



Humble Roots, Deep Roots A Look at a Quintessential Chinese Canadian Family

Elwin Xie grew up in his parents' home and business, the Union Laundry on Union Street just west of Gore, land that was transformed in the early 1970s for the Georgia Viaduct's off-ramp onto Prior Street. The site of the laundry is now a Temporary Modular (Supportive) Housing building called Nora Hendrix Place.

His family is representative of many long-time working-class Chinese families – perhaps it is even the quintessential Chinese Canadian family. He and his siblings attended both Strathcona Elementary and Britannia Secondary, East End inner-city schools for working-class immigrant families during the years before Strathcona and Grandview began to gentrify.

On July 1, 2023, exactly a century since the Chinese Immigration Act – commonly and accurately known as the Chinese Exclusion Act – came into force, Library and Archives Canada made available many Chinese Immigra-



The Union Laundry on Union Street near Gore, probably in the early 1960s.

COLLECTION OF ELWIN XIE

tion documents, a treasure trove of information, complete with photographs, as Chinese were documented much more extensively than most other immigrants.

Elwin's family's connection with Canada dates back to his paternal great-grandfather, Jae Joon Sing, who hailed from the Pearl River Delta county of Yin Ping (Enping) County within the SE province of Guangdong Province and sought out the fabled Gold Mountain in the 1880s, working first to build the Canadian Pacific Railway in the new Canadian province of British Columbia. Later, he worked at the Hastings Mill on the Vancouver waterfront.

His widowed son, Jae Tong Yuen, arrived in 1911, was detained for two weeks while his identification papers were scrutinized, then joined his father at the Mill. His future wife, Sam Toon Moy, was adopted out and arrived in Canada at the age of five in 1905. She left her adoptive family in Powell River in 1919 and married Jae Tong Yuen.

They leased farmland in Richmond at River and Number 4 roads, growing vegetables and raising small livestock. But an outbreak of meningitis at the school in Richmond may have killed their son John; as the Great Depression bit further into their livelihood, the family decided to relocate to China in 1930. However, a "change in water" in their Chinese village caused illness and a reconsideration; they returned to Canada within the year and re-established themselves on a farm in a different part of Richmond, where Elwin's father Harry was born.

Harry Yuen went to China in 1936 at age 16 to learn more of his language and culture, but his timing was terrible as the Japanese army had just invaded. Harry, by then married to 15-year-old May Jick Hon, returned to Canada but was unable to bring his wife with him due to the "immigration act." They didn't reunite until 1947.

An unintended consequence for Elwin and his siblings, since their parents were separated for 11 years of the 23 years of exclusion, is that his future mother arrived in Canada unable to speak English. Hence, he grew up bilingual, speaking dialect Cantonese to his mother yet English to his father who was born on Lulu Island in 1920.

The soon-to-be-expanding family purchased the Gin Lee Laundry at 274 Union Street; Elwin and his five siblings grew up helping in the laundry and living in the mixed neighbourhood nearby

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This month's speaker:
Elwin Xie

President's Note

Happy Gregorian Calendar New Year to everyone! We're looking forward to presenting five interesting lectures before the summer break. It's a challenge coming up with new topics and good presenters, and we thank our program manager John Belshaw for getting the figurative ducks in a row.

Another type of challenge is presenting live lectures and attracting a live audience. Our numbers haven't returned to pre-Covid levels of usually 60 to 80 with a few attracting 100 or so; more typically, we have 40 to 50 people in a great big room at the MoV, but it has worked quite well and MoV is a good host. However, we may experiment with a new venue just for the February lecture on the Rupert-Renfrew neighbourhood – please stay tuned. I'd love some feedback from you, dear members, on what you want from the society: do you prefer watching the live-stream (when it's technically possible)? Do you watch the lectures after they're posted on YouTube? What topics would make you interested in attending or watching? Please drop me a line.

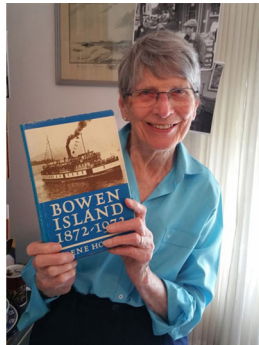
And one more thing: record-keeping. For a society that will turn 90 in a few years our records are a bit of a shambles. Secretary-Director Anne Wyness is working with City Archivist Heather Gordon to come up with a plan to make them permanently searchable and accessible so they can be a resource for the future.

Michael Kluckner, president
presidentvhs@gmail.com

Irene Howard, 1922–2023

After a long and productive life, Irene Howard died in early November, just short of her 101st birthday. Born in Prince Rupert to Scandinavian parents, she earned an M.A. in English at UBC and wrote her first book, *Vancouver's Svenskar: A History of the Swedish Community in Vancouver*, which was published by the Vancouver Historical Society in 1970, one of a number of books this society produced in that period.

She followed with a history called *Bowen Island 1872–1972*, and then wrote a biography of the first woman to be elected to Vancouver City Council entitled *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, The Unknown Reformer*, published by UBC Press in 1992, for which she received the VHS's Award of Merit in 1994 as well as the UBC Silver Medal for Canadian Biography.



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Upcoming Events

Our lectures always take place on the 4th Thursday of the month at 7 pm. We attempt to live-stream them from the Museum of Vancouver on our YouTube channel.

Thursday February 22, 2024

The Historic Context of the Rupert-Renfrew Neighbourhood: a Pre-WWII blue-collar 'suburb'

Laura Saimoto will guide us through the diverse history of this East Vancouver district. Note: this lecture may take place at the Italian Cultural Centre on Grandview Highway in East Van. Details to come in the February newsletter.

Thursday March 28, 2024

"Little Otho: The Gleam O'Hope Princess behind the founding of the Vancouver Crippled Children's Hospital

Tamara Myers and Megan Davies

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Incorporation Day Event, location and time TBA

Thursday April 25, 2024

You Got Trouble! Policing the Vancouver Waterfront in the Early Twentieth Century

Madison Heslop

Watch our past lectures on YouTube

Search for "Vancouver Historical Society on YouTube" for our channel.



YOUTH HOSTELS AND HOSTILE LOCALS: VANCOUVER'S "BATTLE..."
58 views • 2 days ago



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107 views • 3 weeks ago



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COLLECTING AND PAINTING VANCOUVER'S HISTORY - TOM...
440 views • 5 months ago

Vancouver Historical Society Executive Board: 2023 - 2024

(ELECTED MAY 23, 2023)

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NEWSLETTER TEMPLATE/LAYOUT	Kellan Higgins/MK

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The Dueck Letters, continued

By Denise Jacques

As described in the last VHS newsletter, a local family with a cache of Great War letters contacted the VHS mailbox (maintained by Vice President Fialkowski). We were asked for advice on preserving the letters and making them accessible. VHS director Tom Carter proposed that UBC iSchool digitize the material and create a basic timeline. Richard Arias-Hernandez of the School of Information, UBC, has meticulously completed this process. With a compelling interest in data management and visualization, Arias-Hernandez intends to use the computerization of the Dueck letters as a teaching exercise for future students.

The cache of correspondence has had an impact on several VHS Board members. Their preservation indicates a wider debate about how the Canadian past should be remembered. In this vein, VHS Vice-President Jan Fialkowski and I recently attended a book launch by the Canadian actor R.H. Thomson. Entitling his volume *By the Ghost Light*, Thomson uses the physicality of theatre to illustrate his theme. The title refers to the custom of leaving a ghost light on stage to glow faintly in an otherwise dark theatre.

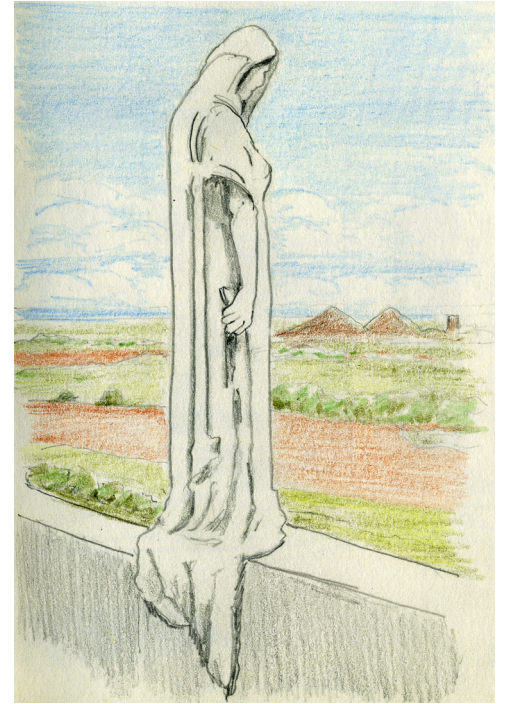
In his book, Thomson uses the phrase “architecture of purpose” to describe the stories that shaped his family’s life. He writes: “A family’s strength — and occasionally its curse — is the stories

it remembers, stories that create a map by which to navigate the years ahead.”

Eight of Robert’s great-uncles fought in the First World War. On his father’s side, of the five brothers at war—three were killed, and two returned damaged in body and mind. One of the three on his mother’s side came home to Canada. Throughout their lives, the great uncles were faithful letter writers.

Thomson confronts the benignity of much of the correspondence. “Please, Mother, send more socks.” Our brief foray into the Dueck letters confirms many encounters with lice rather than the enemy. Thomson discovered that his warrior uncles and nursing aunt more often obscured the horror of their war-time lives. As with the Dueck letters, much is revealed by comparing letters about socks or lice with a timeline of the actual battles they participated in. Thomson describes the reality of war as a vast iceberg concealing most of its substance below the water-line.

To discover what Thomson thinks of the cult of remembrance, I had a close reading of *By the Ghost Light*. The author asks how the fallen should be celebrated. How do you memorialize the losses of a war that many modern audiences consider a foolish, blood-soaked colonial exercise? Essentially, Thomson questions the use of war as a policy alternative. Like his veteran father, he believes that official remembrance celebrations are fraudulent. He posits that the statute of Mother



Canada at Vimy – sketched by Michael Kluckner on a recent visit – should be on her knees begging for the forgiveness of her native sons.

I differ. If you look again at Vimy’s Mother Canada, I see triumph and loss. The grieving mother stands upright beneath a dome of heaven blue. It may be a self-deception to aspire to die for king and country, but it still speaks of sacrifice and patriotism.

More than 650,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders served in the First World War, and 66,000 of them died, while upwards of 170,000 were wounded in the fighting.



We were fortunate once again to collaborate with Dr. Nicholas Kenney (at the back on the left) and his students in the SFU 486 “History of Vancouver” class. Our directors Jurian ter Horst and Lindsay Gibson worked on the course content, and Dr. Gibson gave a lecture on October 10th on aspects of defining the relevance of history, followed by a brief walking tour led by Michael Kluckner on the “cultural topography” of the Gastown-Chinatown area near SFU Harbour Centre. The three directors returned on December 4th to hear the students’ essay presentations, most of which were done as very professional videos. An engaging group of students – we wish them well.

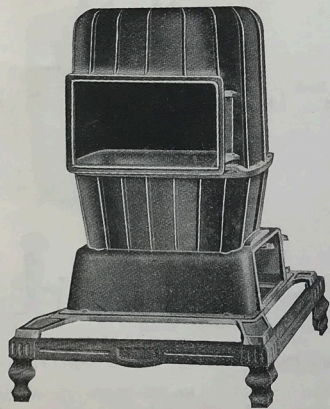
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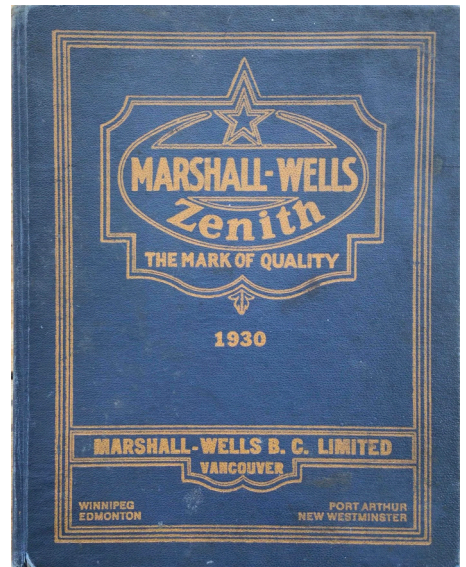
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Just the thing for those chilly January Vancouver nights, from the 1930 Marshall-Wells catalogue. Vancouver's population was 245,000 and the region's population was only 310,000 compared with the 2.5 million of today. The global population was two billion, a quarter of today's. The \$183 cost of the deluxe cabinet model was perhaps one-fifth of the annual wage of a skilled tradesman. All these comparisons lead me to recall the thick fogs of Vancouver winters 60 years ago, when many people still burned "coal, lignite, coke or briquettes" in stoves such as this. And oil, delivered by truck. And the suggestions today to be rid of comparatively clean natural gas-burning furnaces and replace them with electric heat pumps, on this year when BC Hydro will be a net importer of electricity due to the prolonged drought in northern BC. Happy 2024, everyone!

– Michael Kluckner

The history and legacy of a Chinese Canadian family in Vancouver

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that was often called Hogan's Alley, home to many members of Vancouver's black community, including Nora and Ross Hendrix, grandparents to iconic rocker Jimi Hendrix.

When freeway expansion threatened the laundry with expropriation, Harry Yuen resisted forcefully, holding out for several years for a deal that allowed them to open another laundry across the street. Ironically, a half-century later, the Georgia-Dunsmuir Viaduct is now slated for demolition.

Elwin has been able to locate many family members with the newly opened Library Archives Canada documents. His family also includes "A Paper Son" illegal grandfather and his paternal grandmother was a "Mui Tsai" "Little Sister," i.e. an indentured servant for a merchant family.

Elwin works at the newly opened Chinese Canadian Museum as a guide, and has been a museum interpreter at the Burnaby Village Museum since 2009. He is also well-known as the videographer for the Vancouver Historical Society. His

carefully crafted recordings of lectures going back to 2016 are an invaluable resource.

His presentation on January 25th will include government-created family documents: the CI 44 mandatory registration of 1923 as well as CI 30 Travel Documents and CI 45 for locally born Chinese Children. And there will be two short videos: a family genealogical video and his very funny shadow puppets video of life at the laundry. Readers of *British Columbia History* will have seen his story in the Winter 2020 issue.