

Riverview Lands: A Family Matter

Three years ago, when a group of parents concerned about the future of the Riverview Lands ran a small coupon ad in the community newspapers of greater Vancouver, an elderly gentleman in South Burnaby was moved to reply with a letter as well.

"I am now approaching my 81st birthday" he wrote, "and find it unthinkable that anyone in their "right" mind would even consider using "Riverview Land" for any purpose other than that which our forefathers had in mind, when it was set aside for those with mental disorders.

"Many times did I accompany my Dad as he drove to "Essondale" with visitors from other parts of Canada, or from other parts of the world. The visitors never failed to marvel at the beauty, the tranquility, and the foresight of our forefathers in preserving this site. Many of the visitors were professionals, and all sang their praises to the landscapers who added their unique collection of specimen trees to the site now known as "Riverview."

"My father was Chief of Police for the City of Vancouver during World War I. He loved this Province of British Columbia and never tired of "showing it off." Riverview was one of his favourite places and so it was appropriate that he passed his last days in the Senior Home there, where he received such "Caring Care" from "Caring Caregivers."

The letter was signed "Wm. Stewart McRae, Teacher, Counsellor, School Principal; born at 1936 Keefer St. (now Ferndale), Vancouver, B.C., 1912. Then there was a post script:

"Riverview should be a "Sacred Trust" to All British Columbians."

I was sitting then on the provincial advocacy committee of BCSS, and was particularly touched by this

unsolicited gesture, since I had known the author and his family a very long time. The fine handwriting in which the letter was couched (just a little shaky now because of arthritic fingers) was familiar to me – both the writer and his wife had taken teacher training at the old provincial Normal School, and had been personally instructed by Dr. MacLean (of the MacLean Method of writing).

Reflecting on that reminded me of the flowing copperpoint hand Mr. McRae's father had practised, which had always fascinated me when I knew him as a child.

I had visited former Chief Constable "Bill", William McKenzie McRae in the company of his eldest daughter, Anna, not long before his death at Essondale from what was almost certainly Alzheimer's disease. One of the strongest memories I carry of that visit was the gentle consideration and attentiveness of the staff, and how grateful Anna was to have her father decently cared for in a public hospital, after several unfortunate experiences in private care homes.

That visit was not my first to Essondale. I had been there as quite a young child (about nine, I think) to visit my dear Uncle Gibby (who was there "for a rest," I was told.) Later, when my own son had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, I began asking questions of the mother and aunts, and learned that my uncle's diagnosis was paranoid schizophrenia. He was not, however, as so many modern myth-makers would have it, "locked away forever." He was treated, (with ECT since neuroleptic drugs were not yet in common use), he recovered, and he came home. His life was saved – he had been starving himself because he thought his mother, with whom he lived, had been poisoning the food – his sanity and his considerable

intelligence restored. I still treasure the beautiful woollen scarf he made for me in craft therapy while he was there, and I remember the exquisite workmanship of several inlaid cribbage boards and tooled leather purses that he made for other family members.

These memories have a special poignancy for me now because my own wonderful son is in the Refractory Ward at Riverview, and we are waiting day by day for the tiniest signs that he may be starting the long climb back from the psychotic abyss into which he plunged when he broke in mid-December.

The urban conglomeration that surrounds Riverview today continues to expand. The Lower Mainland area that most Riverview patients come from and return to has grown in the last four years according to BC Stats by 202,843 people – 57,145 in '94 - '95. We know that schizophrenia occurs worldwide at a rate of about 1%. There is no indication that the need for long-term, sometimes life-long care, will decline dramatically in the foreseeable future. Even now, severely ill people sometimes wait weeks or months for a Riverview bed.

Four thousands citizens of his province filled in the coupon that asked the government to safeguard the Riverview Lands for the use of mental patients. No Minister of the Crown has yet agreed to receive these coupons with the media present. Like my father, who wrote the letter quoted here, we all need to let the government know that we would like the present site preserved in its entirety, so that it can continue its historical function as a place of peace and beauty, a place of refuge, hope and healing – a sanctuary in times of need for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. **M.E.H.**

Riverview Lands: A Matter For All Communities

A meeting notice that crossed our desk recently included a map to help those unfamiliar with the Riverview campus find their way to the Valleyview Auditorium. It was labelled "Riverview Hospital Site Map – October 1991." A helpful touch, we thought, since the hospital grounds are extensive, the roads wind across the hillside site at different levels, and the auditorium is somewhat removed from the main buildings, currently used for acute and longer-term patient care.

Another glance at the map revealed a feature overlooked the first time – along the length of the top side of the site were a series of lines and small notations – Zone 1, Zone 2... and so on, up to Zone 6. The Riverview Lands had been neatly portioned along their length, with lines running north to south at more or less equidistant intervals. It reminded us of those ubiquitous charts one used to find in books for homemakers, demonstrating to the uninitiated just where to make the cuts to completely carve the chicken.

This discovery led us to peruse the 'Site Selection Report' produced by the Resource Planning Group in October 1993 for the British Columbia Mental Health Society's 'Riverview Hospital Replacement Project.' What caught our eye there was the statement: "With the location of the site being so close to the Town Centre, Lougheed Highway, Trans Canada Highway, and a proposed rapid transit route, it has become a very valuable property and, consequently, is being viewed for an array of potential target markets." It was not clear who was viewing it this way: the hospital, the BC Buildings Corp., or BCBC's 'boss', the government of the day. It lent credence, however, to the apprehension that many interested parties have had regarding the disposition of these lands, that

unstated plans may have already been formulated.

A recent call to BCBC in Victoria elicited the information that the Crown Corporation, which "owns" the land and buildings of Riverview Hospital on behalf of the citizens of the province, has not yet had any news from Treasury Board regarding the availability of funding to continue the series of Public Land Use Consultations embarked upon last spring.

Given the declared freeze on most capital spending projects, and the extended furore over budget matters during the last few months, it seems reasonable to assume at this point that plans for the "replacement" of Riverview Hospital may also be slowed down, if not put on the back burner for a time.

For those of us unhappy about several aspects of the plans that have been proposed so far, no news for the time being may be good news and a delay may be an opportunity to formulate more clearly and forcefully our own ideas regarding what is needed across the spectrum of mental health services.

A degree of misunderstanding on the part of some people concerned about services outside the Lower Mainland needs to be cleared up. Because the government has said in the past that no new money would be available for developing new services or facilities except what is "saved" by downsizing Riverview, the insistence of Lower Mainland groups that the downsizing should stop was seen as selfish self interest.

What those in other parts of the province should understand, however, is that we are perfectly in sympathy with the need for new services elsewhere. You need more services of all kinds, and tertiary facilities somewhat closer to home

would undoubtedly be desirable for both patients and families. We want you to have those promised facilities, but cutting beds that are already in too short supply here does not make sense. What needs fixing first is the plan designed to allow those services to be developed – not in one area or the other, but in both.

We have pointed out the rapid population growth in this area and the fact that the current bed count at Riverview and in acute care hospitals is insufficient to meet present needs. There is an appalling lack of decent and supported housing for those with a severe mental illness who are trying to achieve some stability in their lives, and keep themselves out of hospital. The community system as it operates today is often callous and neglectful. The "passive" case management so often practiced and shamefully rationalized where assertive case management is obviously needed can be disastrous, or even fatal, when those whose illness prevents them from recognizing their need for care get none – because they didn't ask for it!

We should all let the government know that we would like the Riverview Lands preserved in their entirety – as vital greenspace in an area where the population is expected to double by 2010; as an irreplaceable ecological corridor for wildlife in an increasingly dense urban sea; and as a fitting historical place of sanctuary for the severely mentally ill, for whose treatment and welfare these lands were acquired by the provincial government in 1904.

If you have not already sent in your coupon to support the preservation of the Riverview Lands, please use the version on the back of this newsletter and do so without delay. Then persuade your friends, fellow workers, neighbours and relatives to do the same.