



The Historian

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Our Past in Perpetuity

June 2011

President's Message



First of all I would like to take this opportunity to officially welcome our new Museum Curator, Jane Lemke. "Welcome Jane and we'll do our best to see that you have the tools that you need to get our beloved museum in shape."

Speaking of which and coming from a technology background, I know the museum is in dire need of some new computer equipment, which brings me to my second point...

Fundraising; for far too long we have relied on government funding and times being what they are, those sources and amounts are dwindling. So we need to take action and come up with our own fundraising initiatives. At our last board meeting I brought forth this item on the agenda and will continue to do so until we have some sort of formal "Game plan" to raise some much needed funds. On this note, I welcome any and all suggestions.

Thirdly, I shall endeavour to increase public awareness in the Mission District Historical Society (MDHS). Unfortunately I feel that a lot of the general public in Mission don't even know we exist or what we do.

Finally and to go hand in hand with increasing public awareness, the Board and Staff are going to launch a volunteer recruitment drive. Without a solid team of dedicated volunteers the MDHS is "Dead in the Water."

In closing, I would also like to take this opportunity to formally thank each and every one of our current volunteers in all the branches. "Without your selfless and dedicated help, we couldn't do all that we do. It's as simple as that and I commend you all."

Best Regards,

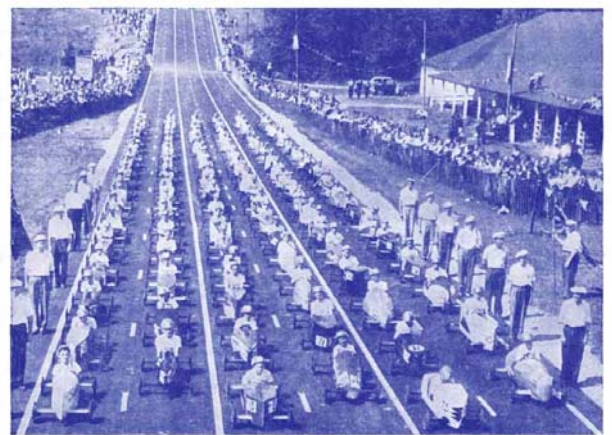
Paul Hockridge
MDHS President



WESTERN CANADA CHAMPIONSHIPS
SOAP BOX DERBY



OFFICIAL PROGRAM



—Photo by Clifford

MISSION CITY
British Columbia



**JUNE 30
JULY 1**
1958

Organized and Administered by the Western Canada Soap Box Derby Association

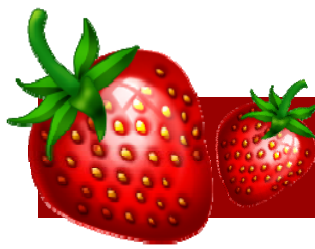
Derby program from 1958; the first year that the Western Canada Soap Box Derby Association organized the event.
Courtesy Mission Community Archives

EVENTS:

The Mission Museum 'Kid's Club' will be running every Friday afternoon from 1:00-3:00 pm from July 8-August 26. Fees are \$5 per week; pre-registration is encouraged.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Feature story - 'Mission: 'Home of the Big Red Strawberry' and 'Derby Town'	2-3
Soap Box Derby Highlights	4
Strawberry Queens and Kings	4



Mission: 'Home of the Big Red Strawberry' and 'Derby Town'



This issue of the newsletter features resources of the Mission Museum, Mission Community Archives, and Heritage Places, on the Strawberry Festival and Soapbox Derby. If you or someone you know has records, objects, or information on this topic, contact the Archivist or Heritage Places Coordinator at 604 820-2621 or the Curator at 604 826-1011.

In 1946, in a post-WWII effort to raise funds for a much needed addition to the Mission Memorial Hospital, Mission held its first Strawberry Festival. It was to become an annual event and included such activities as a Strawberry Queen Pageant and a Soap Box Derby. People came from all across the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley to participate in the festivities. Almost as soon as it all started, Mission became known as the 'Home of the Big Red Strawberry' and 'Derby Town.'



This crown, donated by V. Wallace in 1975, was awarded to the annual Strawberry Queen. It is adorned with rhinestones and features seven circular rings atop a thin metal band. Two of the rings were reattached at some point with hot glue, one of which has since fallen off again. This is understandable considering the age of the artefact which was also used for the May Day festivities in 1921, an initial fundraising effort for the Hospital, held after the First World War.

In 1947, just the second year of its existence, the Mission Soap Box Derby became a franchise of the All-American Soap Box Derby meaning the winner would go on to Akron, Ohio to compete in the championship finals.

This gold-painted cardboard helmet is from that first qualifying year and has the words, "Akron or bust" twice scrawled in pencil on its right side, obviously written by the hand of its young racer, identity unknown. The first to advance from the Mission Derby to the finals in Ohio was Lorne Nicholson, who had also won the previous year when the Derby was just one of the events of the Strawberry Festival.



The Festival and the Derby continued to be held together on Main Street (present day First Avenue) until 1949, when the Soap Box Derby became so popular it took over the street by itself, and the Strawberry Festival had to move to the Fairgrounds (now the site of the Leisure Centre). In 1956, the Strawberry Festival ended due to the increasing popularity of the Soap Box Derby, which had by then become a well known event, province-wide.

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This Banner, donated in 1984, belonged to Gerry Hughes, the 1948 Mission Soap Box Derby Champion who travelled to Akron Ohio to compete in the All-American Championship Finals. The Banner travelled with him and was displayed to designate his spot at the Finals. Hughes won a couple trophies that year including Chevrolet Motor Divisions Award for Canadian Soap Box Derby Champion.



The Jimmy Gunn Memorial Trophy, named after the committee member on the Board of Trade who, back in 1946, came up with the original idea to run a Soap Box Derby in conjunction with the Strawberry Festival, was awarded to the Grand Champion of the Western Canada Soap Box Derby. This one was used from 1964 to 1973, the Soap Box's final year until its resurrection in 1999. It stands over 2 1/2 feet

tall on its 2 foot square base and includes two blank plates meant for the winners of subsequent races, which, due to the loss of a major sponsor, never happened.

Jimmy Gunn's (1916-1972) records were donated to the Mission Community Archives in 1990 by his eldest daughter. They document his life and varied activities mainly between 1937 and 1953. The bulk of his records pertain to his community service, including the Mission Soap Box Derby. They comprise a broad range of material, including: the first agreement signed with the All-American Soap Box Derby dated December 31, 1946, minutes, reports, correspondence, newspaper clippings, programs, prize lists with winners, rule books, photographs and memorabilia which document both the early history of the derby (1946-68) and Gunn's role.



Jimmy Gunn (left) with Gerry Hughes, 1948 Mission Champion
Courtesy Mission Community Archives

For many years, Jimmy accompanied the winner of the Mission derby to the All-American Soap Box Derby Championship in Akron, Ohio. His records provide documentation of the years 1947-48 and 1950-52.



Gerry Hughes "weighing in" before finals for the 1948 Canadian and International Soap Box Derby Championship in Akron. He went on to win the Canadian title.
Courtesy Mission Community Archives

The year that Jimmy accompanied Gerry Hughes to Akron, a 40 foot Canadian sugar maple was planted at Derby Downs. The plaque under the tree read: *A living symbol from the Dominion of Canada, a friendly neighbour who has sent many fine competitors to the All American Soap Box Derby. Planted and dedicated at Derby Downs, August 13, 1948.*

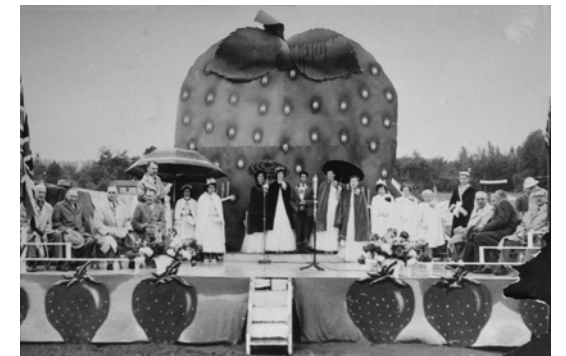


In 1950, the franchise was extended to make the Mission derby a province-wide competition and by 1956 thirty-four communities across the province had participated in the popular derby.

Due to its growing success, a Western Canada Soap Box Derby Association was formed in December of 1957 to organize and manage the event. The following year, 11,000 people came to Mission to watch boys from BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan compete in the derby. In 2009, Roger Hilliard, the last President of the association (dissolved in 1974) donated all of the records to the Community Archives. Their records along with Jimmy Gunn's provide extensive documentation of the derby's entire history.

In addition the Community Archives also has numerous photos donated by the Fraser Valley Record in 1983 and 1984 and Bert Clifford of Clifford Studios (Mission) in 1997 which cover the derby from its beginning until it ended in 1973 as well as the Mission Strawberry Festival (1946-1956).

When the Strawberry Festival first opened in June 1946, thousands lined Main Street to share in the entertainment and celebration. Indeed, the city's main thoroughfare (now First Avenue) was closed between Grand and Horne Avenues to all traffic. Special tracks were then laid on Main Street so that the 'Strawberry Special,' a model steam train built by Percy Routledge, could operate. At Main Street and Welton Avenue the 'Strawberry Bowl' (a stage built in the shape of a bowl of strawberries) was erected to facilitate entertainment and to crown Mission's Strawberry Queen; in the evening, the area was used for street dancing.



Mission's Strawberry Queen coronation, 1955.
Courtesy Mission Community Archives



Derby racers on the final leg down Main St.
Courtesy Mission Community Archives

Throughout the day a shuttle bus was standing by to transport people to the agricultural grounds where a baseball tournament and log bucking contests, among other events were underway. The shuttle bus operated between the Mission City Bus Terminal, Railway Street near the CPR depot, and the agricultural grounds at 7th and Grand Avenues.

Mission's first Soap Box Derby was a big part of the Strawberry Festival excitement. This first 'wildcat race' followed a non-permanent track that started at the top of Grand and 7th Avenues; it continued down Grand to Third Street and then turned west for one block. Derby racers then headed south down Birch Street to the top of Legion Hill, where they followed Main Street east to the finish line. The great success of the Derby led to the creation of a permanent track in 1953, near Grand and 7th Avenues (current site of the Mission Leisure Centre). It was the first permanent derby track to be established in Canada, however only remnants of it remain there today.

Mission District
Historical Society
33215 Second Avenue
P.O. Box 3522
Mission, BC V2V 4L1

President
Paul Hockridge

Past President
Mildred Vollick

Secretary
Sheryl McKamey

Treasurer
Ann Senae

Directors
Jim Hinds
Joan MacLatchy
Alice Thompson

Archivist
Val Billesberger

Curator
Jane Lemke

HPB Coordinator
Jenn Murray

Administrative Assistant
Jill Holgate

Council Representative
Mike Scudder

www.missiondhs.com
missiondhs@yahoo.ca

Soap Box Derby Highlights:

Courtesy Mission Community Archives

- 1946
 - Initial Soap Box Derby, a "wildcat race", held in conjunction with FIRST annual Strawberry Festival on First Avenue.
 - Lorne Nicholson of Mission wins first derby.
- 1947
 - A franchise is granted to operate derby within a 30 mile area.
 - Lorne Nicholson of Mission wins the derby for the second consecutive year and is the first winner to compete in the International Derby at Akron, Ohio.
- 1950
 - Derby franchise extended to cover the entire province.
 - David Mussaleum of Haney wins coveted championship title.
- 1953
 - 1st permanent track opened at site of present day Leisure Centre & Soapbox garden.
 - Fred Cameron of Haney wins 1st championship race on new track.
 - Estimated 12,000 people attend derby.
- 1957
 - Western Canadian Soap Box Derby Association formed to organize and manage the annual derby.
 - Annual derby becomes main event with cancellation of the Strawberry Festival.
- 1969
 - Dennis Lissimore of Mission wins the championship title (the fourth and last local youth to win the annual race over its 28 year history).
- 1972
 - Carol Ryall is the first girl to compete in annual derby.
 - John Vantol of Prince George wins the championship race.
- 1973
 - End of an era. After 28 years, the last derby was held at the Fairgrounds/Leisure Centre. Gary Semeniuk of Edmonton, Alberta was the last champion.

STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL QUEENS

- 1946 Grace Holmes, Mission
- 1947 Valerie Dever, Mission City
- 1948 Erna Buck, Dewdney
- 1949 Myrtle Davis, Dewdney
- 1950 Miriam Madonald, Dewdney
- 1951 Maud Hari, Mission City
- 1952 No Queen contest
- 1953 Marlene Scott, Mission city
- 1954 Dorothy Whatley, Mission City
- 1955 Pat Frankie, Mission City
- 1956 Sheila McAlister, Mission City

STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL KINGS

- 1947 John Anutooshkin, Mission
- 1948 No contest due to flood
- 1949 Joe Kish, Mission City
- 1950 No contest due to poor harvest
- 1951 J.K. Spanier, Clearbrook
- 1952 K. Shikaze, Dewdney
- 1953 K. Shikaze, Dewdney
- 1954 F.W. Gaspar, Aldergrove
- 1955 Jack Yosheoka, Aldergrove
- 1956 No evidence contest was held



John Anutooshkin of Cedar Valley, the first Strawberry Festival King, with trophies (Fraser Valley Record, June 12, 1947).

Courtesy Mission Community Archives



Newsletter Submissions.

We would like to encourage our members to contribute to our next issue with a story that relates to Mission's history. If you would like to contribute to our next issue, please email missiondhs@yahoo.ca The deadline for the next issue is August 19, 2011.