

The Province

Where Vancouver's history runs deepest; Downtown Eastside can pride itself on the past

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Series: Operation Phoenix: Part 3: A journey back to the city's historic core

Illustrations: Photo: The Province / II Hastings Street looking east from Carrall to Main in October 1923, a scene bearing witness to the importance of the area in Vancouver's early days.

Colour Photo: Photo: 1890 photo of the Gold House Hotel on Water Street. Photo: Carnegie building at Main and Hastings, probably 1910. Photo: Woodward's department store on Hastings, 1903. Photo: Gastown street scene in November 1970. Photo: Rundown housing area in Vancouver in 1963. Photo: Housing in Vancouver's Chinatown in 1961. Photo: Pacific Stage Lines bus depot at Cambie Street, 1950s.

Operation Phoenix is a year-long project by The Province, CKNW 980 and Global B.C. We hope to engage the community in seeking solutions to the issues facing our most vulnerable citizens in the Downtown Eastside.

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The Downtown Eastside birthed Vancouver, forming the heart of the city as it grew from a tiny settler outpost to a metropolis. Today, what was once a vibrant, pulsing core is ailing.

It wasn't always so.

Vancouver began as the home of the Central Coast Salish, including the Musqueam and Squamish First Nations. Hudson's Bay fur traders moved west to Langley by 1824. Fort Langley grew and, by 1858, road-builders arrived: one route was driven to Burrard Inlet, where Hastings Townsite was formed.

In 1867, Stamp's Mill (later Hastings Mill) was completed at the foot of Dunleavy Street. That same year Captain "Gassy" Jack Deighton founded a saloon in Gastown at Carrall and Water streets to serve millworkers and loggers.

The City of Vancouver was incorporated in 1886. That summer, a fire razed the wooden buildings, killing 20 people. The community had to rebuild.

The first church, St. James's Anglican, was built in 1887 on its current site, the same year the first CPR passenger train pulled in. A hospital was erected in 1888 and well-off families settled on Alexander Street.

By the 1880s, Hastings Street had earned the nickname "Skid Road," named for the logs sent to Hastings Mill along Gore Avenue. In the 1890s there were at least 60 hotels in the area catering to workers.

Around this time, what are now heritage buildings began to go up. The Carnegie Library was built in 1903. The main street in the area shifted from Cordova to Hastings.

As of 1897, the population was about 20,000. The area around Main and Hastings became the civic centre. Carnegie Hall, the Carnegie Public Library,

markets and theatres attracted pedestrians.

"It's the historic core of the city. It's got the largest concentration of Vancouver's heritage buildings and many are of the first three decades of the city's development: they're of a certain scale and era that reflect a lot of the economic, social and architectural values of the time," says City of Vancouver senior heritage planner Marco D'Agostini.

He counts 500 Downtown Eastside buildings on the city's heritage register -- more than 20 per cent of the city's heritage stock.

After the construction of the courthouse on Georgia Street in 1906 (now Vancouver's Art Gallery), the city expanded west and by 1912 the population had hit 120,000.

Wealthy families went to the West End, leaving immigrants, working-class families and single men. Once-tonsy Alexander Street became a red-light district.

The area had always been multicultural, drawing Chinese labourers to work on the Canadian Pacific railroad and then new immigrants after the First World War. Japanese immigrants settled on Powell Street and by 1930 the area was known as Japantown.

Also in the 1930s, the city began to rezone for more industrial use. In 1947, another planning trend espoused in a University of B.C. report advocated the levelling and redevelopment of housing. Improvements on existing homes were banned -- a freeze that lasted 20 years -- and the remaining houses fell into disrepair.

The area remained lively, as it was still a transportation hub -- the B.C. Electric Interurban train station was at Hastings and Carrall, the North Shore Ferries left from the foot of Columbia Street and the steamships docked at the pier between Main and Carrall Streets.

By 1958, even the transportation hub had been lost. The streetcar service was discontinued and the station closed. The next year, the North Shore ferry sailed for the last time.

People stopped having a reason to walk through the

area. Small businesses suffered.

"In some sense, the neighbourhood had been in a very slow decline since the early days when downtown moved westward, but it is really in the 1950s that you can chart many of the major events that sort of spelled disaster," says area historian John Atkin, author of *Strathcona: Vancouver's First Neighbourhood* and other books.

"When the street-car system was shut down, the station at Carrall and Hastings had an estimated 10,000 people a day going through. Now you take Robson Street today and take 10,000 people off it who couldn't return and it wouldn't stand a chance of surviving as a viable retail street. So that was one of the big kicks to the neighbourhood," says Atkin.

In the 1940s, the area suffered a blow after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, when Japanese residents who had settled along Powell Street were forcibly removed to relocation camps in B.C.'s Interior. Few returned.

Around the same time, more land was zoned for industrial use.

A growing number of residents were single men who worked as labourers in logging camps, in the ports or as miners. They populated the single-room hotels and local bars dotting the area. After the work foundered and they grew older, many held on, living in rooming houses on fixed incomes.

"The community's always been for people in transition who don't have money to go somewhere else or who are going through changes in their lives," says local poet-historian Sandy Cameron.

The drug scene also has roots here, starting with Chinatown's opium dens. Alcohol remained the drug of choice for residents for decades. The area attracted marijuana and LSD users in the 1960s.

The port also brought hard drugs. By the 1960s, several cafes along the 100-block Hastings Street were known hangouts for heroin users and dealers. The 1980s saw an increase in the popularity of cocaine and injectable prescription drugs such as Talwin and Ritalin (Ts and Rs), and crack cocaine and crystal meth moved in. About 6,000 Downtown Eastside residents are now thought to use drugs.

In 1968, the Carnegie Centre lost the Vancouver Museum as a tenant and was boarded up until the 1980s, when residents fought to turn it into a community centre.

Gastown was redeveloped in the 1960s, housing projects went into Strathcona in the 1960s and 1970s and Expo 86 brought the conversion of area hotels.

By 1981, the community was noticeably aged: 35 per cent of residents were over 65.

Starting in 1985, Riverview Hospital in Coquitlam, which housed 4,630 psychiatric patients at its peak in 1951, began moving patients back into communities.

The Downtown Eastside absorbed many former patients who lacked the support to live independently.

Other supports weakened: the federal government stopped building new social housing in 1993 and in 1996 abolished the Canada Assistance Act that mandated a certain level of income for those in need.

As residents had less income, businesses suffered. Eaton's moved out its flagship store in the 1970s; Woodward's held on until 1992, when it was shuttered for good.

Today, the population of the Downtown Eastside postal code, which encompasses a larger area, is about 16,000. The Vancouver Coastal Health Authority estimates that at least a third of them live "marginal lives."

But they are living in an area rich in history and with reason to be proud.

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THIS WEEK'S LINEUP

Monday: Introduction: The people and their struggle

Tuesday: Impact of gentrification and the Olympics

Tomorrow: The daunting health-care challenge

Friday: Mike McCardell's unique take on the area, plus your feedback

TV AND RADIO

Tune in to our Operation Phoenix partners, Global B.C. and CKNW 980.

CKNW host Christy Clark and Global reporters Aaron McArthur and Mike McCardell are focusing on Operation Phoenix this week.

Research by librarians Kate Bird and Carolyn Soltau

WILLING TO HELP? YOU CAN BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Help us make a difference on the Downtown Eastside by signing up for Operation Phoenix. Do you have time to volunteer? Goods such as blankets or coats to donate to those who need them? You can sign up to help at operationphoenix.ca. There will be a list of agencies needing help, along with details of what they need.

Become a part of the solution.

A history of homelessness

The Downtown Eastside has a long history of being a refuge for the homeless.

In their book, *Street Stories: 100 Years of Homelessness in Vancouver*, authors Michael Barnholden, an associate professor of the University

of B.C.'s Humanities 101 class for Downtown Eastside residents, and Nancy Newman, a Douglas College instructor, trace the story all the way back to 1886. That year, a fire consumed almost all the wooden buildings in what is now Gastown and the Downtown Eastside. More than 3,000 people were left homeless, and the area became a tent city.

En masse homelessness struck again in 1929, when up to 12,000 workers were evicted for non-payment of taxes during economic hard times. About 500 of them didn't qualify for relief and camped out on the False Creek Flats until disease closed the camp. In 1935, about 300 men occupied the Carnegie Centre in a protest against conditions in the relief camps.

The Hotel Georgia was later home to up to 1,600 homeless men, who occupied the abandoned building, post office and art gallery in 1938 after Depression-era relief camps closed. Later, war veterans also protested the substandard housing they had returned to and occupied the old Hotel Vancouver.

The hippie movement later led to squatting in Richmond's Finn Slough, Maplewood mud flats in North Vancouver and the Jericho Beach Hostel. With Expo 86 came evictions from single-room-occupancy hotels to make way for tourists.

In recent years, the Frances Street and Woodward's squats have drawn attention to homelessness, as have protests against SRO conversions. "Recent homelessness is different from historic homelessness, which was generally on account of the economic cycle," said Barnholden. "What is interesting, since the mid-1990s you have an increase in homeless in good economic times, particularly in B.C." Today, he says, clawbacks of social programs are to blame and "the No. 1 thing that influences homelessness is [mental or physical] disability."

— Elaine O'Connor