

The Mission Heritage Association: Catalyst for a Community

BRIAN ANTONSON

Mission Heritage Association, Mission, B.C.

The recession of the early 1980s brought dynamic changes to British Columbia's industrial and trade profile. The traditional sustaining industries in the Fraser Valley city of Mission (shake and shingle manufacturing, logging and lumber production) were in sharp decline, and many shops were closing their doors. Doom and gloom pervaded this quite river town and civic pride and social and cultural activities were lost and forgotten by the majority of people as they struggled just to survive.

It was in this atmosphere of depression and fear that the Mission Heritage Association was founded more than 10 years ago by a group of volunteers. They had no land, no development team, no designs, no political base, no public support. What they did have was a dream and the determination to make that dream come true. Today, the Association's principal project, the Fraser River Heritage Park (FRHP) is a reality, flourishing on the site of the original Catholic mission which grew into the present city of Mission, British Columbia. What began as a modest heritage-preservation project became the catalyst for revived confidence and civic renewal. The Mission story is told here as an example, and it is hoped, an inspiration to other communities. It is also hoped that Mission's success will demonstrate to foundations and granting agencies the far-reaching effects which can follow from initially modest but strategic investments in community projects.

In 1979 it was announced that the *Samson V* (the federal government's last steam-driven stern-wheeler on the Fraser River) was to be placed at auction. A small group of concerned citizens in Mission decided that this historic boat could become the ideal focal point of a centre to mark the heritage of their community and to study the great river which flows by it.

To begin the campaign to secure the *Samson V*, a local resident, Norma Kenney, gave a speech at a dinner sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce. Afterward, Chamber members flocked to the cause, drawn by her vision and the appeal of the idea and the Fraser River Heritage

Park/Samson V Committee was formed. Many of those early enthusiasts are still actively involved in the Association.

Fourteen communities along the river lobbied hard to acquire the Samson V and in the end it went to New Westminster, some 30 miles downstream from Mission. Spirits were somewhat dampened but the Mission group remained resolute in its determination to build the heritage park. As a first step they felt it was necessary to become a registered society.

After careful consideration and guidance from local lawyers, a vision statement was agreed upon, following the guidelines provided by the B.C. *Societies Act*. A constitution and by-laws and policies and procedures were also formulated and a board and membership structure were established. Interest in the proposed heritage park was growing and the fledgling Mission Heritage Association (MHA) was immediately faced with a fundamental question: where?

Mission's Municipal Planner suggested that some of the "O.M.I." lands might be available. The history of these lands reaches back to 1861 when Father Leon Fouquet, a priest from the French order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I.) first stood on a bluff overlooking the Lower Fraser Valley, with Mt. Baker in the distance. Fouquet purchased 200 acres of the surrounding land and accepted a donation of some 200 more to build a mission and Indian residential school on the site. This became the first settled community in the area, a community which grew into Mission City.

By 1980, the O.M.I. lands had been unused for a quarter of a century since the school had been absorbed into the provincial education system. Long-range plans had reserved the land (now owned by the Crown) for the development of low-cost, high-density housing. Members of the newly established MHA had more ambitious plans. They strolled among the overgrown foundations of the mission and envisioned a centre for the study of the powerful Fraser that flowed at their feet; a centre for learning and teaching and celebrating the town's heritage; a centre for the cultural, visual, and performing arts and sciences; a centre that would honour the traditions of ecclesiastical learning and solitude; a centre which would celebrate the history of the land and the river—a history some 12,000 years long.

With this new focus to their vision, the MHA set about building an organization that could make their vision a reality. Representatives of the Association approached the mayor of Mission. He offered support

and advice and introduced the group to local M.P.s and their staffs as well as many other important potential supporters. On his advice, visual displays of the proposals were developed for use in presentations. One contact instigated by the mayor was particularly valuable. Austin Pelton, the local M.L.A. became an invaluable advocate for the project in public, the Legislature, and Cabinet.

The responsibility of acquiring and developing such a large tract of Crown land was obviously too great for the small MHA so it was decided that the group should become a federation of local independent societies that, together, would have the clout to acquire and maintain the property. As a federation, the MHA sought board representatives from a number of community organizations. A simple committee system was designed and an executive committee established to bring their work to the board. The response was overwhelming. Every major association in Mission is represented on the board (which also included representatives from the municipal and regional levels of government). The executive committee is comprised of people selected especially for their individual talents or professional expertise. This organizational structure has assured serious input from the economic, social, cultural, political, historical, academic, ecclesiastical, and recreational elements of the community.

Negotiations to secure the site for the park commenced late in 1980 but initial interest from the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing faded and negotiations were discontinued in 1981. Undaunted, the MHA continued its publicity campaigns, inviting the community to "Join the Team, Build the Dream". Articles about the history of the O.M.I. lands, and the potential value to the community of the "Fraser River Heritage Park" appeared regularly in the local press. A newsletter was started and each home and business address received a copy. Appearances before City Council and various community service and business groups spread the word among civic leaders. Members of the Dewdney-Alouette Regional District (DARD) and local elected government representatives lobbied to support the concept. Whenever possible, carefully prepared proposals were presented to the Ministry, along with letters of support. Meetings, meetings, meetings, but each one showed measured progress.

A conceptual plan for the park was developed over the course of many months, with the assistance of DARD staff, and it increased popular enthusiasm. The concept included an interpretive centre; rebuilding of some of the original structures over the original foundations and assigning new roles to them: galleries, a heritage library, a theatre; and large natural areas where strollers could enjoy panoramic views as well

as quiet and solitude. The centrepiece of the park was to be an authentic reconstruction of the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes of Mission City which at one time was the only Marian shrine in B.C., a valued place of refuge and site of pilgrimages and ceremonies.

And then came the recession of the early 1980s. In Mission, a resource-based community, the suffering began early, ran deep, and lasted longer than in many other areas of the Fraser Valley. But in the darkest days of high unemployment, business closures and diminished civic interest and pride, the concept of the proposed Fraser River Heritage Park continued to grow, a symbol of hope for the future.

Interest at the Ministry level continued to lag but interest at the community level grew. The municipality and regional district were continually informed of progress and offered assistance and advice with proposals, as well as some use of their office facilities. Each took a more and more active interest, and with this growing support came a resumption of active negotiations with the Ministry.

Inspiration came from many sources, among the most notable the support of Pat Kelly, a representative of the native peoples who first settled the valley thousands of years ago. Pat's eloquence, and sense of his people's place in the history behind the project, made him a moving speaker at both board meetings and in the community.

In 1983, DARD created the Fraser River Heritage Regional Park Committee (with two representatives from the MHA and three elected officers), and the Park was incorporated into the official Regional Parks Plan. A retreat was held over a spring weekend to bring together the various ideas for the concept. With the advice of The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (which remains a valuable source of information and inspiration) the Association obtained a first grant that allowed it to establish a presence on the property, but the land negotiations had still not proved fruitful.

Yet each opportunity to take a step forward met with an enthusiastic response. When, after laborious negotiations, the Ministry finally gave permission for some work to be done on the land, more than 100 volunteers turned up. The B.C. Heritage Trust provided a grant to help the "Revitalization Project" and the MHA raised funds and provided labour of a value to match this grant. Fraser Valley College students created a grid for future archaeological surveys of the grounds and the handling of artifacts. A sod-turning ceremony on the lands demonstrated a commitment to the future of the project. The Oblates of Mary

Immaculate and the Sisters of St. Ann, original occupants of these lands in the 1860s, became supporters. Government "challenge" grants provided funds for hiring students as guides for visitors to the property.

Perseverance and progress finally paid off in 1986 when drastic changes in personnel at the Ministry produced an abrupt turnabout in its position on the use of the site. From a low of some two and a half acres, the provincial commitment grew to some 50 acres of land for Park use. On Heritage Day, February 17, 1986, the Ministry granted the 50 acres of former mission lands to the Regional District and the MHA sought, and was given, the responsibility for development, management, and co-ordination for the Park. This is a unique agreement made between a not-for-profit association and a government ministry to co-operate in the establishment of a regional park.

This, the biggest hurdle of all, was surmounted through sheer determination on the part of the MHA and its supporters. Their constant focus on the goal of securing the lands for the Park never wavered. When negotiations faltered, more work was done, more evidence provided, more support generated in the community and at executive levels. Association members were tireless advocates. Tours of the land were hosted by volunteers so that people could see its immense potential. The support of enthusiastic representatives from all groups represented on the board of directors helped spread enthusiasm. People began to talk of the Park as a *fait accompli*.

The years since then have been packed with progress. A timetable was set that will see development of the Park well underway by 1992, the year of Mission's 100th birthday, and significant measured progress toward this goal has been evident each year. In 1986, Expo year in British Columbia, thousands of fair visitors travelled up the valley to visit the site of the new Fraser River Heritage Park.

On the day of the summer solstice, the Park was officially opened. Gifts poured in from many sources, including a donation of 58 mature rhododendrons and azaleas, many from the famous Rothschild Gardens in England, a colourful start to the Park's Memorial Gardens.

A B.C. Lottery grant and thousands of donated hours of work made possible a new building, the Reception Centre, soon to be known as Norma Kenney House in honour of the Association's founding chair and president. It grew tall and proud on a bluff at the southwest corner of the Park.

The building bears testimony to the co-operative spirit that has guided development of the Park. To provide workers, Fraser Valley College sponsored a log-building course, as they do about every three years, and hired a master log builder as the instructor. While the College ran advertisements for students, Municipal Council approved a gift of sized logs from the Municipal Tree Farm and had them cut and hauled to the Ferndale (correctional) Institution where the inmates peeled them. They were delivered to the Park on the date the log-building course started. The students then built the shell of the log building under supervision and volunteers took over the completion of the interior. Today volunteers staff Norma Kenney House and its Valley Treasures Gift Shop and Blackberry Kitchen (featuring products from the property's own blackberry patches). It is the site of many social events.

The Mission Kinsmen built a turn-of-the-century bandstand not far from Norma Kenney House (commemorating their 40th anniversary) where music festivals, fair-weather concerts, and other events are held throughout the summer. Public washrooms and parking facilities have also been added to the site, and the Mission Rotarians (who are represented on the MHA Board) have pledged funds to build a flag plaza signalling the entrance and location of the Park.

Park development has only just begun. Funding is now being sought for the reconstruction of the Grotto and professional consultants, hired using a federal grant from Community Futures Initiatives, have developed business and design plans that will be used in funding proposals as well as for administrative and decision-making processes in all aspects of Park development.

Each community seeking to duplicate Mission's success will have unique problems and considerations in its chosen projects but some general observations and guidelines should be useful to all. At the start it is important to seek out and heed wherever possible, advice from professionals, politicians, consultants, the community at large, and any major community resources. It is equally important to ensure that all expectations are realistic and somewhat flexible in order to avoid conflicts and burnout.

MHA Chairman Norma Kenney often talks of the "parking lot philosophy" that went into the development of the Park. She recalls the many important ideas that were generated and discussed by members walking to their cars after a meeting. Often these conversations in the parking lots of Mission went on late into the night as new ideas were put forward and grew.

The impact of the Park on the community has been an inspiration. The early 1980s were a difficult time for Mission and some people were hesitant to embark on a project of this magnitude. The population was only 20,000 and the spirits of the citizens of Mission were beginning to flag. In 1990, 25,000 people live in Mission and the work and vision of the MHA have been major contributing factor to the community's vastly improved self-image and social attitudes. As a result of the progress in the Park, other development has been spurred and the economic picture in Mission is much healthier. Projected population figures for the year 2000 are for 43,000 people, and by that time people will be enjoying the completed Park.

The spirit of co-operation and the dedication and enthusiasm of the few determined visionaries who conceived the Fraser River Heritage Park has now permeated the entire city of Mission. That spirit ensures that Mission will continue to grow and prosper, a place that people and industry will be proud to call "home".