

# Vancouver Historical Society

## NEWSLETTER

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### Alvo von Alvensleben: Vancouver's Flamboyant Entrepreneur

#### March Speaker: Eve Lazarus

**A**lvo (Gustav Konstantin) von Alvensleben (1879-1965) was a larger than life character who helped change the face of the city during his ten years in Vancouver. The descendant of a German noble family with very high connections, this supremely self-confident entrepreneur arrived in Vancouver with only \$4 in his pocket. Over the next decade he became Vancouver's biggest booster and, not only made and lost millions but at the outbreak of WWI having been accused of being a spy, left the city to make his mark south of the border.

After leaving Germany and briefly working on his brother's coffee farms in El Salvador, Alvo von

Alvensleben arrived in Vancouver virtually penniless in 1904. In 1907, with \$1,500 accumulated from fishing in the Fraser River, he formed the first of several real companies which

covered everything from fishing, whaling, timber, real estate and mining. Co-founder of the Vancouver Stock Exchange and the financier of the Dominion Trust building [see story on Page 4], he managed with

his family name and connections, to bring large amounts of German and European capital into Vancouver and British Columbia.

On April 2, 1908, he married Vancouver teacher Edith Westcott and had three children. His Kerrisdale estate, now Crofton House, was staffed by 13 servants. Its magnificent ceiling was carved by Charles Marega. He threw parties for 600 people.

Seeking to boost immigration

and investment in Vancouver, he co-founded the "100,000 Club", the chief aim of which was to bring Vancouver's population to that level by 1910.

Family connections to the Kaiser, however, got him in trouble. He was in Europe at the outbreak of WWI and, unable to return to Canada where a depression had wiped out most of his investments, he went to the US as did many Germans living in Canada. Deemed an enemy, the remains of his assets were seized. Fantastic rumours abounded that he was a German spy and that he was preparing to welcome a victorious Germany to Vancouver.



**Eve Lazarus**

*Photo: Matthew Dunn*

His time in the US was troubled, for in 1917 he was sent to the Fort Douglas internment camp in Utah until 1920. He went on to continue his businesses

out of Seattle but never met with the same success as he had in Vancouver.

Speaker Eve Lazarus is a longtime Vancouver journalist and the author of four books, the latest being *Sensational Victoria: Bright Lights, Red Lights, Murders, Ghosts & Gardens*.

*Bruce M. Watson*



**Studio portrait of Alvo von Alvensleben**

*Photo: City of Vancouver Archives Port P1082*

Next Meeting: 7:30 PM, Thursday, March 28, 2013 at Museum of Vancouver

## President's Notes

I've had the pleasure of attending several of the Society's annual Incorporation Day Luncheons. It's an excellent opportunity to meet other Society members in a setting more social than the monthly meetings, and I've thoroughly enjoyed the conversations at the table. The University Golf Club is always lovely and the food delicious, so it's quickly become a social event I look forward to.

This year promises to be similar, but different. After many triumphant years at the helm of the luncheon organizing, this year Elizabeth Hawkins passed the torch to Katie Adkins, who has been busy attending to the many details that go into the event. I'm looking forward to attending — I suspect it'll feel like meeting an old friend with a new suit.

I also know there may be exciting announcements in the works for next year's luncheon...but we'll get into that in the coming months!

I'm particularly excited this year to hear from our keynote speaker, Jackson Davies.

I did not grow up in Vancouver. I was born and raised in the interior, in Princeton, on a ranch several kilometres out of town. For many years CBC was the only television station available, pulled from an antenna. I have many happy memories of watching "The Beachcombers," to see what troubles the Molly's Reach gang would get into...and out of.

It was my first real window into another part of our beautiful province, the lush coastal rainforest of "The Coast." It offered a world that was multi-cultural and inclusive, all the while proving cooperation and good citizenship is the strength of any community, large or small. And it had great stories, writing, characters, and actors.

I'm looking forward to Mr. Davies' recollections about the show, and his impressions about how "The Beachcombers" contributed to the rise of the movie and television entertainment industry in Vancouver and British Columbia. I hope you are too, and that you'll join me at the luncheon!

*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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## Incorporation Day Luncheon

This year's Vancouver Historical Society Incorporation Day Luncheon will be held on Sunday, April 14th, 2013, at 12 noon at the University Golf Club, 5185 University Boulevard. The Luncheon is an annual event, commemorating the April 6, 1886 incorporation of the City of Vancouver.

There will be door prizes, the Award of Merit presentation, and as always, a terrific menu. The Luncheon is also a fun opportunity for members and friends to meet others in the community who are interested in the history of Vancouver.

This year's featured speaker will be actor Jackson Davies, in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the debut of the television show "The Beachcombers."

We would like to have a good advance estimate of attendance so please buy your tickets early. Tickets for the Luncheon will be \$35 each and you will be able to buy them at the March monthly meeting, or by mail. For mail orders, please send a cheque by April 5th to: Vancouver Historical Society, PO Box 3071, Vancouver BC, V6B 3X6, Attn: Luncheon.

*Katie Adkins*

# The Dominion Building

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Prior to its completion, in June 1909 the *Vancouver Daily Province* reported on the terra cotta in buff and red from Leeds, the polished red granite columns from Aberdeen, a two-storey high main entrance fitted with bronze-plated metal and polished wood, and a 13th floor with a large hall, a dome ceiling, 14 marble toilets and a barber shop.

Jacqui Cohen, president of Army & Navy owns the building and rents it to the same eclectic bunch that have always been attracted to its look and feel or perhaps drawn by its lower rents. Writers, barristers, accountants, artists, unionists and film directors rub shoulders in the elevators — one that has a collage of archival photos dating back to the building's birth, and the other a Tiko Kerr rendition of a wobbly looking Dominion Building which is quite unnerving after a couple of glasses of wine.

*[Eve Lazarus is a journalist, author and VHS Director. She writes the "Every House Has a Story" blog at: [www.evelazarus.com/blog](http://www.evelazarus.com/blog) from where this article has been reprinted with permission. Eve will be speaking on Alvo von Alvensleben at the VHS' featured talk on Thursday, March 28th at the Museum of Vancouver. See Page 1. — Editor]*

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## Book Now for the Prohibition Tour of Vancouver on April 27th

For the VHS's next members-only tour, we invite you to join us for a tour of Prohibition Vancouver as it was in the late 1910s. Hear about the strange brew of forces that led to prohibition in BC. See now-respectable hotels that once operated as notorious speakeasies. Uncover the story of Vancouver's most outrageous mayor, most beautiful showgirl, and most successful rum-runners.

The tour will be held on April 27th, 2013, starting location to be announced. The tour is limited to 20 people, so reserve your spot today.

For more information, contact the VHS at 604-878-9140 or email at [info@vancouver-historical-society.ca](mailto:info@vancouver-historical-society.ca).

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## Welcome New VHS Member

Janet Nicol

## 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 7:30pm on the fourth Thursday of every month except June, July, August, December).*

Thursday, April 25, 2013

### **Our Friend Joe: The Joe Fortes Story**

*Speaker: Lisa Ann Smith*

When a young West Indian sailor named Seraphim "Joe" Fortes arrived in Vancouver in 1885 with little to his name, no one could have possibly guessed that one hundred years later he would be voted "Citizen of the Century." When Joe Fortes died in 1922, his funeral was the largest the city had seen and was attended by everyone from the city's elite to the most common soul. Learn more about this fascinating man whose name now adorns a city library branch as well as a renowned restaurant.

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, trail-blazers, 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.

# Vancouver's Dominion Building

by Eve Lazarus

A few weeks ago I was standing on the 11th floor of the Dominion Building looking down its spiral staircase and thinking about architect John Shaw Helyer.

Helyer designed the 1910 building and then supposedly committed suicide by throwing himself down those same stairs at the building's grand opening.

It's quite a story, it's just not true. Helyer died from a stroke in 1919.

But just because that's an urban myth, it doesn't mean the building hasn't its own great story. For starters this overdressed red brick and yellow terra cotta structure with its oddly shaped beaux-arts roof comes from a time when architectural sculpture helped shape Vancouver. One writer called it a 19th century Parisian townhouse that should be one storey high, stretched up into an eccentric skyscraper.

It's this eccentricity that I love about the building, that and the way it dominates the corner of Hastings and Cambie. It's a reminder that this part of the city was once the heart of Vancouver with the Woodward's building to the east, a couple of newspapers and department stores within walking distance, and the original law courts across the road where Victory Square now sits. We know Victory

Square for the Remembrance Day ceremony, but when Mayor Gerry McGeer read the riot act to 4,000 unemployed workers in 1935; it was here where they gathered to protest.

The Dominion Building was financed by Alvo von Alvensleben, the flamboyant son of a German count. In the 10 years he lived here, he brought millions of dollars of German investment into Vancouver and bought up large tracts of land and houses. He lived at what is now the Crofton Girl's School and he turned the Wigwam Inn at Indian Arm into a luxury resort.

Before going fabulously broke in 1913, he'd amassed a personal fortune of \$25 million and his business interests included mining, forestry and fishing. By the time the Dominion Trust collapsed in 1914, Alvo, reviled as a spy, had already grabbed his Canadian born wife and children and fled to Seattle.

On October 12, 1914 William Arnold, the vice-president and general manager of the Dominion Trust, killed himself with a shotgun in his Shaughnessy Heights garage.

The Dominion Building is now dwarfed by high-rises, but for a short time it was the tallest building in the British Empire.

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**The Dominion Building in 1919**

*Photo: Stuart Thomson Photographer,  
City of Vancouver Archives CVA99-232*

## 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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