



Stories Told – Wooden Sidewalks, Bucket Passing Brigades and Backroom Jail Cells

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Time has transformed the streets of Coquitlam from rutted dirt to one made of wooden planks to the concrete and asphalt avenues we see today. If the sidewalks could talk, perhaps they would tell similar tales to those of Olive Van Brakel, whose parents were some of the first Francophone arrivals to the area around 1910.

“My father had not intended to stay permanently but when he was living in Maillardville, he met my mother. She played piano and he played violin left-handed. They were some of the first to be married in Our Lady of Lourdes Church,” says Olive. You could say they continued to make beautiful music together for many years as they stayed to build their lives and raise their family in the community. Olive was born in Maillardville.

Now in her 90s, Olive remembers, “When I was a girl, there were no cement sidewalks. In fact there were no

sidewalks at all. Later they put in wooden ones.” Growing up she recalls, “I knew everyone on my street by their first name. There was a path beaten between the houses where we played with neighbouring children. We were like one big family.”

Emeri Paré, one of Coquitlam’s first police officers and eventually Chief of Police and Fire Chief was Olive’s uncle. When Emeri moved to Coquitlam in 1910, he worked at Fraser Mills for two dollars a day. As a blacksmith he hand forged the horseshoes and then installed them on the Clydesdale horses that were used to pull the lumber wagons.

Emeri built his first house on Pitt River Road. In 1912 he was appointed as a special constable at a rate of \$10 per month. Following the secession of Port Coquitlam, Emeri Paré was appointed as a constable at a rate of \$75 per month and on January 19th, 1914, he was appointed Chief of Police, though his wages did not change. In the absence of a police station, part of his home served as the station and he even had two jail cells built at the back of the property. His trusty horse and the fire wagon were also kept behind his home. The same horse was used for police patrols as well as to pull the fire wagon in those early days.

There were no water mains, fire hydrants or hoses if fires threatened. In emergencies, a bell would sound from the church tower at the corner of Laval Street and Laval Square. Volunteer fire fighters formed bucket brigades where they passed buckets of water from hand to hand from the closest available water source.

They say, ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same.’ While Olive notes that the Coquitlam of today is not the Coquitlam she grew up in; that neighbourhoods are much larger and that general stores have been replaced by super stores; she also notes that the spirit, hope and appreciation that her parents had when they first moved here, can be seen in the faces of the new families who now choose to call Coquitlam home.

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