

work brought art into the public domain, enriching the Vancouver cityscape

BINNING: Artist with street sense

By ADRIAN ARCHAMBAULT

On a hot afternoon in late June of 1938, Bert and Jessie Binning were resting on the manicured lawn at the steps of the Art Institute of Chicago. They were tourists and they were trying to relax and escape the heat after several hours of exploring the vast collection of artworks and antiquities of Chicago's largest art museum.

As part of a sabbatical from teaching at the Vancouver School of Art, Bert was on his way to England with his wife to seek out and study with sculptor and teacher Henry Moore. Even so, this summer day of surveying original and innovative art works — an activity he enjoyed above almost anything else — had left him in a puzzling state of gloom.

What had depressed him, Jessie discovered, was the thought that for nearly 30 years, his life in Vancouver had deprived him of experiencing these great works with his own eyes.

Binning had grown up in Vancouver and was a graduate of the Vancouver School of Art in 1932. He had been chosen by its director to be among the first locally raised and educated instructors. But living in Vancouver in the 1930s emphasized its physical and cultural distance from the creative progress of Europe and even Eastern Canada, a situation that was magnified by the economic low of the period.

Developments in Canadian art such as the emergence of the Group of Seven and the work of Emily Carr remained largely misunderstood in the public mind. The widely approved forms of art in Vancouver reflected the prevailing British influence on the city, with its established tradition of landscape and still life.

The Vancouver Art Gallery had opened in 1931 with a collection dominated by these conservative British paintings and Binning deplored that they were "nailed to the wall and never changed."

"When we heard about people like Picasso and Matisse," Binning recalled, "we heard about them as far-away people living on another planet."

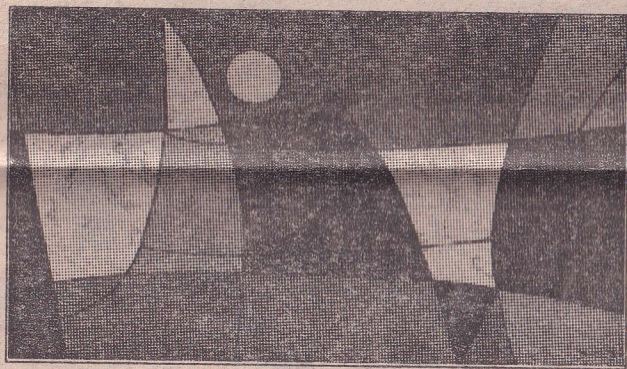
Exploring the contemporary evolution of art was confined to viewing bad reproductions in the few periodicals and books available to Vancouverites during those years.

It was this that moved Binning to devote himself to the task of introducing all the contemporary arts to Vancouver over the next three decades. He wanted to bring an experience of the arts into every corner of the community.

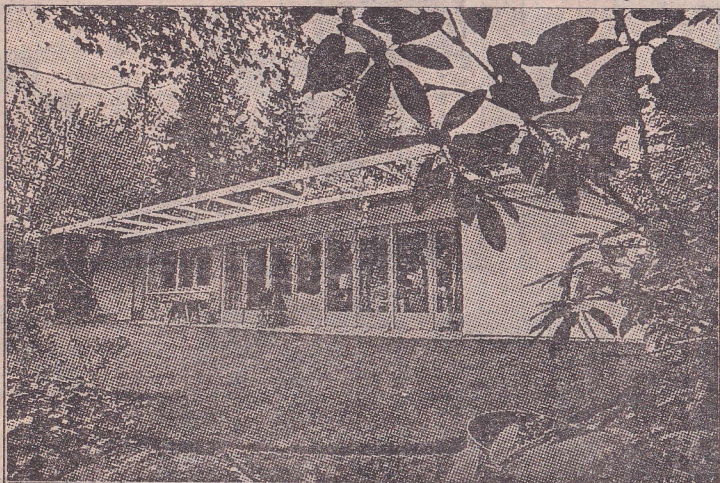
He believed not only in a strong interaction between the arts but also that art was connected intimately with the everyday living environment.

Binning's first love was painting but he is probably most familiar to Vancouverites through his mosaic designs for the former B.C. Hydro building on Burrard and the adjacent Dal Grauer Substation.

His geometric designs for the Substation became a major feature



BEST OF BINNING: self portrait (right); Yellow and Pink Seaside (above); Binning-designed home (below); Fair Weather Signals (below, right)



BILL KEAY/Sun files

on Burrard Street during the 1950s when they were lighted from within the building at night. These commissions were examples of the relationship he wanted to forge between artists and architects.

But projects like the B.C. Hydro building barely are only the visible tip of Binning's local iceberg.

Long before the present downtown skyline took shape, Binning was one of the initiators of the Art in Living Group which emphasized the relationship between art and architecture. In the 1940s, the group — a team of artists, students and interested



himself in 1940 was the first mature example of a modernist house in Western Canada.

Using glass and local materials, this flat-roofed post-and-beam structure became a model for several generations of architectural students and a prototype for many West Coast houses.

Binning's drive and enthusiasm had a strong influence on those around him. Bringing his message of living art to the first post-war generation of students in the 1950s, he moved to teaching at the newly formed School of Architecture at the University of B.C. These students and those that followed would design many of the buildings that are landmarks in Vancouver today.

Significantly, Binning had also become an abstract painter, taking as his subject the playful boats, towers and pennants of the Coast's nautical life.

His paintings were recognized for a consciousness of color and the formal architectural elements that could be used to create new images.

He developed a more classical approach than Jack Shadbolt and other Vancouver artists who took their inspiration from the organic elements of the landscape of the Coast. But as a group they sought only to respond to the changes and promise of their time with as many new methods as possible.

Teaching yet another generation of university students into the 1960s, Binning "invented" the Festival of Contemporary Arts at UBC, an occasion that art patron Alvin Balkind called one of the seminal events in the ferment of the arts in Vancouver. From 1962

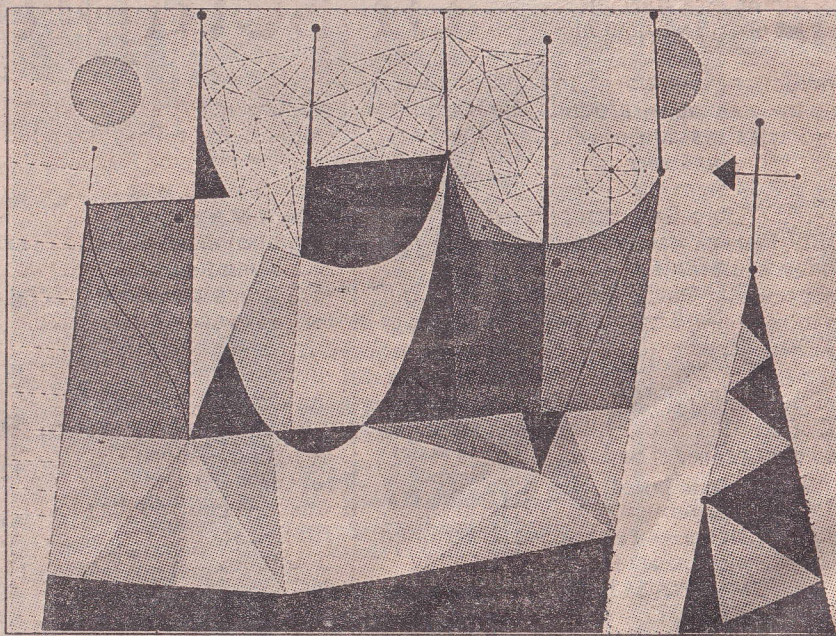
to 1970, the festival encouraged public involvement with artists and students.

Lawren Harris, founding member of the Group of Seven and early convert to abstract painting, once remarked that Bert Binning should have put aside all the time and energy consumed by these other

activities and just painted.

But Binning's work in the community and in arts education was closer to his idea of the meaning of art. Thanks to the work of his generation, the results continue to enrich the city today.

Adrian Archambault is currently working on a biography of B.C. Binning.



citizens — organized widely popular art gallery exhibitions related to innovative ideas in architecture, school design and community planning. These events anticipated the expansion of the Lower Mainland and cleared a path for new things to happen.

The house Binning designed and built for

HARMONY HIGHLIGHTS

WEST Vancouver's sixth annual Harmony Arts Festival, Aug. 9 to Aug. 18, highlights the best of what the North Shore has to offer in the way of visual arts, music, theatre and culture.

Standout events include:

ArtDemos

Stone sculptor Michael Binkley, weaver Jane Kenyon and First Nations



CATCH Michael Binkley's stone sculptures-in-the-making, Thursday at the Ferry Building.

carver Wade Baker demonstrate their craft on site. Catch Binkley Thursday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Baker Saturday and Sunday, noon to 4 p.m., at the Ferry Building. Kenyon sets up her loom at the Silk Purse Friday and Saturday, 1 to 4 p.m.

ArtSpeaks

Artists and art educators share their views during these lunchtime and afternoon talks that begin today at noon with a discussion by Adrian Archambault of the drawings of B.C. Binning.

Musical Concerts

Thursday through Sunday,



NIGEL Mack brings his Blues Attack to the Dunderave Concert Stage Saturday.

open-air concerts at John Lawson Park and on the Dunderave Concert Stage highlight a wide variety of sounds. For your listening pleasure: Ancient Cultures, Bongo Bob, Fiona Blackburn, Gypsallero, Summer Pops Youth Orchestra and more.

Creative Kids Day

North Shore News sponsors this day specially dedicated to junior artists. From 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, kids can create from clay or recycled paper, play dress-up and write a poem. All activities take place at John Lawson Park.

Harmony Craft Market

Two dozen artisans ply their wares Thursday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., under the tents at the foot of 15th Street.

—Layne Christensen



NEWS photo Cindy Goodman

B.C. Binning's light-hearted drawings as a record of life in West Vancouver is the subject of an ArtSpeak discussion today at noon by Adrian Archambault, who has spent the past five years researching Binning through discussions with the late artist's wife, Jessie (above).

W. Van arts in harmony

Sixth annual W. Van festival kicks off

By Layne Christensen

Community Reporter

LAST Friday's reception at West Vancouver Seniors' Activity Centre was the official opening of Harmony Arts but it wasn't necessarily the beginning.

It has taken six months to organize this week's events and six years to bring West Vancouver's festival of the arts to its current state, says festival coordinator Valerie York.

"As it becomes more established, the level (of quality) keeps going up," says York of the 10-day celebration which transforms streets and parks from Ambleside to Dunderave into outdoor showcases for arts and crafts, music and theatre. Participation, too, continues to climb.

Last year more than 200 artists and

artisans and 110 musical performers contributed to the festival's success. This year those numbers climb to 275 and 216 respectively.

More than 250 volunteers assisted with last year's festival, which organizers estimate was attended by more than 10,000 local residents and visitors to the area. This year, York places the volunteer count at 400.

Ruth Payne, coordinator of the Ferry Building Gallery, has seen participation in the festival's popular ArtBeat street gallery skyrocket.

Last year 80 merchants volunteered their store windows to showcase the works of North Shore artists, both emerging and established. This year the "gallery walk" encompasses 150 store windows along Bellevue and Marine between 13th and 25th streets.

Removing art from the confines of a gallery setting and taking it to the streets



NEWS photo Paul McGrath

JURORS Elizabeth Evans (left) and Barb Head, as well as festival image creator Colin Righton, show their works alongside those of the 37 artists they juried for a joint exhibition at the Ferry Building and Silk Purse galleries through Aug. 25.

makes art accessible to the public, says Payne. And that's exactly the goal of Harmony Arts.

"It's really a visual feast out there," says Payne. "And it makes art (and the

arts) friendly."

A complete schedule of Harmony Arts events is available for pickup at the Ferry Building Gallery, 1414 Argyle Ave. The festival wraps Sunday, Aug. 18.

GALLERIES

Government of Canada Fine Arts Gallery (W.V. Memorial Library): *Emerging from the Dark*, works in pencil, pastels, and watercolors by artist Wilfred Alinas, to Aug. 31; *Local Scenes*, watercolors and egg tempera works by Michael Brouillet, to Aug. 31. Lower Mainland artists who would like to apply for an exhibit during the 1997 schedule at the library gallery are invited to submit works for selection.

Call 925-7410 for details.

Ferry Building Gallery: *Harmony Arts Festival Group Show*. Free. Info: 925-7290.

Silk Purse Arts Centre: *Harmony Arts Festival Group Show*, to Aug. 18, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. 925-7292.

Seymour Art Gallery: *Male Time*, oil paintings on canvas by Bruce Perry, shows soulful portraits of men depicting the journey of life, Seymour Art Gallery lobby, to Aug. 19. *My Ocean, My Coast*, watercolors by West Van artist and sailor Colin Hempsall, exhibition continues to Aug. 18. I,

Object, an exhibition of fused and slumped glass objects by Brock Craig, Aug. 21-Sept. 15; opening reception, 7-9 p.m., Aug. 21; artists talk/slide show, 7 p.m. Aug. 28. *Metamorphosis*, themed intaglio prints by Biliana Velkova, Aug. 21-Oct. 13; opening reception, 7-9 p.m., Aug. 21. Info: 924-1378.

North Vancouver District Hall Gallery: *Art Exhibition*, paintings by Bowen Island artist Bill Hoopes and *Baroque Variations*, three-dimensional works, by Vancouver artist Paul De Guzman, are on

display until Aug. 29.

West Vancouver Museum and Archives: *West Vancouver Collects!* Exhibition features W.V. schools, photography and Lawson Family collections from the Museum and Archives as well as personal collections from W.V. residents. Last chance to see local collections of Chinese paper-cuts, cookbook and biscuit tins, skulls from Lighthouse Park, spoons from around the world and a royal tea cup collection, closes Sept. 1, Tues.-Sun., 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 925-7295. **North Vancouver Museum**

and Archives: *Tools, Trades and Technological Change*, exhibition, to Sept. 2. *Norgate and North Lonsdale Neighborhoods*, to Sept. 2. *Charles H. Cates & Sons*, to Oct. 1. *North Lonsdale & Norgate: Two N.V. Communities*, to Sept. 2. Wednesday to Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. 987-5618.

THEATRE

Presentation House Theatre: *NoShtic*, North Shore Theatre

See more page 15

DIGEST

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Halt waterfront plan, lawyer says

He hopes that North Vancouver district will not adopt the district-initiated plan for the waterfront.

GLENN BOHN
VANCOUVER SUN

Proposals to open North Vancouver district's waterfront up to the public are causing hardship for owners of waterfront

homes, says a lawyer hired to represent them.

Vancouver lawyer Jonathan Baker said Wednesday he hopes council won't adopt the district-initiated plan for the residential waterfront.

"They can't simply fool around and play politics because it may be attractive to designate a lot of wealthy people's houses as a future park,"

he said in an interview.

"That may look good prior to an election [in November], but they have to have money and an implementation plan."

A brochure mailed to all North Vancouver district residents last November outlines a "50-year vision" drafted by the district's waterfront task force.

The committee of community association representatives

called for more waterfront parks and viewpoints to provide for "improved physical and visual accessibility" to North Vancouver's residential waterfront — beaches and bluffs that stretch more than eight kilometres, from Deep Cove to Maplewood.

A large map on the brochure summarized proposals to purchase existing residences for

such things as a northward expansion of Cates Park.

There was also a proposal to buy some properties and resell them after the district retains a six-metre-wide strip of land for a "mostly natural seaside and seaview trail system..."

In an April 29 letter to council, Baker says many of his clients have already suffered

SEE WATERFRONT, B3



IAN SMITH/Vancouver Sun

POST-AND-BEAM HOME: Jesse Binning, 93, in her West Vancouver house; municipal officials have been authorized to draft a heritage designation bylaw for property.

Unique house to be preserved in West Van

GLENN BOHN
VANCOUVER SUN

There are hundreds of stately old mansions in West Vancouver, but a small house built in 1940 will be the first privately

owned "municipal heritage site" in B.C.'s highest-income community.

Jessie Binning, 93, wants to ensure that the post-and-beam building designed by herself

and her late husband will be maintained and preserved as a single-family home.

She wants future generations to appreciate one of the first modern West Coast-style

dwelling built in the province.

For decades, students, artists and architects have been making pilgrimages to the house, an unpretentious-looking building, especially compared

to the more grandiose structures nearby.

"There's been a great interest in the house architecturally — not only here but nationally,"

SEE HERITAGE, B3

HERITAGE from B1

Ground-breaking post-and-beam house cost about \$5,000

The architectural goal was to build an affordable house suitable for the West Coast.

Binning said proudly during an interview Wednesday.

It's not novel now, but there's a wall of glass on the south side revealing a sweeping ocean view. Rocks from nearby Cypress Creek — not imported marble from a distant quarry — were used for a large fireplace. Wall-to-wall cupboards are made of local woods.

Jessie Binning said she worked out the basic floor plan. Her husband — artist and educator B.C. (Bertrand Charles) Binning, founding director of

the fine arts department at the University of B.C. — refined the design with help from architect Ned Pratt and Robert Berwick.

Their architectural goal was to build a dwelling suitable for the West Coast and its climate, while ensuring the final product wasn't too costly.

Jessie Binning said they spent about \$5,000 on the house. Their ocean-view lot in the high-end Altamont neighbourhood cost them \$600, or \$37.50 in monthly mortgage payments.

"It was very much a ground-breaking house when it was first designed," said Joel Lawson, a district planner involved in her-

itage issues.

"He was hoping to show that good design didn't have to be expensive — that good, well-designed houses could be done for the masses, using local materials and local artisans," he said.

The house is now almost 60 years old, but Lawson said it remains in virtually its original condition.

Binning doesn't like the look of some of West Vancouver's new homes, which are at least 10 times the size of hers. She wonders why couples need so many rooms.

In 1998, the district gave the Binnings a heritage award for

their efforts in designing and preserving the landmark residence.

Recently, the house was declared a national historic monument, making it the first modern house to receive that recognition.

But the municipal award and the national designation provide no legal protection for the house, so last month Jessie Binning requested a municipal heritage designation for her home.

This week, West Vancouver council authorized staff to draft a heritage designation bylaw for the Binning residence.

That designation would be

registered on the property's title and would remain in effect when there is a change in ownership.

Anyone who wanted to change the building would have to seek a special "alteration permit" which must be reviewed by the municipality's heritage advisory commission and be approved by council.

In theory, a future council could revoke the heritage designation with the consent of an owner.

"But, from what I understand from my cohorts in other parts of B.C., it's extremely rare that a council would remove a designation," Lawson said.

one state charge.

In the northeast border

said he expects to oppose any application for bail.

Binning's remarkable paintings, murals and mosaics adorn house

From B1

recalled. "My husband built it in [to the kitchen cabinetry]. It doesn't seem like anything, but it was revolutionary. The young carpenter who was working on things around here came up to my husband and said 'You can't build that stove in — where's the dog going to sleep?' " She smiled. "Dogs used to always sleep under the stove. It shows the era."

Binning was determined to have only modern furniture in the house. Jessie had an 18th-century antique chesterfield that stayed in storage for decades.

"Bertie said 'it won't suit our house,' " she said with a laugh. "Then on my birthday, he came to me and said 'For your birthday present, I'll allow you to bring that couch.' He died soon after."

The antique chesterfield is one of few changes Jessie has made to the decor.

There seems to be an endless supply of B.C. Binning's remarkable abstract paintings, drawings, murals and mosaics sprinkled throughout the house.

"This is called *Night Signals*," she said, pointing out a small work of brilliant multi-coloured lights and shapes set against a black backdrop.

"When that was painted people thought he must be

depressed or something, because it had a black background. He said 'Don't you ever drive over a bridge at night and see the lights on the bridge?' It's interesting to see the different approaches people have to a work of art."

The Binnings were married in 1936.

"Somebody said to me 'What did your father think of you marrying an artist?' And I said 'I think he paid him!' " she laughed.

The couple went through some lean times, living on \$100 a month when Binning studied in London. But Binning became a giant in West Coast art, with murals in the old B.C. Hydro building, the main branch of the Vancouver Public Library and the old CKWX building on Burrard street.

"Binning was instrumental in working with both the local art and architectural communities during the '40s, '50s and '60s," said heritage expert Don Luxton.

"He was very influential as a teacher [at the Vancouver School of Art] and as a painter. Binning is considered one of the pioneers of the modern movement locally."

Luxton is also pleased that the government has begun to recognize that modern structures have heritage value.

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TODD DUNCAN/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

B.C. Binning's art adorns the inside of the West Vancouver home of his widow, 95-year-old Jessie Binning. The Binning residence, built between 1939 and 1941, will receive a National Heritage Site plaque on Sunday in recognition of its striking architecture.

Influential in modern architecture, Binning house now a historic site

By JOHN MACKIE

Everything about the Binning house in West Vancouver is a work of art: the striking modern architecture, the walls splashed with murals, the elegant cabinetry and furniture, the lush garden, the stunning view, and the legendary builder and owner, artist B.C. Binning.

Built between 1939 and 1941,

the Binning house was a huge over. To this day, students from the University of B.C.'s School of Architecture regularly troop over to West Vancouver to study the house, which is remarkably unchanged since it was built.

The federal government has recognized the importance of the Binning house by designating it one of only a handful of National Historic Sites in British Columbia. On Sunday, the house will receive its National Heritage Site

"My husband would think it was funny," chuckles Jessie Binning, the 95-year-old widow of Bert Binning, who passed away in 1976.

She explains that the house was an attempt to show what you could do when you didn't have a lot of money, but had imagination.

"When this house was built, there were square houses being built that were around \$5,000," she said. "Boxes. Bertie wanted to show what you could do in a dif-

In consultation with architects Ned Pratt and Bob Berwick, Binning designed a bold experiment with a flat roof, an open design, and a two-tiered floor plan. The south wall is virtually all glass, the foyer was designed to be a gallery for Binning's art, and the house was seamlessly integrated into the landscape.

"When the house was built, stoves were on legs," she

GLENN BOHN
VANCOUVER SUN

A modest home in the high-priced Altamont neighbourhood is to become the first privately owned residence in West Vancouver to be legally protected under the municipality's heritage designation bylaw.

The bylaw allows for only minimal changes to both the exterior and interior of the modernistic 1940 home owned by Jessie Binning, 93, widow of late

SEE HERITAGE, B4

HERITAGE from B1

Odds 'slim' small houses will survive

There is no financial incentives for owners who want houses preserved.

artist B.C. Binning.

If future owners want to do much more than put in new plumbing or wiring, they'll have to seek council's approval.

Tyke Babalos, the chair of the district's Heritage Advisory Commission, says the odds are "slim" that other small houses on large lots will survive in the long term.

The percentage of seniors in West Vancouver is double that of the provincial and national average, and Babalos notes that many post-war homes are still occupied by their original owners.

"You won't really know what's going to happen to those homes until they sell, and I think that's coming up in the next five or 10 years," he said in an interview.

"It won't happen in one year, or one month. It will come gradually, and those houses will be gone."

As it stands now, the district of West Vancouver offers no financial incentives for home owners who feel their homes should be conserved and decide to seek a heritage protection bylaw, as Jessie Binning did.

In fact, there's a financial disincentive, because prospective buyers may shy away from a purchase once they find that even a change in paint colours would require a "heritage alteration permit" from district hall.

So Babalos would like to see more carrots to save heritage homes, like the tax credits the



IAN SMITH/Sun Files

PRESERVED: Jessie Binning stands outside 1940s heritage house

city of Victoria offers to those who spend money on repairs to heritage homes. He said the commission hopes to make some recommendations to council next year, after it has updated the district's existing list of heritage homes.

West Vancouver has 101 buildings on that list.

Joel Lawson, an assistant planner with the district who works on heritage issues, said the most vulnerable homes are those sited on large, high-value lots. Some of those lots can be legally subdivided, so a developer can buy the lot and put up two new houses.

"In some cases, you can have houses which are three, four or five times bigger than what's there now," Lawson said. "It gets a little more difficult to convince someone to keep the house, unless they're into having a smaller, heritage house."

However, Lawson also believes that heritage houses are now in vogue, because a growing number of people want to buy and restore them.

The heritage buffs are people

like Mona and Peter Foreman.

Last February, the designer-builder team was given one of the district's heritage achievement awards. They bought a 1945 log house in the Cedardale neighborhood and spent two years restoring it. They added some modern features, like a larger kitchen and a family room, but respected the past.

The current owners of the home — who requested anonymity — said the renovation made it more livable for a young family. After they left their former home in Altamont last year, a developer tore down the 1940s-era house and replaced it with a large new house, although the old house had gone through a major renovation with new plumbing and wiring in 1985.

North Shore Heritage Weekend events this Friday, Saturday and Sunday include an Indian Arm boat tour, photo exhibits and tours of heritage homes. For more information, call West Van Museum and Archives, at 925-7295, or the North Vancouver heritage commission, 990-2326.