

RECOLLECTIONS

(From a 1987 interview with two sisters who attended camp in the 1920's.)



A little bit of history walked into the camp unexpectedly when Norma Holmes (neé Bakenham), 75 and Evelyn Gatenby (neé Bakenham) 72, came back for a visit. These sisters were residents of the original Alexandra Orphanage in the 1920's, and with the other Orphanage children spent part of each summer at Camp Alexandra. On a lazy, spring afternoon, Norma and Evelyn shared some of their recollections of those early days:

“Every summer from the day school let out on June 16, for a full month, we would come down here to the Camp. The whole orphanage came - lock, stock, barrel and staff. Then the underprivileged and mothers came.”

“At first when we came, we came in private cars. It was an all day drive over rough roads. Then we graduated to the train. That was a long trip too. The train came through three times a day from Vancouver to Seattle, and stopped at the depot here, where Heron Park is now.”

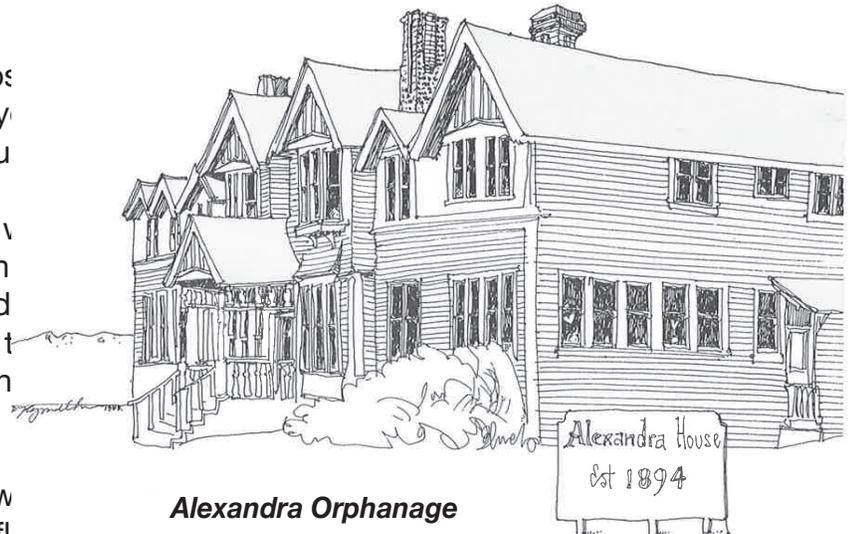
“In the orphanage, the boys and the girls were strictly separated. The boys had their times for eating and all their activities, and the girls had theirs. If you were ever caught talking to a boy, you were sent to the dormitories.”

“It was hard to go into the orphanage, but in those days, it was very strict, we had our days off to go to the circus.”

“We all had to wear uniforms; a navy blue sack suit and a white hat in the summer. Every Sunday we'd go to a dance - you name it. We only went to the Holy Rollers and the Special Service Mission.”

“We liked it at the Orphanage, even though we worked on Wednesday and Saturday, we had to scrub the floors and make our own beds and clean the dormitories. We always knew everyday what we were going to have for dinner. It was the same for each day of the week. Matron would put the gramophone on while we ate. We had to eat everything on our plates, of course.”

“Mrs. Irving, the Matron was English and very starchy. She had been a nurse and wore a stiff old nurses uniform all the time. It was part of my job when I got older to take the Matron her breakfast each morning. She always had toast in a rack and her Eno's Fruit salts. It was generally the oldest girl who took Matron her breakfast, and she never got up till she'd had it.”



Alexandra Orphanage

“We were given Epsom Salts once a week whether we needed it or not, then we girls had to get down on our knees and staff would comb our hair with coal oil to make sure there was no lice. In those days girls had longer hair and lice was a problem.”

“Christmas was really something. We’d come down Christmas morning, eyes as large as saucers, and here would be this big tree with all these dolls and toys. The orphanage had very wealthy people on the Board and they were generous at Christmas. Then we’d entertain them with poems and songs. I bet we’ve been in more homes in Shaughnessy than most people, at garden parties and what not. We sang and entertained. The wealthy people would say ‘Who do we get for entertainment? We’ll get the girls from Alexandra because they work for nothing.’”

“At that time, when you reached the age of 12 you were no longer allowed to stay in the Orphanage. They found you a foster home, or put you to work in a private home. The boys were generally placed on farms and the girls were hired out as domestic help. You had to be at least a half orphan to get into the Orphanage, with one or the other parent dead, because of course, back then there was no such thing as divorce.”

“Every morning we had to line up before school for inspection. They would check behind your ears, your neck, your hands and behind your knees. We had gym once a week where we did some exercises, but not much in the way of music and dancing.”

Camp Alexandra 1918



“We all got along pretty well with each other, just like any big family. The big kids took care of the little kids, and we shared. There was no distinction—you were all the same, and all treated the same, although there were some jealousies from time to time. The staff had their favorites. Kathleen Forsythe was always allowed to keep her ringlets, and everyone else had to have a short Dutch bob.”

“When we came down to Camp Alex in the summer, we still stuck to our schedule, except that here, we went swimming. The big building (Dining Hall) was here then, and the two little bungalows. (*The current Stagehouse and children’s House*). The boys playshed used to be where the Rec Hall (*Alexandra Hall*) is now. There were a couple of cabins, and then just big tents. We orphans slept in the buildings, and the underprivileged slept in the tents.”



“The Oyster farm and point (*Blackies Spit*) were out of bounds. The Swim Club had the point, and the twain were not to meet. Another reason we didn’t go to the point was the riptides. There were a lot of deaths. If you went out too far and the tide was changing, you were dead.”

"I remember one incident here. A girl came up to me and said 'close your eyes and stick out your tongue.' We didn't know anything of the outside world, so I did it. There was the most awful burning on my tongue. Then she told me to go do it to another girl, and believe it or not, I did. It turned out to be flakes of lye, and to this day, I have a sensitive spot on my tongue. It happened right here, just behind the Dining Hall where

there used to be a woodpile all around. Boy did I get into trouble that day! It was the hardest thing in the summer to go back, and when school started, we all had to go to bed at 7 o'clock. We would be there listening to the kids still playing outside."

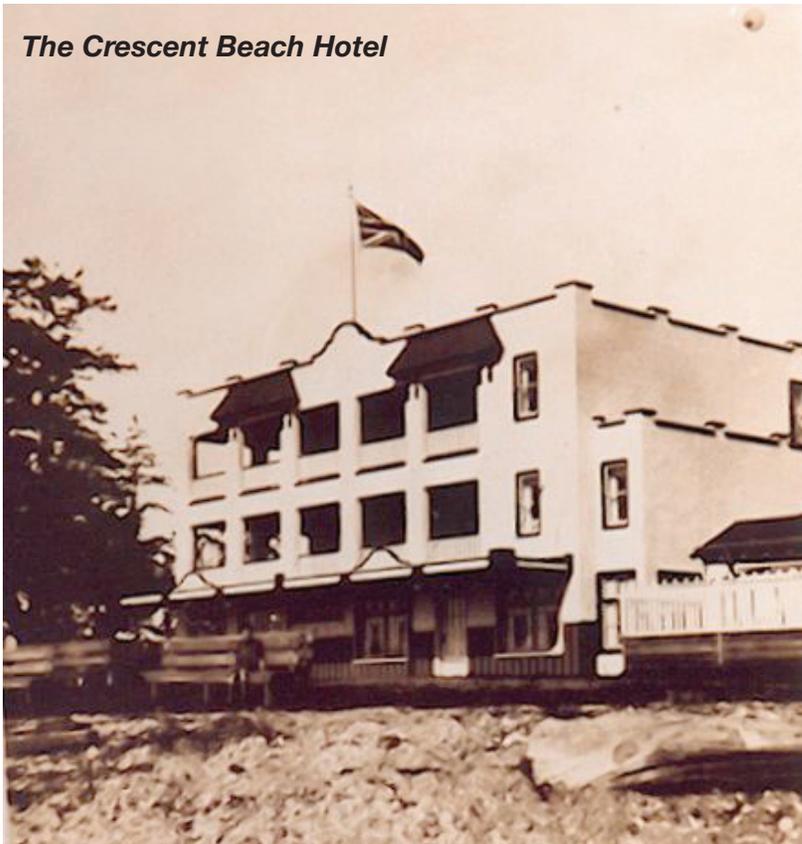
Boy's Camp



They had a big wood and coal range in there, and was it hot! It was Evelyn's job to make sure there was enough wood for the stove."

"After we turned 12, it was the Depression, and here we were, old Orphanage kids looking for a job - and they were few and far between. We went to see Mrs. Beckett (head of the Alexandra Orphanage Society,) and she put us to work. We both came down and worked here in the summer in the kitchen, and looking after the outdoor toilets. They'd call us 'kitchen flunkies' nowadays.

The Crescent Beach Hotel



"In those days, these were all just summer homes here. It's hard to believe that people commute every day to work in the city. It was so isolated here; so calm and quiet."

Norma and Evelyn were able to identify some of the old pictures here at the Camp, and for Norma, who lives in Seattle, it was her first visit back in more than 50 years.

The waterfront circa 1928

