

Green Scene: Riverview – Magnificent Trees and More

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(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, September 12, 2008, page 24)

[photograph]

[caption: The campus-like feel of Riverview, with its spacious lawns and an eye-pleasing mix of tree species including oaks, lindens, chestnuts, tulip trees and many others.

Sue Habberger photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Fresh air & peace - it sounds like modern care]

The Treefest Celebration on the Riverview Hospital grounds denotes, for me, a seasonal shift from the casual pace of summer to a busier fall. This annual event held, this year, on Sunday, September 21 from 11 am to 4 pm, provides an opportunity to enjoy the splendour of Riverview's magnificent trees in their most colourful autumn cloak, learn of the hospital's history, attend gardening workshops on various topics and view a number of community displays. Treefest this year will also include a tour around some of the more interesting buildings with Vancouver's renowned heritage architect, Don Luxton, and a presentation by Val Adolph, author and co-editor of two books on Riverview.

Located in Coquitlam along the Lougheed Highway north of the Colony Farm Road intersection, Riverview Hospital first opened with the West Lawn building in 1910 for care of the mentally ill. In its early days, the Hospital was known as Essondale and its grounds included what is now Colony Farm Regional Park on the other side of the Lougheed Highway. The Hospital was intended to provide for the well-being of patients in a health-promoting setting which ensured patients would have plenty of fresh air, daily contact with nature, nutritious home-grown food and opportunities for meaningful work under the supervision of a medical team. A botanical garden, established on the grounds by the province's first official botanist, John Davidson, was managed with patient help. It was later moved to the new University of British Columbia. Over the years, additional institutional buildings, some designed on a truly grand scale, were constructed at Riverview. These included, in 1934, the graceful Crease Clinic, an outstanding example of the art deco style much in favour during that period.

Thanks to inspired planning by those responsible for landscaping, Riverview evolved over the next few decades into a campus-like setting with elegant institutional buildings surrounded by a world-class collection of trees. At its largest in the 1950s, Riverview was home to over four thousand patients. They were provided with on-site training in the form of print and metal-working shops and could participate in a variety of agricultural activities including caring for animals and growing vegetables on prize-winning Colony Farm. Leisure facilities included a swimming pool and a recreation building complete with a bowling alley. Finnie's Garden, located on an uphill area away from the busy highway, provided a quiet retreat for patients and their visiting families.

Then, times and attitudes changed. Farm work suddenly became too demeaning. With the advent of new drugs, many of the mentally ill were thought to no longer require institutional care. By 1983, West Lawn closed and Colony Farm ceased operation as a working farm. The downsizing of Riverview continued into the early 1990s as the provincial government planned to move many patients into regional facilities although a new 358-bed facility was proposed for Riverview. Meanwhile, as the trees of Riverview matured, the pastoral nature and beauty of the site became more apparent with the passing of time. Public

tree tours were initiated in 1992 as appreciation for this unique site continued to grow. In 1994, the first heritage tree inventory was compiled and a book was published on the history of Riverview.

Meanwhile, government cutbacks starting in the mid 1990s undermined previous health care plans and cut gaping holes in the social safety net. In the past decade, the number of homeless people has reached crisis proportions; many of these people have been found to suffer from mental illness. As our society struggles with how best to provide care for the mentally ill, perhaps it's time to acknowledge the past achievements at Riverview and re-evaluate its planned closure.

I find it ironic that contemporary medical advice to schizophrenic patients includes many of the same objectives Essondale practitioners had in mind for their patients almost a century ago - regular habits, daily outdoor exercise and consumption of healthy foods. This is, of course, sensible advice for all of us. If you are contemplating some regular outdoor exercise, I can recommend no finer place for a daily stroll than the grounds of Riverview Hospital. Attending Treefest will provide an excellent introduction to the site and is sure to reveal some features that will draw you back again.