



The Museum Post

Web Page www.kitimatmuseum.ca E-Mail: info@kitimatmuseum.ca

Kitimat Museum & Archives

293 City Centre
Kitimat, B.C. V8C 1T6
(250)632-8950 (tel)
(250)632-7429 (fax)

Monday to Saturday, 10 am to 5 p.m.
Closed Sundays and Holidays

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How do company towns become heritage communities?



The Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada invited Museum Director Louise Avery—one of seven heritage professionals across Canada—to present at a company town session for its annual conference (May 22–25), this year in St. John's, Newfoundland. Urban planners, architects, and academics continue to be fascinated with the mid-century modern built environment of Kitimat.

Participants were asked, how do company towns become heritage communities? How successful is your institution in transmitting memories and perpetuating community belonging? Avery presented Kitimat history, insights based on that history, existing heritage interest and initiatives:

First, Kitimat is not a true company town. The Aluminum Company of Canada chose to pass on town operations to the municipal council set up in 1953 before the first homes were constructed. Within ten years Alcan had



Johnson Crooks duplex

sold its property back to the

municipality. Alcan maintained that it did not want a company town. In the original planning the municipal government would attract additional industries in an effort to diversify Kitimat's economy, avoiding the "boom and bust" scenario.

Many people in Kitimat's Nechako and Kildala neighbourhoods live in 1950s homes and therefore, are living history in their daily lives. But Kitimat's housing is basic and boxy, with residents wanting more space and embellishments. Five housing companies are identified in the 1950s:

1. **N.W. Hullah Construction** assembled prefab houses such as "story-and-a-half," on site (see above). Hullah also assembled many one story homes. Hullah houses were popular as some had the luxury of fireplaces in the living rooms and vaulted ceilings.
2. American-based **Johnson Crooks Construction Company** created duplexes, four-plexes, and six-plexes with semi-basements. The duplex was the more popular house choice and many were constructed in Nechako. Skyliners or "chicken coops" were above ground, the living space on the second floor with two small carports.
3. **G. W. Golden Construction Ltd.** sold its Golden Homes in 1957, featuring varied exteriors and roof

lines on three streets, and Golden Apartment blocks in Kildala.

4. **Sagimat** created single family dwellings and duplexes in Kildala. These houses were erected once the plant expansion program began in 1955.
5. **Pan-abode** had an agent selling homes from 1954 to 1959. Pan-abode is an interlocking red cedar invented in 1948 in BC. A number of these homes were constructed in Nechako.

Though the heritage of Kitimat housing may not be fully valued, the green space that is part of the original Stein plan of the 1950s is still enjoyed today. Kitimat has 41 kilometres of walkways through green space. The Kitimat Heritage Group advocates for the walkway system as it is a key town plan element.

For Kitimat's commercial properties the leading Vancouver architectural firm Semmens and Simpson designed Kitimat's first commercial buildings and the City Centre shopping centre. City Centre was purchased by a mall company in 1974 and enclosed. The structure added to the back of the existing 1957 strip mall doubles the commercial space and adds a third floor. The mall front is still original.

Other architects of the modern era planned three downtown buildings – the Hudson's Bay Company store,



Century House, and the federal building. Today, these three commercial properties are close to their original 1950s construction.

With the downtown design, there is no main street, only an internal walkway and green space, an original 1950s plan element. Over the years, dissatisfaction was expressed that Kitimat didn't have a downtown main street. Currently, a Vancouver firm is contracted by District Planning to conduct a study for the revitalization of the downtown area. The firm is looking at the feasibility of a main street downtown. This move would be a departure from the original Stein plan of pedestrian/traffic separation. However, the firm has expressed interest in Kitimat's mid-century modern architecture.

The future of Kitimat heritage is building heritage capacity – with more residents valuing mid-century modern and wanting to preserve the original town plan. Many long-

time residents love Kitimat's energy, and are aging in place, resulting in a growing senior's population. There has also been a recent influx of families from the Lower Mainland of BC as housing prices there have increased.



Golden Homes on Yukon Street

Youth love retro, and Kitimat has lots of that. Currently, there is not an excessive turnover in population, unlike the transience of the past. The cost of living in urban centres may be keeping people in Kitimat and bringing people back.

There are no heritage tourism initiatives in place at this time as fishing is the primary promotion. However the Museum has advocated for town heritage in the Vacation Planner, on Kitimat's tourism website, and has created five heritage walkway signs. Kitimat also has two heritage sites designated by municipal government—the corduroy road and the CN Station. These are listed in the Official Community Plan 2008 that fosters local culture, heritage and pride of place, and promotes greenway expansion. With a stabilizing population and years ahead, Kitimat will make gains in heritage interest.

The Kitimat Museum & Archives continues to work on building community interest in heritage. The municipal government is now talking about a new Museum building once a final investment decision is achieved. The government also has plans for an update to the Official Community Plan. The Museum and Kitimat Heritage Group will be advocating for heritage in that plan. Walkways have been the springboard for heritage in Kitimat now and into the future, plus the new initiative for the downtown, just begun.

Century House, Kitimat's first office building was constructed by Commonwealth Construction in 1959 for \$600,000. Mid-century modern features include flat planes and large windows.





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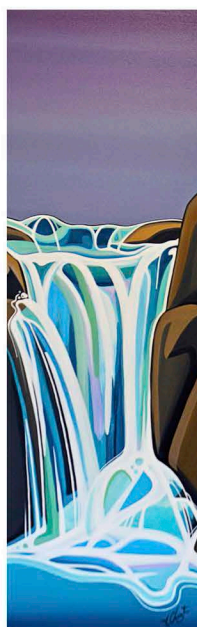
More information and registration forms are
available online at www.kitimatmuseum.ca
or at the Kitimat Museum & Archives.
Frames available first-come, first-serve.

Exhibition in conjunction with North West Photo Fest.
For more information on festival events visit
www.northwestphotofest.com

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Recent Acquisitions

It has been a slow few months for acquisitions. Sharon Leonard brought in a 'Pipe Band' lighter. This lighter is a duplicate of one we already have in the collection but we accepted it because the lighter has an image on both sides. Now we can add this lighter to our display, with the second side visible.

The Pipe Band was founded in 1960 by Pipe Major Jack Geddis, Drum Sergeant Ron Graham, and Snare Drummer Robert Tinsley. The band was very active in the community, performing at July 1st parades, several BC fall fairs and annually piping in the haggis at the Burns' Night banquet and dance, in celebration of the birth of poet Robert Burns. The Band folded circa 1968.



Pipe Band lighter with Pipe Band insignia (at right) and piper and drummer (flip side). Leonard Collection KMA No. 2018.6

Occasionally the Kitimat Museum & Archives is asked to provide photographs that will be used in publications. A condition of permission to publish is that we receive a copy of that publication. As per our agreement Douglas Grant sent a copy of his book 'Vertical Horizons, The History of Okanagan

Helicopters'. To quote Mr. Grant, "If the Kemano Kitimat ALCAN project had not been awarded to Okanagan Air Services in 1951 (later to become Okanagan Helicopters Ltd.) they might never have had the opportunity to become Canada's largest helicopter company and the third largest in the world". The KMA image provided for the book is above.



Carl Agar looks up at pilot Bill McLeod sitting in the S-55 CF-GHV, circa 1952. Kitimat Heritage Advisory Commission KMA No. P0007

Recent Presentations—Authors at the Museum

In May, the Museum welcomed two northern BC authors, Barbara Robin and Joyce Helweg. A small gathering of eighteen listened to Barbara and Joyce share cowboy poetry and song, and humorous and thoughtful stories from their books. It was a great evening of sharing!

Barbara Robin talks about her life in a series of short stories entitled, *I Should Have Married a Cowboy* - recounting her adventures in north central and northwest B.C. As a young girl Barbara and her family lived in Kitimat for a time and then moved to Fort St. James. Most of the stories in her memoir are authored by Barbara, but there is a story told by Barbara's uncle, Paul Sargent, about the Red Rose mine located west of Hazelton. Barbara was a realtor in Fort St. James until 2009 when she sold her business and moved to Prince George, going to work in a local realty office and retiring in May 2016.

Joyce's first book, *A Change in Direction* chronicles Joyce's adventures in the back country. She travelled by saddle on packhorse across the last frontier on a 40-day adventure trip to the Spatsizi Wilderness Plateau, a vast tract of land occupying the north central interior of British Columbia. Joyce had never ridden before but she learned to ride quickly, "pack a horse,

make a meal from nothing and change directions at a moment's notice." Her next book, *Bucked off* is a collection of humorous stories lived by Joyce and her husband John, married for 44 years. The couple both grew up in Fort St. James, B.C. where they raised three daughters. Joyce continues to volunteer in her community of Fort St. James and manage Cranberry Creek Ranch. Visit her website at www.joycehelwegauthor.com



Joyce Helweg (left) with Louise Avery (centre) and Barbara Robin