

by Valerie Giles, Ph.D.

Remembering . . .

Old houses should be lovingly maintained

The Prince George Community Heritage Commission accomplished an important project in 1995 with the publication of There's Life in These Old Houses -- a tribute to a selection of pre-1930 heritage homes in Prince George. With full-page colour photographs and short descriptions of each one's history, the book makes a fine keepsake and is still sold at the Fraser-Fort George Museum.

More people should care about old houses because their numbers are dwindling. Almost every new construction involves the demise of somebody's once-loved home. The ones left standing impart features that were practical or stylish for their time and inform us about aspects of people's lives at the time they were built. More importantly, old houses portray the architectural history of our city. They are an interesting visual record.

Affection for old houses often grows out of childhood memories. My Grandmother's house was built on Vancouver's Fairview slopes above False Creek. It was a proud chocolate brown Edwardian with a verandah and stout cream-coloured columns. Clad in clapboards at the bottom with fish scale shingles on the upper floor, it had three levels of balconies at the back to survey the yard. In one corner, a forty-foot Queen Anne cherry tree beckoned us to climb and in the other, a blackberry vine tangled and spread big enough for us to cut tunnels and crawl around underneath it. It produced blackberries the size of gumdrops. Beside the house was a "no-man's-land" where we weren't supposed to play. It was built up with clinkers from the coal furnace. Those clinkers, mysteriously, caused many a scraped knee!

The front door had a large oval window with beveled side lights, all discretely covered in lace curtains. Inside, the staircase had a banister sturdy enough for sliding. A wide pocket door slid open to the left of the entry hall revealing the living room, where bay windows looked out to the verandah and the front yard. Under the windows and beside the walk, English daisies and foxgloves seeded and came back every year through the decades. The living room led into a separate dining room and then into the kitchen at the back. The kitchen was large, and by the time we knew it, it had built-in cupboards. One pantry had the unusual feature of being screened at the outside wall, thereby allowing food to be kept cool in the years before refrigeration was available. From the large kitchen window, there was a commanding close-up view of the downtown office tower lights by night and the picture post card sight of the North Shore mountains by day.

Three large upstairs bedrooms had imposing mirrored wardrobes, and the biggest included a walk-in closet. Although there was only one bathroom in the house, it was spacious enough to accommodate furniture -- chests of drawers and a vanity -- and an old elephant-footed tub that stood away from the wall.

The real adventure in that house was the dimly-lit basement with all its ominous shadows and creaky doors. Although my brother and I considered it definitely “too scary” ever to go down there on any Mother-requested errand, we gleefully scampered downstairs to listen by the coal bin when colliers came to empty 100 pound sacks of anthracite through the verandah’s trap door.

After my Grandmother died, the house was rented and over the years some true characters came to live in it. As teenagers, my brother and I took up residence there the first year I attended UBC and he went to St. George’s. In that time, we witnessed the beginning of the neighbourhood’s deterioration. We became uncomfortable living there and moved back home at the end of the school year. For the next three years we commuted to Vancouver from thirty miles away. Our visits to the house became infrequent.

Eventually, the neighbourhood seriously declined and this house, along with its neighbours, was sold. It got torn down and in its place stands a soul-less boxy little apartment building, built for the condominium market. I can’t imagine that anybody would ever develop an attachment for the structure that replaced that grand old house.

Years ago, an architect asked me what features I’d want in a house. “It would have to have a verandah,” I began. When I finished the description, I realized I’d mentioned many of the things I liked about my Grandmother’s house. Now, it exists only in my memory. If I could wish it back, it would be there in a heartbeat.

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