

*Dancers at the Spring and Norouz Festival which is the Canadian Iranian Foundation's signature event to welcome spring. It occurs every year on second week of March at the Mickey Macdonald Gymnasium. Photograph by Mr. Hamid Zargarzadeh, courtesy of the Canadian Iranian Foundation.*



# DIVERSIFYING HISTORY ON VANCOUVER'S NORTH SHORE

Sharon Fortney

The North Vancouver Museum and Archives [NVMA] has undergone a re-visioning process in recent years, redefining its role in the community and seeking a new home for its museum collections and galleries. The NVMA considers itself to be an agent of community building. Its mission states that:

*The NVMA exists to engage, strengthen and inspire our community by exploring history, connecting people and sharing ideas.*

The NVMA is the sole custodian of the cultural,

archival and museum collections of two municipalities: the City and the District of North Vancouver. It preserves historically valuable community records and makes them meaningful and accessible to the public by organizing exhibitions, delivering educational programs, caring for collections, and providing access to archival information.

To make this vision a reality, museum and archives staff have begun to explore ways to make museum collections, exhibits and programming more inclusive of the diversity



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that exists within the City and the District of North Vancouver. A first step in the process was consultation with the Squamish Nation and the production of two exhibits, 2010's *Squamish Community: Our People and Places* and 2011's *Entwined Histories: Gifts from the Maisie Hurley Collection*.

A successful school programme was also developed in partnership with the Squamish Nation Education Department and offered for the duration of the *Entwined Histories* exhibit. Materials developed for the programme continue to be used by the Squamish Nation, creating a lasting legacy of the exhibit and

the partnership. A secondary level program, available online through the NVMA's website, continues to be offered.

The NVMA is now moving forward on a new initiative that seeks to open the museum and the archives to the North Shore's diverse Iranian community. Iranian Canadians are the fastest growing immigrant community on the North Shore. There are 30,000 Iranians in Metro Vancouver, most of whom live on the North Shore, in West and North Vancouver, making up about 5% of the local population. The Persian community has been represented on the museum's governing commission for many



The Haftseen feast, which is usually held at every Iranian house before their new year March 21st. The meal features different items which each symbolizes something related to life and spring. Photograph by Mr. Hamid Zargarzadeh, courtesy of the Canadian Iranian Foundation.

years now, but has been absent in the galleries, collections and public programming.

The NVMA wants to include this diverse and vibrant community in its collections, exhibits and programming, but is essentially starting from scratch. The NVMA currently has no artefact collections representing the Iranian community, and minimal archival holdings. The few materials held by the archives were collected as part of other initiatives, and are not considered representative of the community. Staff wanted to move forward in a thoughtful and sensitive manner.

In 2011, the NVMA hosted a focus group with members of the local Iranian/Persian community, and individuals who work closely with this community, including representatives of the Aga Khan Foundation and SFU History Department. Encouraged by the feedback they received, staff decided to proceed with an oral history project that will gather arrival stories, providing material that will facilitate future exhibits and programming.

The NVMA's *Diversifying History Project* will collect oral history narratives from the North Shore's multifaceted Iranian Canadian community, which includes multiple

ethnic communities (Kurds, Baluchi, Asari, and Persianate peoples), three major languages, and multiple faiths - among them Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Baha'i, Zoroastrianism, and Ismaili. With the guidance and expertise of SFU faculty with a middle eastern focus, the NVMA intends to collect oral histories from community members who reflect this diversity. A partnership has already been established with the SFU Centre for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Cultures.

The *Diversifying History Project* will be organised into several phases, which will seek to understand how Iranian immigration to the North Shore has changed over time.

- **Phase One** will focus on the first Iranians to immigrate to the North Shore in the 1950s-60s.
- **Phase Two** will include families that emigrated in the 1970s and 1980s.
- **Phase Three** will focus on immigration from 1990 to present.
- A fourth phase of the project will explore ways of expanding the project as community outreach through a school programme or kit that allows local

students to gather family history and present it to the public through an archival exhibit, web-based exhibit, or pamphlet.

Each of the first three phases of the project will culminate in a short video that can be shared in the museum's free public galleries or online via the NVMA website. Archival materials, such as photographs, posters advertising community events, and Persian language newspapers created on the North Shore, will also be collected for the Archives when possible and incorporated into the videos.

A part-time Project Coordinator [Dr. Sharon Fortney] has been hired to design research questions, train researchers, and monitor the oral history project as it progresses. Press releases are being sent to all of the North Shore's Persian language newspapers, as well as the *North Shore News* and *North Shore Outlook*. Funding is now being sought for a September start date for Phase One of this project.

Immigration patterns change over time, and museum and archives collections must grow and change to reflect this diversity. Making connections can take time and care needs to be taken to ensure a lasting relationship. The NVMA recognises a need to establish connections with other newcomer populations, including the Chinese, Korean and Filipino communities which are also growing on the North Shore. Changing demographics are being translated into changes to collecting policies, as the NVMA balances its past focus on maritime and industrial history with the life histories of the people who define our community today.

*Dr. Fortney has worked with the NVMA on several projects involving community consultation in the last three years, including: two Squamish Nation exhibits, a focus group with the Persian community, collections documentation and research, school program development and delivery. She has previously conducted oral history research with several local First Nations, and recently co-ordinated with SFU's Making Culture Lab to create the "Ongoing Legacies" oral history video featured in the Entwined Histories exhibit.*



## WISH YOU WERE HERE

Getting ready for the newest **Royal BC Museum** exhibition opening May 17, 2012: *Dinosaurs: Ancient Fossils, New Discoveries*.