

## Green Scene: Celebrate *Treefest* at Riverview

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If it is fall, then it must be time for *Treefest* on the Riverview Hospital grounds in Coquitlam. Although it will be the 18<sup>th</sup> annual *Treefest* on Saturday, September 17 from 1-4 pm, the event this year will be somewhat poignant because it will be the last *Treefest* to be held while Riverview is still a functioning provincial hospital. With the remaining Riverview patients expected to be transferred to other facilities by June 2012, *Treefest* next year will be held, for the most part, on a vacant site graced by heritage buildings and a world class collection of trees. Hopefully, past will be prologue and ways will be found for the site to continue to play a significant role in keeping with its past contributions.



**Riverview Hospital has grand landscapes, heritage buildings (Centre Lawn and East Lawn shown here) and a world class collection of trees.**

***Kiyoshi Takahashi photo.***

Riverview has a proud history of serving mental health care needs in this province ever since the government acquired land for the facility in 1904. Opened in 1913 and originally named Essondale, the hospital grounds supported not only mental health care but also BC's first botanical garden. It was the site for a provincial architectural competition that was intended to produce monumental buildings reflecting the most recent trends in mental health care complemented by graciously designed-grounds to support the site's therapeutic purposes. West Lawn, with its open airy wings and abundance of natural light, was considered to be the most modern institution of its kind when it opened in 1913. Although the First World War altered some of the original grand plans for the site, the buildings which followed (e.g., Centre Lawn in 1924, East Lawn in 1930, Crease Clinic in 1934) continued the tradition of splendid architecture complemented by superb landscaping reminiscent of an English country estate.

John Davidson, recruited from Scotland as the province's first botanist, arrived on site in 1911. He quickly set about developing gardens for the new hospital, undertook extensive surveys of the province's flora, established a

botanical garden which soon held 600 native species and solicited specimen trees for landscaping at Essondale from his contacts in Great Britain. The Essondale nursery he established went on to supply trees and shrubs for parks, highways, courthouses and other public places in BC for the next half century. When the University of British Columbia was established, Davidson moved there and took the botanical garden with him. The landscaping and nurseries at Essondale continued under the guidance of Head Garden, Jack Renton, who had trained at the world famous Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England established in 1759.

The fabulous landscaping on Essondale's grounds and fruit production from its orchards (as well as food production at Colony Farm which was originally part of the hospital) could not have been accomplished without the help of Essondale patients. Outdoor work in a healthy setting was known to be beneficial for the mentally ill in an era long before the development of modern medicines. Some of the patients were former miners and their skills in building rock walls can still be seen in several places at Riverview today.

In 2008, people were aghast when rumours surfaced of the Campbell government's suggested intentions to convert Riverview into a residential area of highrise towers and finance mental health care from the proceeds. The City of Coquitlam, taking a more enlightened approach to one of their crown jewels, applied to the federal government in 2009 to have Riverview designated as a national historic site – a designation that would not preclude a wide range of activities on site including the mental health care services for which the site is so well suited. Since then, the provincial government, while not supporting this assessment for federal heritage status, has indicated an intention to have Riverview evaluated under a provincial heritage conservation planning process.

Only a few things about Riverview's future appear certain. Limited mental health care services will continue to be provided by the Fraser Health Authority in three new smaller facilities and the movie industry will continue to have a presence on site especially in the beautiful art deco Crease Clinic which they have occupied for several years. Although many buildings at Riverview remain very serviceable and offer a variety of facilities, the fate of the remainder of the site appears to be very much up for grabs. The September 17 *Treefest* event provides a wonderful opportunity to learn more about Riverview, its marvelous trees, magnificent landscapes and its contributions to this community.