened in Brighthouse on August 21 1909 with 7000 people in attendance. The sponsors of the enterprise, which was named after the Epsom Derby winner, were a group of 5 businessmen who purchased the land from



Steveston saloon (ca. 1910)

CRA# 1984 37 11



First airplane visitor to Richmond (1910)

CRA# 1978 15 18

Sam Brighthouse. The racing was managed by private enterprise who deducted an operating percentage from the bets placed at the pari-mutuels. The Richmond Municipality assessed taxes, granted licences and also allowed non-racing events to take place at Minoru Park. An event of considerable excitement took place in 1910 when Charles Hamilton flew a Curtiss bi-plane over the park as the first flight west of Winnipeg. Hamilton then challenged a racehorse and rider to a one mile race, giving the horse a lengthy start. Prince Brutus, the horse, maintained his lead and won by 10 seconds. Several flights took place from Minoru Park over the next few years as the popularity of flying grew but the major attraction remained the horse racing. The inter-urban railway would bring fans from all over the lower mainland to Minoru Park to attend the race meetings. The crowds were dominated by men but it became more respectable for women to attend.

As the population of Richmond grew in the 1890s, churches became a major factor in the social life of the family, particularly for the women. The talents of these hard-



Horse race at Brighthouse racetrack (ca. 1940)

CRA# 1977 2 42

working farm and store owners wives were used to raise monies to build and furnish the churches and living quarters of the clergy. The first churches were built by the Presbyterians on Sea Island and at South Arm, the first Methodist church was built on Sea Island in 1891 and St. Anne's Anglican Church was built in 1892 in Steveston. Each church would have its own group of industrious ladies who would gather together on a regular basis to fund raise and make furnishings for the church. The earliest group were the Women's Missionary Society formed in 1892 to supply clothing for the Mission at Alberni but all churches also had their form of the Ladies Aid Society.

The Ladies Aid Society of the 1920s of the Richmond United Church documents events which would have been typical for all such groups from the turn of the century to the

beginning of World War II. The ladies would meet in each other's homes on a monthly basis, plan an annual bazaar, a strawberry festival, possibly a chicken supper and other fund-raising events. Each special date on the calendar would have its own celebration; for instance, a St. Patrick's Day dinner of mutton stew and steamed potatoes. Much deliberation would go into the dispersing of the funds raised by these events. The hostess for the day would pass around tea, cookies and small cakes while the members continued to talk and work on their needlework. Many quilts were made during these meetings and were given to the clergy, a deserving family or raffled off at the bazaar. Most Ladies Aid groups consisted of up to 20 members, once the numbers went over that amount, the group would be divided into small groups by area with convenors to report to the main Ladies Aid representative. Although the groups met with a serious intent, the fellowship, support and



Richmond United Church (1930)

CRA# 1977 15 55

friendship were of paramount importance to these women. This was truly socializing with purpose to produce a useful end.

Occasionally the Ladies Aid group would arrange a concert or play to be performed with local talent. These events would bring in additional funds but also allow all members of the family to attend together. Entertainment for the family was largely limited to church-sponsored concerts, school plays, a rare picnic in Stanley Park, or the annual Agricultural Shows. The lives of children would be fully taken up by school, farm or house chores, family entertainment, Sunday School and playground games. There was little or no commercial entertainment designed specifically for children. In Richmond the big day for all school children was the May Day Celebrations at Minoru Park. Started in 1922 this celebration would continue until 1932 when the Great Depression took its toll. A May Queen was crowned and she and her attendants would process in a large parade to Minoru Park. There was dancing around the maypole, folk dancing and marching drills performed by all the students in Richmond Schools. The marching drills were always a topic of conversation as the students marching in precision would come into position, kneel down, put on white caps, tip their heads forward and words would appear to the onlookers, such as *Richmond* and *Jubilee*. The children would also participate in sports, races and be given treats such as ice cream and lemonade. These events were a highlight of the year for all Richmond school children and an early example of the municipal bureaucracy providing leisure activities for the community.

As the community of Richmond grew throughout the 1920s and 1930s leisure time increased for many people as more labour saving machines were invented and the economy became more diversified. Entertainment in general was community based with an emphasis on fund-raising. There were regular events such as whist drives, bazaars, community dances in the Orange Hall or the Cambie School Gym, amateur dramatic clubs and strawberry festivals. Personal celebrations such as weddings, 21st birthday parties and christenings were



Maypole dancers (ca. 1930)

CRA# 1977 24 104

often reported in the Marpole-Richmond Review. Leisure in the early 1930s continued to be community based with mostly home grown activities. As the Depression era began to lift, world wide events and trends began to influence the social scene.

The community dances were still held as before in the Cambie School gym but now often had a theme following American trends. An example was a dance held in January 1937 advertised as a 'Night in Haarlem complete with blackface orchestra'. The same entertainers and musicians as previously but in a jazzy style. These themes were perceived to be a more sophisticated method to attract more participants to the same recurring events. The coronation of King George VI was heralded by an outpouring of patriotic fervour. The

social events were similar, whist drives, dances, teas, etc., but all were based on celebrating the renewal of the British monarchy after the disillusionment of the abdication. The fervour was not restricted to citizens of British descent as the Japanese School students carried 1500 lanterns in a procession and the Japanese area of Steveston was highly decorated with red, white and blue. Also in August 1937, Dr. Norman Bethune lectured on a more sombre world event, the Spanish Civil War, in his talk on 'Communism and Christianity'. The social events of 1937 in Richmond seemed to reflect the coming conflicts in Europe.

As the economy began to improve trends in leisure started to move towards a more commercial base. The hayloft in the McNair's barn was available for roller skating, barn dances for 700 people were held attracting people from all over the lower mainland. In 1939 the very first visit of the Ringling Brothers Circus must have delighted all those children whose parents could afford to take them. The big tents were pitched on Grauer's field, Sea Island, thereby being ideally placed for Richmond and Vancouver patrons alike. Although dances were still prime fund-raising events, the trend towards professional musicians grew. There were frequent weekly advertisements in the Richmond Review for dances featuring touring bands, some more well-known than others. The major factor in commercial entertainment in the 1930s, moving pictures, was not available yet in Richmond. Eugene Greczmiel started silent picture shows in Steveston in 1929 on Moncton Street but by 1930 he had built the Marpole Theatre which was easily accessible via the inter-urban railway to all Richmond residents. This growing movement towards being entertained by professionals rather than amateurs, passive entertainment rather than active, was not halted by World War II.

For the first year of the war, many Richmond activities continued as before, but now the whist drives, teas and community dances changed their fund-raising focus. The means remained the same but the end was now the war effort. By 1941 the individual efforts of such groups as the Girl Guides,



War Bond Pledge Drive (ca. 1944)

CRA# 1984 7 10

Ladies Aid and volunteer associations were being channelled through the Richmond Branch of the Canadian Red Cross. In March 1941 the Red Cross had its own column in the Marpole-Richmond Review not only giving nursing tips and advertising first-aid courses but also listing its own fund-raising events, often with professional performers. These efforts raised over \$50,000 in 1941 alone. Meetings were also held in homes where women met to knit or sew for the soldiers and nurses overseas. As the war progressed, the community came together at such events as the 1943 Richmond 'Victory Carnival' at Brighthouse. This was the first major community event for all ages since the reinstatement of the May Queen Carnival in 1939. The carnival featured horse racing, sports events, a car and bicycle parade and games such as *Hit Hitler*. During the war years, servicemen were entertained by the Richmond Hostess Club, a social canteen.

As the servicemen returned from Europe and the Pacific, the social scene began to evolve and respond to the changes in society. You were still requested to please bring your own

sugar to a Canadian Legion whist drive and Reeve R.M. Grauer came out emphatically against having beer parlors in Richmond but the feeling of change was in the air. By February 1947 the inter-urban timetable was changed to allow for more late night passengers and the council had passed resolutions granting licenses for two theatres in Richmond. The Steva Theatre opened in October 1947 in the old Japanese Temple which had



Lulu Theatre (1958)

CRA# 1988 18 31

been purchased by W.Thorne. One of the first films to be shown was 'Captains Courageous' starring Spencer Tracy. The movie theatre proposed for Brighthouse would take considerably longer to build. Messrs Gaskin and Little who were granted the original license to build a theatre were unable to find the requisite funding and three local men eventually built the theatre in 1948. Messrs Siverton, Thompson and Mudry completed the building, near the corner of Westminster Highway and No.3 Road, in record time but then sold it prior to opening night to Mr. Peter Barnes. The Lulu Theatre opened

on May 12 1948 showing Bing Crosby in 'Blue Skies'. The bill was changed three times a week and admission was Adults 40 cents, children 20 cents. Mr. Barnes, a shrewd businessman, also held a special matinee on Saturdays for children, charging 5 cents.

June 1948 saw yet another choice for entertainment when the Boladrome was opened at the corner of No.3 and



No.3 Road and Park Road (1958)

CRA# 1988 18 24

Park Roads. This venture was owned and operated by Les Gould and George Brunton, both local businessmen and both members of the Lions Club. All the opening night's proceeds were donated to the Richmond Lions Club to go towards the club's Inhalator Car Fund. Bowling quickly became an all ages leisure pastime as housewives', children's and firefighters' etc., leagues were formed.

Although mass entertainment was usually on a commercial basis, there was still a need for grass roots

involvement. An editorial in the May 7 1947 issue of The Marpole-Richmond Review extolled the virtues of being a member of a service club. World War II had ended but many returning servicemen missed the comradeship of those years and Richmond experienced a boom in men's service clubs.



Kiwanis Club of Richmond (1945)

CRA# 1987 57 1

Such organizations, the Lions and Kiwanis Clubs, personified the ethic of socializing for a worthy cause. The regional drama festival was an excellent example of a group effort benefitting the community at large. As the municipality began to grow dramatically, the infrastructure was enhanced by many volunteer efforts. This would continue as individuals chose to use their leisure hours to improve their community.

Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s the leisure choices remained a mix of private and public based activities with many traditional events existing alongside the movies and bowling. In general terms the public normally went out of their houses to be entertained or to participate in volunteerism. As the municipality grew, there was a need for more community buildings in different areas. Various community halls were proposed and by 1952 a pledge drive was organized to fund the Steveston Community Centre, to be built on land purchased by the Steveston Community Society in 1947. This land was purchased through monies received from the annual Salmon Queen Festival held on Dominion Day.

As the community grew together through these advances, an invention was becoming publicly available that would change the leisure choices completely. In 1950 television sets were on display in store windows but as yet the sound and picture were not received at the same time. By the time of the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 you could purchase a 21 inch Westinghouse television for \$449. The CBC transmitter was built in 1953 and by 1954 guaranteed reception of at least two channels was offered to Richmond. This mass commercial entertainment would change leisure forever. An editorial in September 1952 queries the benefits of television stating that there is no doubt that it encourages physical inactivity but also could be a very powerful education tool. By installing a television in the home, a family would return to home based entertainment in their recreation room. The choices, to a certain extent had come full circle.

The development of Richmond from a pioneer settlement, to a small farming and fishing community and then to the emerging suburban entity of the middle 1950s was reflected in the social and leisure life of the residents. Leisure activities were initially necessarily restricted to the confines of hearth and home but as the community became more established, the growth of commerce and the economy gave people a choice between private and public activity. As the life of the family moved into the mainstream of community life,

women played a very active part in formulating much of the social aspects. The leisure time of the family began in the front parlour of the 1880s, moved slowly into the wider community through the auspices of church and school and then beyond with the introduction of mass commercial entertainment. The major innovation of readily available television would return the family, albeit in a passive role, to the home and recreation room. Global events and trends would also influence the citizens of Richmond, the leisure activities of the individual were drawn into the culture of the time.

The daily choices, often spontaneous and random, made by an individual or a family would shape the community of Richmond. A person could choose to become a member of a volunteer organization which would endeavour to help the less fortunate. Or someone else would pick up on the latest trends in entertainment elsewhere and decide to actively campaign for a movie theatre. The movement of leisure activities from the parlour into the community was facilitated by the response of the municipality and commercial businessmen. The role of the municipality in the providing of leisure facilities grew rapidly concurrent with the growth of Richmond. The initial involvement with the early community centres and the May Queen Festivals blossomed into the all-encompassing municipal leisure infrastructure of today's city.

The progress of the municipality from 1879 to 1955 was reflected in the growth of leisure opportunities for its citizens. Such opportunities were available throughout Canada but the combination of these choices helped to create the community of Richmond.