

Behind the scenes at the North Vancouver Museum and Archives



North Vancouver Museum and Archives' collections manager Magdalena Moore shows off some historic beekeeping equipment stored in the NVMA warehouse.

Rob Newell photo

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History is being made in a secret warehouse on North Vancouver's industrial waterfront.

The site has for decades been a storehouse of priceless cultural artifacts — war memorabilia, artworks, inventions and pioneer-era tools — all 20,000 of them milestones in the North Shore creation story.

Or so we thought.

Some of these dust-covered items — hoarded away by long-ago collectors with the North Vancouver Museum and Archives into countless, label-less boxes crammed with all manner of bric-a-brac of dubious origin — bear little to no connection with the North Shore at all.

“How many wood planes do you really need?” asks museum director Nancy Kirkpatrick, referring to the boxes of antiquated hand tools the museum has collected and stored over the years. Likewise, one could ask how many 11-tonne tugboat engines from Powell River does a North Vancouver museum need? The machine is apparently still in peak running order. Yet, the answer is still none.

The relics were all collected, it seems, with the vague idea that one day museum staff would sift through and appraise it all, deciding then what to catalogue and keep for a grand heritage village, complete with a schoolhouse and a general store.

Well, that day has come. But plans for the heritage village have gone the way of history. Instead, a more focused, themed museum near the Lonsdale Quay and former Shipyards is [likely to be built](#). With that new mandate in mind, the NVMA is now culling their more-than-20,000-piece collection down to just 12,000 items in preparation for the big move by May 2015. So it seems, this day has just begun.



On a recent tour of the hush-hush location, museum collections manager Magdalena Moore and NVMA commission chair Bob Heywood navigate through row-upon-row of collected curiosa, pointing out where a small expeditionary army of museum staff

and volunteers have made inroads into the stacks.

“The museum’s changed its philosophy and now we’re looking at major themes that properly illustrate the North Shore,” Heywood says, pointing to some old wooden ski poles, leather skates and a piece of Mount Seymour’s old Mystery Peak chairlift.

Sports and recreation is just one of seven major new themes, evocative of the North Shore’s natural history and geography. The other six include First Nations history, industry and economic activity, transportation and infrastructure, notable achievers, immigration and settlement, and community development.

“In the future the museum will be much more interactive and program-oriented around these themes and in bringing in speakers, guests and exhibits for them,” Heywood adds. “The new museum is going to be a lot different from the old one.”

And while the waterfront siting of the new museum is still little more than a promise on paper from city politicians so far, the closure of the “old” museum at Presentation House is already set for the end of the year. At least, that’s when the Chesterfield Avenue museum will be

appointment-only viewing, no longer open to the public for rainy day walk-ins starting in January.

The reason for the closure is to focus the museum's staff and resources on the task of paring down of the museum's permanent collection before the 2015 deadline.

"Downsizing is not as simple as one might think," Heywood says. "You can't just have a garage sale and get rid of it, because it was given to you in trust that you ensure you deal with it in an appropriate way."

And it's not cheap either.



Begun in June, the whole downsizing process, known as "deaccessioning," comes at a cost of about \$350,000, shared between the two North Vancouver municipalities.

That covers not only the few museum staff currently dedicated to identifying, cleaning and cataloguing what's found in the warehouse, but also any efforts to try to return any unnecessary items to their rightful owners or to perhaps place them at more appropriate museums.

"To some extent, you've got to look at the value of the item," Heywood says, "because a lot of stuff isn't worth much and you're going to spend a lot of time trying to track down the owner of a tobacco can."

And, Moore adds, "there's a lot of legal complications in giving it to

somebody who wasn't the original owner, like a descendent — how do you figure out which of the siblings to give it to? And since people gave it to keep it in the public realm, we're trying to keep things in the public realm by offering them to another museum."

Any final decision on the fate of those thousands of misfit artifacts, she adds, will fall on the councils of the city and district.

Given the seven new museum themes and the 7,000 square feet of new exhibit space planned for the waterfront, the new NVMA location is all but guaranteed to feature prominently artifacts of the North Shore's shipbuilding history.

Acquired largely in the 1990s, the NVMA warehouse has whole areas dedicated to maritime manufacturing, which include not only relics of Burrard Dry Dock's wartime output, but also an early submersible prototype from North Vancouver deep-sea explorer and inventor, Phil Nuytten.

And with the [recent return of shipbuilding](#) to the North Shore with Seaspan Marine's successful bid for the federal naval and coast guard contracts, there may be no better theme to tie together so many different aspects of the North Shore's past, present and future — economically, geographically, personally and politically.

"We are really seeing that with some of these ideas, they're coming back," Moore says, discussing an early two-wheeled relic of what may have been the region's first ever bike-share program at Burrard Dry Dock, proving that what's old may soon be new again.

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