

STEVESTON

the Jewel in Richmond's Crown

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TIM LYNCH

Tall Ships were a common sight in Steveston from the late 1800s until early 1900s. STEVESTON WATERFRONT circa 1898 (City of Vancouver Archives BO.P297 N.130)

Approaching the City of Richmond across the North Arm of the Fraser River in BC's Lower Mainland there is an overwhelming sense that the City is on the move. The world class Vancouver International Airport is actually located in Richmond. The building of the Canada Line rapid transit system connecting the city center with Vancouver airport and downtown Vancouver, as well as construction of the 2010 Olympics oval suggests that the City is growing with a high degree of confidence in its future. Its casino, exotic shopping centers, City Center sky-rise condominium expansion and midnight market reflect a sense of rejoicing in its location and the multitude of dialects included among its population.

Looking beyond the construction cranes that dot the skyline there is another part of Richmond that is a treasure trove of BC maritime history. Steveston, the area of Richmond that straddles the South Arm of the Fraser River, is a landmark of iconic proportion in BC's maritime history. During the early 1870s fishermen from Japan founded a living habitat at the Fraser River estuary to the Gulf of Georgia. These pioneers established the foundation for thriving fishing, canning and boat building industries along the Steveston waterfront. The City of Richmond, in recognition of this seafaring inheritance, sponsors a Maritime Festival at its Britannia Heritage Shipyard each August.

It's The Real Thing

History buffs visiting Britannia Shipyard will recognize that they are walking on sacred ground. The souls of people who walked on this terrain over the ages in support of an arduous and at times a rewarding occupation are ever present. This area is no municipal fantasy playground. It is the real thing. If only these buildings could talk. They would tell us about the people who built them and occupied their fragile frames.

On either side of the Shipyard, like giant size bookends, two bunkhouses appear alongside the Steveston waterfront. On the east side the Chinese bunkhouse stands proudly awaiting renovation respecting its former glory. When the renovation is complete it will be accessed along the traditional Steveston boardwalk where the many different races that populated a very segregated Steveston mingled and got to know each other. Leading off from the boardwalk are stilt / pile houses nearing completion in renovation of the area.

On the west side of the Shipyard the First People's House was a similar dwelling for Native workers employed by Phoenix Cannery. The building is akin to Coast Salish longhouses. First Nations cannery workers and fishers lived in this structure communally during the fishing and canning season, returning to their traditional grounds in off season.

Approaching the Shipyard from the north visitors are confronted with a rugged vista of the Steveston Channel with its wooden pile tops that in another era supported canneries jutting out from the tidal water. To the east a classic L-shaped timber cannery building dominates the view. The oldest surviving structure on the Steveston waterfront, this building was once a focal point in the British Empire. In July of 1889, the 200 ft. long tea clipper *Titania* loaded with salmon made the first direct shipment of its exotic cargo around Cape Horn to Great Britain. For the student of history this facility conveys an appreciation of how real-time ship building has changed over the past Century in BC. On the west side of the channel a traditional netting building awaits its retrofit for further recording the history of Richmond's maritime past.

Like a pearl in the center of an oyster, the focal point of the Heritage Shipyard acknowledges the contribution made by the founding race that built this region of BC. The original home of the Murakami family with its beautiful flower garden

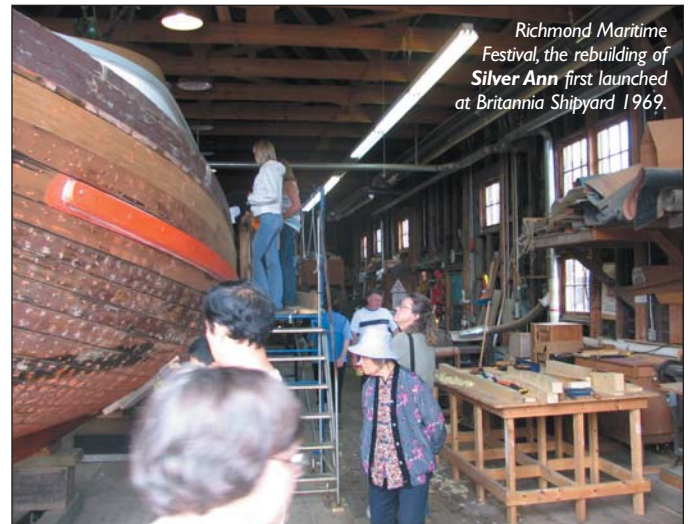


Modern cargo ship passing by as maritime festival celebrates the heritage of Steveston

still takes pride of place to the west. The 1932 Saeji Kishi family boat building shop dominates the shipyard on the east side. Wooden gillnetters, 24' and 26' outfitted with Easthope engines were the main product of the shop. Through the dedication of local volunteers it has been restored as a fully operational wood boat building facility.

The City of Richmond is to be congratulated in its ongoing investment in the preservation of this historic BC maritime community landmark. Also the Richmond citizens who generously volunteer their time in maintaining the originally preserved boat building and cannery facilities must be acknowledged for their labour of love. Besides the days of the Festival, a walk around the Shipyard at any time of the year creates images of very hard working and dedicated people going about their daily routine earning a living to support their families.

History Repeats Itself



Richmond Maritime Festival, the rebuilding of Silver Ann first launched at Britannia Shipyard 1969.

The Britannia Shipyard is located in the more easterly part of the Steveston waterfront. From Richmond Centre one has to travel south along Railway St. with detour around the Homma Elementary School. In 1902 the area was served by the Canadian Pacific Railway that transported workers and freight between Vancouver and Steveston for over 50 years, hence the name Railway St. It became linked by the Interurban electric railway system connecting many communities in the Lower Mainland.

Describing the cultural mosaic of Steveston in 1911, Garnet Weston, *British Columbia Magazine*, wrote "Take a Steveston car and ride it until it has carried you to the cannery village by the Fraser. Your ride will take you from nearly all that is familiar, and in the end you will find yourself where the speech of five tongues meets you with a pleasant shock. The explosive gutturals of totem-faced Indians, the harsh words of wandering ex-soldiers of Sikh regiments or sailors from the navy of Nippon, and running through the babel like song of a violin, the cries of the Chinese remind you that here is the land where story books are written. Even the English has the oddness of vernacular bred in lone

places far from where centralization keeps it pure.” It will be interesting to see if future travelers along the Canada Line will sense the same degree of appreciation for current day inhabitants along the Steveston Waterfront.

The Steveston Waterfront



Statue of pioneer Japanese fisherman overlooking Steveston harbour

If Steveston is the jewel in Richmond’s Crown, the emerald that rests on the breast of Steveston is Garry Point Park [insert, page 23]. To truly understand the maritime experience that Richmond has inherited one has to walk along the Steveston waterfront from the tip of Garry Point towards the Britannia Shipyard. As one leaves the Park there is a realization that one is in a working fishing community. The industrial land on the shoreline displays a variety of fishing vessels as well as a great deal of other fishing paraphernalia. The rumour on the streets of Steveston is that a BC business establishment is conniving with the federal authorities to create another Vancouver Coal Harbour with its expensive condos and parked pleasure boats replacing today’s fishing vessels. (See *Symbiotic Bureaucracy*, *Fisherman Life*, July 2005). Already very expensive, small dwellings (town houses) encroach upon this heritage industrial parkland. You don’t know what you’ve got till it is gone, eh?

Approaching the small Steveston shopping community on Moncton St. one passes the Gulf of Georgia Cannery. Built in 1894, it is the last remaining of 49 canneries that dotted this location of the Fraser River a Century ago. A Parks Canada national heritage museum, it is dedicated to souls of Steveston that suffered in the Cannery industry over the years. Peoples



Councilor Harold Steves aboard John Horton’s Steveston Lifeboat, 2007 Richmond Maritime Festival

from all continents but especially Japanese, Chinese as well as First Nation women, often with children strapped to their bodies, worked on the cannery production line under horrendous conditions. A telling exhibit of the times is the “Iron Chink” butchering machine that eventually made some expert Chinese salmon butchers redundant. Truly a place where all history buffs touring BC must visit.

The community of Steveston was named after the Steves family; New

Brunswick farmers who landed in the area in 1878. Community leaders in agriculture, fishing and boat building, the family tradition continues by descendent, Harold Steves, who has served on the City of Richmond Council since 1968.

The Steveston wharf provides the perfect interface between local residents, visitors and the remnants of a once thriving fishing industry. On weekends and holidays fresh fish can be purchased from local fishing boats. Between the world famous Pajo’s floating fish-and-chip shop to the upscale full service Shady Island Restaurant, maritime culinary delights await visitors with varying pocket sizes.

A Rush to Modernity

The most telling part of Richmond’s rush to modernity is the land between Steveston community and the Britannia Shipyard; the former BC Packers Company site. This industrial waterfront property has been transformed into a concrete and steel replication of the community’s maritime inheritance. Along the waterfront an attractive imitation concrete boardwalk merges with a wooden pathway leading towards the Britannia Shipyard. Steveston residents and visitors continue the tradition of meeting and talking while enjoying the vistas of the Fraser River, Gulf Islands and Mount Baker (see *The Fraser River*, *Mariner Life*, September 2006).

On the BC Packers land beyond the waterfront a high density condominium complex is nearing completion. While functional in many ways, the density suggests a design rationale not unlike the profit motive behind the bunkhouses at Britannia Shipyard. Between the condominiums and the waterfront the developers utilize their remaining three acres as a construction dumping ground while negotiating its use with Richmond Council.

Talking about the significance of BC Packers to the Richmond community, Dave Woodley, retired BC Packers foreman commented, “Most of Richmond’s original residents over the age of 35 were involved with BC Packers, either through fulltime employment, student employment or a family

member working there.” Acknowledging that Steveston’s maritime era has passed, Woodley said, “Besides its inevitable commercial / residential uses it would be good to see green parkland included on the remaining property. Such a space would compensate the congested residences on the property and add a place for reflection on Richmond’s more recent maritime heritage.”




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In the 1970s developers did try to build condominiums on Garry Point Park. Citizens of Steveston, lead by Councillor Harold Steves, gained a landmark legal decision stopping the development. With Richmond Counsel’s preoccupation with the Canada Line and Olympic Oval, visitors and local residents may have to tolerate the open scar that spans BC Packers waterfront until Richmond’s post Olympic era. We can only hope Counsel will not have too many Olympic expenses preventing balanced decision making around the appropriate use of BC Packers remaining heritage property.

Courage and Perseverance

At the end of the BC Packers land, just where the Britannia Heritage Shipyard begins, there is a reminder of Steveston’s humble beginning. Perched on a rock, overlooking Steveston harbour is a statue of a pioneering Japanese fisherman. In recognition of the 125th anniversary of the arrival of their ancestors local Japanese Canadian Fisherman erected the statue on September 20, 2002. It commemorates the spirit of their ancestors and their legacy of courage, perseverance, leadership and accomplishments.

There are thousands of Richmonds in this world, but there is only one Steveston. The annual Richmond Maritime Festival at the Britannia Heritage Shipyard on the Steveston waterfront is an opportunity for all British Columbians, and out of province visitors, to flavour the rich maritime heritage of this part of BC. Visitors to Steveston waterfront at anytime of the year will experience a community evolving from a period of onerous maritime labour and embracing a future of balanced tranquility. 

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The following is a submission made to the CBC Contest for the 7 Wonders of Canada

GARRY POINT PARK, STEVESTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

At the place where water flowing down from the Canadian Rockies to the Pacific Ocean meets the tidal flow from the Gulf of Georgia going up the South Arm of the Fraser River, there is a park named Garry Point. First surveyed in 1824, the park was named in honour of Nicholas Garry, Deputy Governor of the Hudson Bay Company. A space originally occupied by Canada’s aboriginal people, Garry Point Park juts out from the historic Japanese fishing village of Steveston, British Columbia. Created by nature and tempered by man, the Park exists because of centuries of erosion of mountain peaks brought to this point by the waters of the mighty Fraser River.

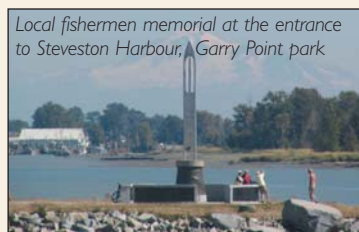
One of the most westerly parts of the Canadian mainland, it is an easily accessible, wild growth, flat terrain with its highest point barely five feet above sea level at high tide. The perpetual Pacific winds provide ideal conditions for kite flying. Children play with their small kites while large men strap themselves to very big kites and take off along the ground and sometimes into the sky.

Walking along the Scotch Pond mooring with its colourful fishing boats on the north side, around the point towards the Japanese Garden with its Cherry blossom trees on the south side, is a uniquely Canadian panoramic treasure. Piercing the distant horizons at all points of the compass peaks of the beautiful Gulf Islands and the coastal mountains serve as an emerald laced necklace around the park. Sunrise, sunset these peaks dance in a collage of bright colors; blue skies, grey skies – they change from razor edges to phantom figures.

The distant majestic Mount Baker dominates the southern horizon as a reminder to us of the importance of being Canadian. Within the micro-climate adventure that is life in BC Lower Mainland, Garry Point is more frequently bathed under blue sky and bright sunlight as rain clouds arriving from the Pacific Ocean pass overhead to bump up against the distant mountains of North Vancouver.

Often there is a clear view of airplanes silently taking off and landing at Vancouver International Airport several miles in the distance to the north. On occasion these distant flying machines have to compete for attention with large and dense flocks of Canada geese passing overhead, which are not so silent.

Local fishing vessels entering and leaving Steveston Harbour and barges towing cargoes between waterfront communities along the BC coastline manoeuvre among giant size purring container ships entering and leaving the estuary. On a foggy day a ship’s horn can add that element of mystery to the experience that is Garry Point.



Local fishermen memorial at the entrance to Steveston Harbour, Garry Point park

At the southern entrance to the Park in front of Steveston Harbour a giant size fisherman’s netting needle points towards heaven. At its base is a list of the names of local fishing folk who went to work one day and never returned home.

A nautical landmark for ships, domestic and foreign, as well as a place of refuge and contentment for visitors, Garry Point Park is a reservoir of so much that is Canada and Canadian.

Tim Lynch

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