An Exclusive Community Magazine Serving the Residents of Oak Bay

OAK BAY NEIGHBOURS

THE OAK BAY HERITAGE FOUNDATION:
Honouring Stories

JANUARY 2026
POWERED BY BVM BEST VERSION MEDIA

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MADE IN CANADA

THE OAK BAY HERITAGE FOUNDATION: Honouring Stories

By Audrey Wang | Photos by Trevor Ball

When the volunteers of the Oak Bay Heritage Foundation gathered on a rainy winter's day in Oak Bay Village for a photo shoot – posing before the familiar façade of the original Oak Bay grocery and post office, and the Bell Block – it was impossible not to feel the presence of history layered in every brick and beam. Heritage, however, is more than just the buildings. The volunteer-run, not-for profit organization is a repository of stories – human stories, community stories, and stories that pre-date settler history by thousands of years.

No one expresses this more clearly than Robert Taylor, President of the Oak Bay Heritage Foundation, whose lifelong love of history shapes his work. "Heritage, a knowledge of local history, grounds us," he says. "We understand why things are as they are, how the community grew and developed; we appreciate the stories of previous residents." We interviewed five dedicated volunteers over coffee at Hide + Seek in the Bell Block. Bill Hanna (Vice-President), Jane Hall (Secretary), and board members Marg Palmer and Pat Howard agree with Robert that stories and a rich history are what give Oak Bay its soul.

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The District of Oak Bay Plan is five-fold: to preserve heritage streetscapes and neighbourhoods; to conserve historic buildings and structures; to conserve cultural landscape features; to conserve natural landscape features; and to celebrate Oak Bay's unique history.

Education is at the heart of the Foundation's mission, thanks in large part to the late Marion Cumming – artist, activist, philanthropist, and changemaker – whose deep commitment to heritage and social justice helped establish the lecture program that continues today. The Marion Cumming Lecture Series, held at the Windsor Park Pavilion in spring and fall, is now one of the Foundation's signature initiatives. The January lecture is "Explorations on our Doorstep – Voyages of Forgotten Dreams", by maritime historian Barry Gough, at the Windsor Park Pavilion, on Wednesday, 21 January, 7pm.

Marg Palmer who has been an active volunteer for 15 years, explains: "Since 2004, the Foundation has conducted lectures on local history. We also create heritage walking maps and engage with residents at the Oak Bay Night Markets." These initiatives are invitations to see Oak Bay with fresh eyes, reminding residents that the familiar village streets, beaches, and leafy lanes hold narratives far older and more complex than the character homes so many admire.

Illustration of the village of Sitchanalth, c.1790; created by the BC Archeology Branch and displayed at the Willows Beach Tea Room.

A crucial part of the Foundation's educational work is acknowledging the land's deeper past. "We reflect that there were Lekwungen villages along the shoreline and islands," Bill notes, "One of the most significant was Sitchanalth, located along what we now call Willows Beach. The village thrived for thousands of years before the population moved to the harbour reserve in the 1840s." As a way of restoring perspective, the Foundation weaves Truth and Reconciliation principles into its programming, helping residents understand that heritage encompasses what was here long before the arrival of settlers.

Though Oak Bay's Indigenous history spans millennia, many of the community's most notable buildings come from the early 20th century.

If Robert had to choose a favourite heritage-valued building, he admits it would be the original Oak Bay grocery and post office (now The Oaks Restaurant), built in 1912. "It became the anchor of the village," he explains. Soon after came the Bell Block (1913), built by Bunting & Son. Its architect, Archie Bunting, was killed in the First World War in 1917, a poignant reminder that the Oak Bay is shaped by sacrifice as much as by architecture.

Next came the Tonkin House (1913), also designed by the young Bunting, now woven into the modern Oak Bay Library. And further along sits the Avenue Theatre, built in 1913 for motion pictures. "These buildings formed a framework for the village," Robert says. They also function as gathering places, familiar waypoints, and parts of the community's shared identity.

Robert Taylor

For Robert, this connection to story is deeply personal. He and his partner, Janet Morningstar, live in a 1922 Arts & Crafts home on St. Patrick Street, designed by architect William D'Oyly Hamilton Rochfort. "Every room contains stories of the families who lived here," Robert reflects. Their research led them to co-author *St. Patrick Street, Oak Bay: An Architectural & Social History* (2018).

L-R: Pat Howard, Marg Palmer and Jane Hall.

The street's history reads like a time-lapse film of the 20th century: "As we walk along the street, we see more than houses," he says. "We know of the children's birthday party in April 1908; the neighbour who was part of the Scott expedition to the Antarctic; the First World War veteran who was a dirigible pilot; the high turnover of occupants during the Great Depression of the 1930s; the wartime RCAF pilot returning home in May 1945... These homes are time machines. We occupy and care for them for a while, but they continue carrying their history long after our time."

Oak Bay, like many communities, wrestles with the tension between heritage preservation

and the need for increased housing. Though the Foundation has no mandate over development decisions, it does advocate for balanced solutions. "Sensitively-designed in-fill housing could provide density without spoiling the character streetscapes," Robert notes, and Heritage Revitalization Agreements can offer ways to preserve heritage structures while supporting thoughtful growth.

The Foundation is fully run by volunteers who maintain the lecture series, host information booths at community events, manage the Century House plaque program, distribute the Oak Bay Historical Tour maps, offer books on Oak Bay Heritage for sale through their website, and collaborate with schools on art projects and heritage treasure hunts. "Anyone can get involved by attending the open monthly meetings, helping at events, or even joining the board," Pat says, "We want to spread awareness through community engagement to keep our local history alive."

Bill Hanna

One of the Foundation's proudest accomplishments is its successful nominations for 17 Hallmark Heritage Society Awards since 2016. The Society recognizes homeowners, writers, historians, and website designers who have made significant contributions to heritage preservation. "The award recipients have accomplished so much in preserving Oak Bay's heritage and history," Robert adds.

Above all, Robert hopes our readers take away one simple sentiment: "I hope for residents to know and understand and enjoy the history of the place where they live, and to assist in preserving the history both physically and emotionally."

In Oak Bay, heritage and history are alive. It lives in the houses, the landscape, the village, and the image of the Songhees village of Sitchalnath (see illustration). Most of all, it lives in the people who bring with them curiosity, stewardship, and heart. Thanks to the Oak Bay Heritage Foundation and the legacy of past elders like Marion Cumming, our stories continue to be told, honoured and remembered.

To learn more about the Foundation, including the Century House plaque program which allows homeowners to celebrate their home's 100-year story, visit ***www.oakbayheritagefoundation.ca.***