

Death of a Centenarian



The Armes house in the 1910th with the monkey puzzle tree (circled) in the centre of the front yard.

SOME DAY last fall, driving down 272nd Avenue, I missed the familiar outline of the Armes House behind the tall monkey puzzle tree. The old wooden home that had stood there for more than a century had disappeared. It had been torn down by new owners. It wasn't really a surprise this would happen one day because the house had not been lived in for decades and seemed beyond repair. The previous owners had already lived in a new house built on the site but had let the relic linger on. They loved the old house, but restoration and upkeep of an aged wooden structure is beyond the means of most. So, now the old Armes house is no more.

In 1998 Donald Luxton and Associates included the Armes house in an inventory of the "most significant heritage resources within the boundaries

of the District of Maple Ridge." The home lacking architectural merits, so probably it was included because it was associated with local area history or just because there are so few buildings of this age left in Maple Ridge.

The house was built on land originally owned by Noble Oliver, Whonnock's first shopkeeper and postmaster, and his wife Catherine. In 1908 they sold 96 acres of their land to Ole Lee, son of the Norwegian patriarch. Only a couple of years later James Armes became owner of that land. It remains a mystery who built the house and when, but Luxton thought that there was a house on the property by the turn of the century—when the land would still have been owned by the Olivers—and that the original house had either been rebuilt or substantially

enlarged by the time Armes left in 1919. It survived very much unchanged after that.

The history of a home is very much the story of the people who lived there. Often not more than a name is left, but in this case I was fortunate to find out more about the family behind the name.

I learned from Roderick Martin of the Tavistock and District History Society in England that James Langman Armes came from Tavistock in South Devon, where he and his brother Frederick George operated a wholesale grocery and mineral water business under the name of Armes Brothers. Unfortunately they did not trade very long, as their premises burned down in 1893, and they were bought out by the local brewery three years later. James, who became an agricultural salesman, left for Canada in 1906.

James and his wife Florence first came to Calgary, where James opened a butcher shop supplying meat to the CPR. (I know this from Frank, their youngest son, who still lived in Williams Lake in 1997.) A little later the family moved to Vancouver, where James went into the real estate business. Frank, who was born in Vancouver, remembered how he took a day-long ride from Vancouver to Whonnock "with my Dad and Mother and a team of ponies." "Imagine," he said, "when you came to Pitt River, you had to take the ferry; the bridge was not yet there."



Harold and Frank Armes around 1913 with the two horses.

At that time the monkey puzzle, now a huge tree, was just a small shrub. "When I was a little boy I used to jump over it," Frank told me. Frank and his mother used to go to New Westminster on the *Skeena* or the fast boat called *Fort Langley* to the market there, "where we bought all the groceries and what was necessary." That must have been when Whonnock's general store had burned down in 1916.

There were anxious days: "One day I got appendicitis and it turned into peritonitis. Dr. Morse of Haney was the only doctor. You did not go to him, he came to you. When he got to the house, I was rushed immediately to Vancouver. They flagged down a freight train at Whonnock Station and I went into Vancouver." Frank stayed in hospital for a month.

A local census taken about

that time includes the name of James Armes and lists: a wife, three sons (Harold, Harvey and Frank), and one daughter (Kitty or Katherine), two horses, a milk cow, and thirty chickens.

James Armes kept an address in Vancouver, and, in addition to farming, he may have continued with some real estate work. He also had a saw mill on Silver Creek on the Mission side of Stave River, and a brick factory in Whonnock, "on the Vancouver side of the Reserve." The brick mill took a lot of wood to keep it going. "Dad had horses and he had to take loads and loads of cordwood in to keep the fires going. My job was—I was not more than ten at the time—to lead the teams down to Haney to be shod by Duncan Graham."

For the Armes family life in Whonnock came to an end with the death of Frances Armes

in February 1919. After James buried his wife in Vancouver he took his children to a big ranch he had bought in the Williams Lake area. They left behind the house that would carry their name into the next century.

When I visited Frank Armes in 1997, he left with me for safe-keeping copies of a picture of the Armes house and three family pictures from the time he lived there. Over the last ten years I have gathered information to revive the past of our community. The collection is kept in the vault of the Mission Community Archives, Maple Ridge having no appropriate archival storage facilities.

We can't expect anyone to keep an old house in good repair for generations, but the least we can do is build a community archival vault in Maple Ridge designed to preserve records, documents and photos, dry, cool, and safe for centuries. In the plans of the new museum just such an archival facility is a main component. Please support its construction. We need an archive urgently. An archive, not old houses and things, is the brain and memory of a community and keeps our history alive.

Fred Braches

Draft for "Looking Back" column published in *Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows News* 15 August 2007