

# Vancouver Historical Society

## NEWSLETTER

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### Our Friend Joe: The Joe Fortes Story

April Speaker: Lisa Anne Smith

When a young West Indian sailor named Seraphim “Joe” Fortes (1863-1922) arrived in Vancouver in 1885 aboard the steamship *Robert Kerr* with little to his name, no one could possibly have suspected he would be voted “Citizen of the Century” 101 years later. Having left his native Trinidad in his mid-teens, Joe worked in Britain for several years before sailing for the West Coast in 1884 to begin a new life.

After the disastrous fire, which completely destroyed the recently incorporated City of Vancouver on June 13, 1886, Joe worked as a shoeshine boy and porter in Gastown at the Sunnyside Hotel and as a bartender at the Bodega Saloon on Cordova and Carrall.

He made his home at English Bay, living in a tent on the beach during the milder months of the year. He

then moved into a cottage at the foot of Bidwell Street on the shore side of Beach Avenue. His little house was later moved to the other side of the street, just east of Alexandra Park.

After years of being a self-appointed lifeguard, he was officially hired by the City as such in 1900.



**Joe Fortes in front of his cottage**

*Photo: City of Vancouver Archives CVA 677-441*

Fortes saved dozens of lives (officially 29 lives) and taught three generations of Vancouver children how to swim. In 1900, not only was his lifeguard status made official, but so were his official duties as swimming instructor and special constable of English Bay beach. Ten years later, he was presented with a gold watch and an additional cheque. His genuine rapport with citizens of all ages endeared him to the city.

Sadly he passed away from a bout with pneumonia at Vancouver General

Hospital on February 4, 1922, just five days before his 59th birthday. On February 7, 1922, thousands of mourners lined Vancouver’s streets to bid farewell to “our friend Joe.” In 1927 the Joe Fortes Memorial Fountain was built in Alexandra Park. In later years, the Vancouver Public Library’s West End branch was named



**Lisa Anne Smith**

*Photo: Ronsdale Press*

for him as was a popular downtown restaurant. The Vancouver Historical Society named Joe Fortes “Citizen of the Century” on the occasion of Vancouver’s centenary in 1986. This past February, Canada Post issued a stamp in honour of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Joe Fortes.

Historians and authors Lisa Anne Smith and Barbara Rogers have written separately on a variety of subjects but collaborated on *Our Friend Joe: The Joe Fortes Story*, (Ronsdale Press, 2012).

*Bruce M. Watson*

Next Meeting: 7:30 p.m., Thursday, April 25, 2013 at Museum of Vancouver

## President's Notes

It may seem a cliché, but is absolutely true: Volunteers are the lifeblood of organizations like the Vancouver Historical Society.

Our entire executive is comprised of volunteers, and many of the activities we enjoy would not be possible without volunteers. The strength and sustainability of the Society depends on the support of our volunteers.

My own experience has been very fulfilling, both in the variety of experience and the pleasure of meeting and working with wonderful people. From organizing the field trips over the past several years to working alongside Bruce Watson, Larry Wong or Bob McDonald to formulate our annual speaker series, my perspective of the breadth of Vancouver's history has expanded. We have so many stories to discover, so many aspects to explore, so many viewpoints to consider... we truly live in a fascinating place, which I really only glimpsed before volunteering to be a director with the Society.

Even if you're not sure if you'd like it, or not sure how you could assist, or simply on the fence: I encourage you to give volunteering with the Society a try. You can easily "get your feet wet" without fully jumping in. You don't necessarily have to sit on the board or on a committee. Volunteering can be as little as suggesting field trips or locations to visit, subjects and speakers for talks, writing newsletter articles, working a table at the luncheon or general meeting...the options are endless.

In fact, we may not even know we need a volunteer...if so, suggest what we're missing!

Thank you to each and every individual that has donated their time and energy to deliver our annual program of activities, year after year. Whether you have stepped down from active participation or are currently graciously handling a responsibility: You are to be applauded.

*Scott Anderson, President*  
*sanderson@vancouver-historical-society.ca*

## BCHF Conference in Kamloops

The British Columbia Historical Federation's (BCHF) annual conference May 9th to May 11th promises to be another exciting event for historians, researchers, and anyone with an interest in B.C. history. The event has been dubbed "Historic Grasslands 2013" to reflect this year's location in Kamloops.

As always, many interesting presentations, workshops and field trips have been organized. Presentations include the history of the surrounding and changing grasslands, and histories of local ranching and mining. Workshops include topics about blogs and wikis on the internet and how it relates to history. There will also be workshops on copyright for digital and print media, and how to develop a tour guide program. Field trips include a tour of the Land Titles Office, several museums and even a heritage train ride.

The BCHF looks forward to seeing members of affiliated historical societies (like the Vancouver Historical Society) at the conference. For more information about the complete agenda, fees, accommodations, please visit the BCHF website at: [www.bchistory.ca/conferences/2013](http://www.bchistory.ca/conferences/2013)

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## The VHS Needs a Representative

The Society is looking for a member volunteer to serve as a representative to the BC Historical Federation. Please send an email to Scott Anderson at [sanderson@vancouver-historical-society.ca](mailto:sanderson@vancouver-historical-society.ca) for details.

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## The Future of the Past is Online BC Historical Federation looking for writers

The British Columbia Historical Federation has created an online encyclopedia and they need your help in getting entries. Included there is the information about this project and how people can contribute. The editor is Derek Hayes, author of the award-winning historical atlas series.

This is a direct link to the project off their website: [http://bchistoryonline.com/wiki/Read\\_about\\_this\\_project](http://bchistoryonline.com/wiki/Read_about_this_project)

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## Welcome New VHS Members

Luke Bailey  
Tom Bottomer

Thomas H. Calder  
Alice Rose

# April Fools' Day Snowstorm

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unexpected snowfall was not an April record. That happened seven years earlier in 1929 when a total of 9.7 inches (24.6 cm) fell during a period from April 3rd to the 8th.

Philip Timms, who had been photographing the city since his arrival in the year 1900, was out with his camera on this Wednesday morning, April 1st. On Hastings Street from just west of Richards looking toward Seymour, he recorded this wonderful scene of several Vancouver pedestrians braving the inclement weather as they hurry to get wherever they must. Looking at the photo, you can almost sense how the clanging, squealing of the streetcars, purring of the automobiles and other city sounds are muffled by the wet snow. The building across the street on the far right in the photo is the original part of Spencer's department store, just to the west of their new larger building. The "Lunch" sign on the left could be above the entrance to the Jack & Jill Coffee Shop, which was at 512 West Hastings — the perfect place from which to watch an April snowstorm.

Old Man Winter's April Fools' Joke was short-lived. Traditionally April Fools' Day pranks must come to an end by noon and sure enough...the paper reported: "The sun broke through the clouds around 11:30 a.m. and helped to do its part to melt the snow."

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## Nominees for 2013-2014 VHS Executive

In its role as Nominating Committee, the current VHS Executive is pleased to submit the following full slate of nominees for the 2013-2014 Executive to be elected at our May 23, 2013 Annual General Meeting.

President	Robert McDonald
Vice President	Bruce M. Watson
Treasurer	Scott Anderson
Recording Secretary	Kellan Higgins
Director	Elizabeth Hawkins
Director	Michael Kluckner
Director	Eve Lazarus
Director	Jim McGraw
Director	Florence Sung

All terms of office are for one year beginning June 1, 2013. Additional nominations will be accepted at the AGM provided that the nominee is a current VHS member and is present.

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## Upcoming Speakers

*The VHS invites everyone (including non-members) to attend our monthly talks. The talks are free and are held at the Museum of Vancouver, 1100 Chestnut Street (close to Vanier Park) at 7:30 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of every month except June, July, August, December).*

Thursday, May 23, 2013

### **Who Fed Vancouver? The Hidden History of the Chinese Canadian Food Industry**

*Speaker: Henry Yu*

For most of Vancouver's history, much of the local produce came from farms and corner grocery stores operated by Chinese Canadians. Many Chinese Canadians were also employed as cooks working in neighbourhood restaurants, Shaughnessy mansions and on B.C. Ferries. Learn more about this fascinating aspect of local food distribution.

Thursday, Sept. 26, 2013

### **Deadlines: Obits of Memorable British Columbians**

*Speaker: Tom Hawthorn*

A good newspaper obituary is more about life than death. Obits about British Columbia's departed reflect lives of an interesting cast of characters — athletes, authors, warriors, scholars, innovators, trailblazers, writers, boxers, cowboy singers, politicians, and murderers. Their nicknames — Baby Face, Mean Gene, Alberta Slim, Professor Midas, Cougar Lady — hint at lives rich in anecdote.

Thursday, Oct. 24, 2013

### **Liquor, Lust and the Law**

*Speaker: Aaron Chapman*

From the time the Italian immigrant Filipone brothers opened the Vancouver Penthouse Nightclub in 1947, the after hours watering hole on Seymour Street became a friendly escape for everyone from world famous entertainers to some of the city's most notorious. Discover its colourful history involving vice squads, politicians, judges, and the underworld. It's a unique look at some of Vancouver's history after dark.

# “Old Man Winter’s April Fool Joke”

by Jim McGraw



Photo: Philip Timms Photographer,  
City of Vancouver Archives CVA 677-276.3

Spring had officially begun almost two weeks earlier. Spencer’s Department Store was having their spring sales event. Vancouver’s weather however, was anything but spring-like 77 years ago on Wednesday, April 1, 1936 — April Fools’ Day. Snow started falling at about 8 a.m., and according to that afternoon’s edition of *The Vancouver Sun*: “By 9 a.m. the city looked like a Christmas card with trees decked out in white and ropes of fluffy white

strung across the street where shortly before had been dull-looking wires.” The headline above this story is the one the paper used on its front page about the snow. The newspaper reports school classes weren’t cancelled and the B.C. Electric Railway’s snowplows weren’t called out, although 75 men were sent out to keep track switches clear for the streetcars and interurbans. The paper also noted the

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## Vancouver Historical Society Executive Board: 2012 - 2013 (Elected May 24, 2012)

### EXECUTIVE

President/Treasurer	Scott Anderson
Vice President	Robert McDonald
Recording Secretary	Kellan Higgins
Director (Membership)	Elizabeth Hawkins
Director	Michael Kluckner
Director	Eve Lazarus
Director (Newsletter Editor)	Jim McGraw
Director	Florence Sung
Director (Programs)	Bruce M. Watson

### APPOINTED POSITIONS

Webmaster	Quasar Data Management
Archivist	Alexandra Allen
Info Line	Bruce Watson
Newsletter Mailing	Margaret Dinwoodie

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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