

# Home or Homelessness? Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886–1950

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## Article abstract

Between 1886 and 1950, marginal housing in Vancouver ran the gamut from home to homelessness: in the spectrum of housing conditions, it could be anything between a room in a lodging house in a respectable suburb and a tea box in a depression-era jungle. Many residents had strong emotional ties to their homes, whatever the quality of housing conditions. Foremost among the reasons for this attachment was a variety of attitudes, concerns, and relationships, including the expectations about adequate housing of those who had lived and worked in British Columbia's resource communities. Examples of these powerful ties, and of the resistance to change that they prompted, suggest that housing bureaucrats and activists should think carefully about the justness and the effectiveness of interventions such as eviction and relocation.

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Jill Wade

### **Abstract:**

*Between 1886 and 1950, marginal housing in Vancouver ran the gamut from home to homelessness: in the spectrum of housing conditions, it could be anything between a room in a lodging house in a respectable suburb and a tea box in a depression-era jungle. Many residents had strong emotional ties to their homes, whatever the quality of housing conditions. Foremost among the reasons for this attachment was a variety of attitudes, concerns, and relationships, including the expectations about adequate housing of those who had lived and worked in British Columbia's resource communities. Examples of these powerful ties, and of the resistance to change that they prompted, suggest that housing bureaucrats and activists should think carefully about the justness and the effectiveness of interventions such as eviction and relocation.*

### **Résumé:**

*Entre 1886 et 1950, l'habitation marginale à Vancouver passait par toute la gamme de logements depuis le foyer jusqu'au sans-abri. Certains lousient une chambre dans une pension localisée dans une banlieue respectable; d'autres habitaient dans des boîtes qui avaient servi au transport du thé et qui gissaient au milieu des taudis de la dépression. Plusieurs résidents étaient fort attachés à leur logis quelqu'en soient les conditions. Les causes de cet attachement reposaient sur un ensemble d'attitudes, d'intérêts et de relations amicales ou familiales auquel s'ajoutaient les espérances pour de meilleures conditions de logement de ceux qui avaient vécu et travaillé dans les communautés nées de l'exploitation des ressources naturelles. Quelques exemples de ces liens puissants et de la résistance au changement qu'ils incitèrent, devraient donner matière à réfléchir aux fonctionnaires et activistes du logement et les pousser à évaluer la justesse et l'efficacité d'interventions qui requièrent l'expulsion et la re-localisation.*

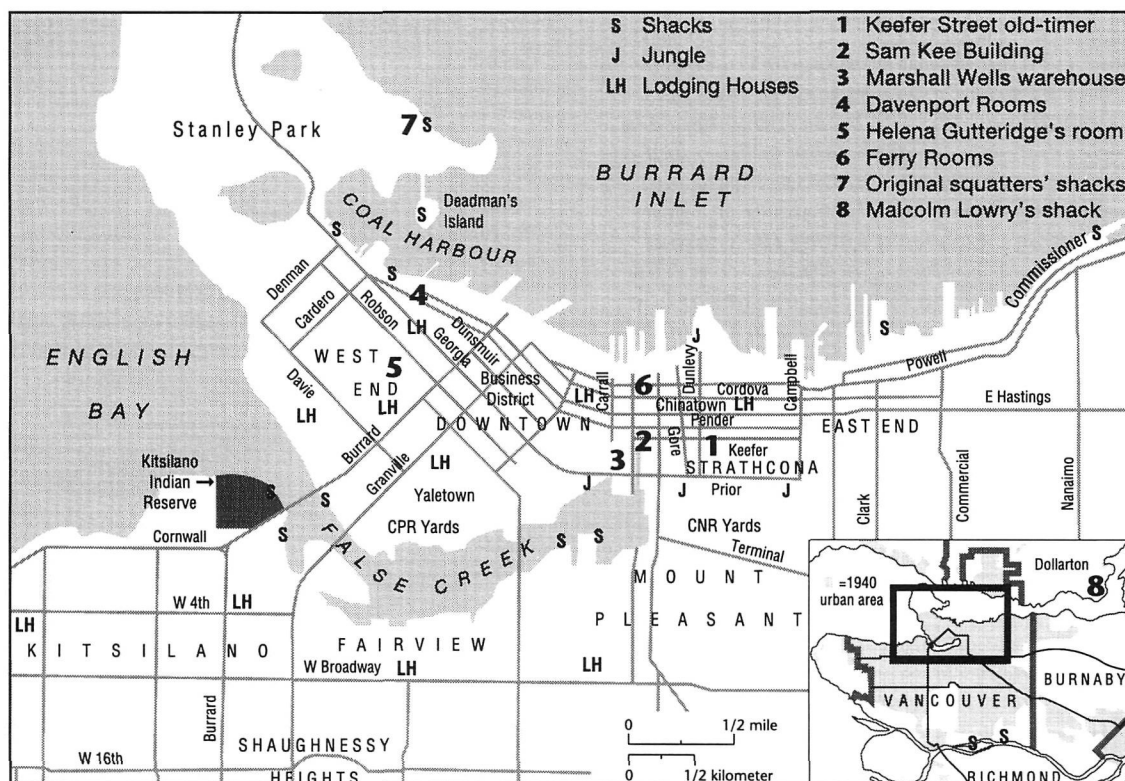
In May 1940, a contented “shacker” of the Vancouver waterfront wrote to Mayor Lyle Telford praising his “roomy” False Creek home with its views in three directions and “an abundance of light, fresh air and sunshine” that gave him “the best of health.”<sup>1</sup> He had proudly “owned and occupied [his] House Boat since 1927” and furnished it with “the Amenities of life,” including “arm chairs, a heater of the Fireplace type, pictures, plants, flowers, [and] ornaments.” The False Creek shacker claimed that his only alternative accommodation was a room in a dingy, dreary lodging house. Other observers likened the nearby shoreline community in Coal Harbour to Vancouver's upper-class district Shaughnessy Heights: here, a “neat little house boat” was known as “city hall,” and a resident of twenty years was its “Mayor.”<sup>2</sup> By contrast, a critic of the “Slums of the Water

Front,” Frank Buck, deplored the “shambles indescribable” on or near water fed by “a fountain of continuous pollution” [a sewer outlet].<sup>3</sup> He described the residents of these “pigsties” as the “Flotsam and the Jetsam” of humanity, “Wrecks of lives ... Prostitutes, whore-mongers, thieves, and ne'er-do-wells,” and “gaunt, weary, depressed [people], accepting the environment with a deep feeling of resentment.” As the False Creek shacker argued, then, “there are two sides to this question” of houseboats. If Buck thought a foreshore shack was wretched and insanitary, the shacker himself found his place comfortable and healthy. However, while there may have been two conflicting positions on the issue, it may also be that a spectrum of residential conditions from squalid to satisfactory occurred in shacks.

We generally think of Vancouver before 1950 as a city of homes and gardens. Still, while middle-class and “respectable” working-class families lived in single houses surrounded by rhododendrons, laurel hedges, and monkey puzzle trees in the suburbs, seasonally employed white and Asian single men, unemployed workers, male and female pensioners, single working women, and low-income families inhabited shacks, lodging houses, and jungles, or hobo camps, located in the city's downtown, shoreline, and outlying areas. As Sir Raymond Unwin stated in 1939, Vancouver was not a city of slums, but some of its parts did suffer from “slum dwellings and conditions of overcrowding and bad sanitation.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the more prevalent, higher quality, single-family houses of Vancouver's built environment, this more marginal, less satisfactory housing was the subject of many negative reports by civic officials and housing activists.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas their earlier counterparts distinguished between satisfactory and slum dwellings, today's housing specialists speak of “home” and “homelessness.” They would categorize as homeless the residents of much of this marginal accommodation because they experienced “the absence of a continuing or permanent *home* over which individuals and families have personal control and which provides the essential needs of shelter, privacy and security at an affordable cost, together with ready access to social, economic, and cultural public services.”<sup>6</sup> The homeless include those individuals who endure absolute homelessness as well as those who are “at risk” because “of their fragile hold on economic and social stability.” Thus, foreshore shacks and lodging houses called slum dwellings in the past would today be seen as places of homelessness. Indeed, housing advocates of the 1990s define as homeless the occupants of Vancouver's downtown east side hotels, many of which troubled health inspectors forty or fifty years ago. Yet, in his letter to the mayor, the False Creek shacker contradicted all the experts past and present: he thought of his houseboat as his home rather than a slum dwelling or a case of homelessness.

Housing historians have tended not to seek out the sentiments of residents like the False Creek shacker. Instead, we have written about marginal housing in Canadian cities by drawing upon primary sources supplied by federal and local governments and by activists like Frank Buck, and, with a couple of exceptions, our assessments are uniformly black.<sup>7</sup> This case study of



**Figure 1:** *Marginal housing in downtown Vancouver 1886–1950. The insert shows the location of shacks in Greater Vancouver and the extent of the urban area in 1940.*

Vancouver attempts to correct the imbalance in evidence. In the end, its conclusions, while more accurate, are less categorical. For example, the shacker was secure in his houseboat home for thirteen years, but with the prospect of eviction, he faced homelessness. In fact, Vancouver's marginal housing ran the gamut from home to homelessness, and, in cases like the shacker's, represented something between a slum and a satis factory lodging in a Vancouver suburb. Furthermore, many residents of this housing developed strong, lasting ties to their homes. Foremost among the several reasons for this attachment to floathouses and boardinghouses were the expectations of many occupants who had lived and worked in British Columbia's resource communities. The question for housing historians to address is whether Vancouver's situation was unique: other cities in Canada may well have experienced the same spectrum of conditions in lodging houses and shacks and the same attachment of residents to their homes.

### **Foreshore Shacks**

For many of us, Vancouver before 1950 was a city of single homes and gardens in a spectacular West Coast setting. While this impression is largely accurate, it obscures the existence of more marginal forms of housing in the downtown, waterfront, and outlying areas occupied by individuals who, for whatever

reason, did not reside in suburban family dwellings. In particular, the 1931, 1941, and 1951 census data indicates that the quality of Vancouver housing remained generally good in those years, but it tends to hide substandard residential conditions in certain parts of the city.<sup>8</sup>

Foreshore shacks and boathouses were not categorized separately in the pre-1951 census statistics, but they have been part of the built environment around Burrard Inlet since the 1860s, when squatters settled in what is now Stanley Park (Figure 1).<sup>9</sup> In the 1880s, unemployed Chinese railway workers threw up huts on the marshes between Pender Street and False Creek. By 1894, about 380 shacks lined the Burrard Inlet and False Creek shorelines.<sup>10</sup> One might speculate that, ten years later, waterfront shacks may have contributed significantly to the 238 one-room dwellings in the 1921 census.<sup>11</sup>

During times of economic depression or housing shortages in the 1930s and 1940s, both individuals and families squatted in floathouses, live-aboard boats, and shacks on piles or land stretched along Burrard Inlet, False Creek, and the Fraser River (Figure 2).<sup>12</sup> In the Great Depression, the majority of shackers lived on the waterfront because they were unable to find suitable housing at affordable rents. These shackers were people "of small means and of independent spirit" who survived hard

times by fishing, by beachcombing and selling cut wood at the Main Street public market, and by relying on relief or small pensions.<sup>13</sup> Many veterans' families caught up in the post-World War II housing shortage also moved into waterfront accommodation. Consequently, by 1949, the number of shacks had climbed to 866.<sup>14</sup> Across the Inlet, ninety more shacks, including the one in which the writer Malcolm Lowry lived and worked, stood along the Dollarton beach (Figure 3).<sup>15</sup>

As the assessments of Frank Buck and the False Creek shacker suggest, and as civic surveys between 1937 and 1940 indicate, some waterfront colonies provided better living situations than others. On Burrard Inlet, enclaves at Coal Harbour and along Commissioner Drive sheltered prosperous occupants living in decent circumstances. The eight Commissioner Drive "boat-houses" ranged from one-room shacks to large, solidly built houses" with flowers in window boxes and barrels and with terraced gardens on the adjacent embankment.<sup>16</sup> If well maintained, these bungalows on rock and timber piers could last a couple of generations. Others, "the worst of their type," between Cardero and Broughton Streets and at the north foot of Clark Drive near the sewer outfall offered "a very unsatisfactory

condition."<sup>17</sup> On False Creek, the area at the foot of Columbia Street among the old Great Northern Railway track pilings represented "the filthiest and most distressful portion," while another part east of Cambie Street bridge, where the False Creek shacker lived, was "a fairly bright and cheerful neighborhood."<sup>18</sup> The Fraser River "fisher folk" and mill workers set standards of health for their community, and a "better atmosphere" pervaded the area.<sup>19</sup>

Access to water supply and electricity and control over tenure differentiated conditions in the various waterfront colonies. Shackers living in more satisfactory situations had water connections or use of taps or wells on adjacent property. They frequently received power directly in their homes and often supplied neighbours with electricity. Unfortunately, many shackers had no water supply and power. Some owned their own shacks or boats and thus enjoyed greater security of tenure, but all were at risk of eviction because they squatted between the high and low tide marks on federal land.

Sewage disposal and fire hazards were major problems for all foreshore dwellers. Toilets placed over tidal flats and sewer out-



**Figure 2:** *Floathouses and boats such as these, photographed in 1934, may have adjoined the False Creek shacker's house boat. Source: City of Vancouver Archives, BU. P. 646 N. 539.*





**Figure 3:** *In 1947, Malcolm and Margerie Lowry referred to their Dollarton foreshore shack as home. Source: Special Collections Division, University of British Columbia Library, Malcolm Lowry Collection, BC 1614/241.*

falls from city homes or private operations like the Canadian Pacific Railway yards and the Granville Island industrial shops polluted False Creek, Burrard Inlet, and the Fraser River, heightening the risk of typhoid epidemics. In addition, the air pollution from eleven large sawmills on False Creek created an unhealthy environment. Refuse dumps and old, abandoned timberwork and boat hulls along the waterfront were probably as much unsightly as unhygienic.

### **Lodging Houses**

If the False Creek shacker counted himself lucky not to live in rooms in downtown Vancouver, others, who in his mind were less fortunate, did occupy by the day, week, or month various types of multiple dwellings, including lodgings, cheap hotels, Asian boardinghouses, and cabins.<sup>21</sup> All referred to by city officials as “lodging houses,” these dwellings were concentrated in the downtown peninsula from the West End through the business district to the east end. Probably the most common form of lodging house was the converted single home, which might be a Yaletown version of pattern-book Gothic Revival domestic architecture or a West End wood-frame builder-house consisting of perhaps, six, twelve or even twenty-two rooms from basement to attic. The manager, who either owned or rented a whole

dwelling, let rooms and housekeeping suites to seasonal and unemployed workers, elderly men and women with or without a pension, single women, couples, and families on low incomes or relief. Ordinarily, the lodgers lived in a room or two equipped with a gas plate and sink and shared a toilet and bathtub.

Conversions began before 1900 in the east end and business district and later spread to the West End. The migration of its original residents to other neighbourhoods and the arrival of European immigrants transformed the east end into a mixed single-family and boardinghouse area by the early 1900s. East Indian and Italian bachelors lived communally in houses rented by one man for many, and women in Italian and other European families supplemented family incomes by supplying probably the best living conditions for male workers in the way of room, board, and washing. The West End began its transition into a lodging house area in the 1910s when its residents gradually moved to Shaughnessy Heights and other upscale west side districts. After 1911, the City of Vancouver authorized growing numbers of lodging houses: by 1929, it had issued business licenses to the managers of 380 houses mostly situated in the core area.<sup>22</sup>

Conversions increased dramatically during the 1930s, especially in neighbourhoods bordering downtown, such as

Kitsilano, Fairview, and Mount Pleasant. "By force of circumstances," desperate owners remodelled their "very good large houses" to generate sufficient income to keep their property.<sup>23</sup> One woman, whose husband's death in 1930 caused her "to live altogether a changed life," raised a daughter, paid her taxes, and avoided relief by operating a lodging house in Kitsilano.<sup>24</sup> By 1940, Vancouver had 1,816 licensed lodging houses.<sup>25</sup> The number of unlicensed houses was unknown, although contemporary observers used figures like 3,000 and "thousands."<sup>26</sup>

### ***Cheap Hotels, Rooms, Cabins, and Asian Boardinghouses***

Lodging houses included cheap hotels and "rooms" located in the business district and the east end. Rooms had no bar, but hotels were "stopping places" with saloons where proprietors and bartenders watched out for "good-and-drunk" loggers on a spree "after hard days and weeks of work in the woods."<sup>27</sup> Premises such as the Powell Rooms or the Grand Union Rooms would have twenty to thirty-five units.<sup>28</sup>

Other rooms were "cabins:" two- or three-storey frame buildings containing single rooms, or cabins, that opened off a porch running along one side of the structure from street to lane. The majority of cabins provided only outside taps and shared cast-iron toilets and supplied no bathtubs or showers. Usually, cabins covered most of a lot. Closer to the city centre, large neighbouring industrial plants or warehouses surrounded them and cut off natural light and ventilation. The construction of cabins started by 1900 in the east end to service the demands of local industries. By 1912, while intended for single working men, they also accommodated families with small children. Many cabins survived until 1950, when forty still remained in Strathcona, and a few others could be found in east Kitsilano and Yaletown (Figure 4).<sup>29</sup> As time went on, health inspectors reported many "helpless or indifferent" pensioners living in cabins with woodstoves, coal lamps, and minimal plumbing.<sup>30</sup>

Another form of lodging was the boardinghouse occupied by single male Chinese labourers who worked in canneries or on the railroad in summer and returned to town when jobless in winter. While they inhabited shacks at first, these men later boarded in buildings operated by Chinese associations and businessmen. Usually, groups of men from the same family, village, or district in China shared premises. Some boarding houses, such as the one in the two-storey Sam Kee Building at Pender and Carrall Streets, were extremely small: narrow cots, a cast-iron stove, and a coal box ranged along a six-foot wide room. In other larger buildings, the men partitioned off cellars, mezzanines, and whole floors into small rooms and cubicles for privacy; they prepared meals in communal cooking facilities. City Health Inspector Robert Marrion reported to the 1902 Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration that the

and 10 feet high, and were capable of holding six persons in each, according to the bylaw. This was one of the best lodging houses in the city. When visited the other night all the rooms but two exceptions were occupied by more than six people. The furniture of a room would consist of a table, six bunks, and a stove: no more. As a rule, the six occupants would rent that room from a keeper who leased the building from the owner. The amount paid was \$3 per month, or fifty cents per month for each occupant, provided no more than the proper number were allowed to use it. This was a fair example of the manner of living among the working Chinamen.<sup>32</sup>

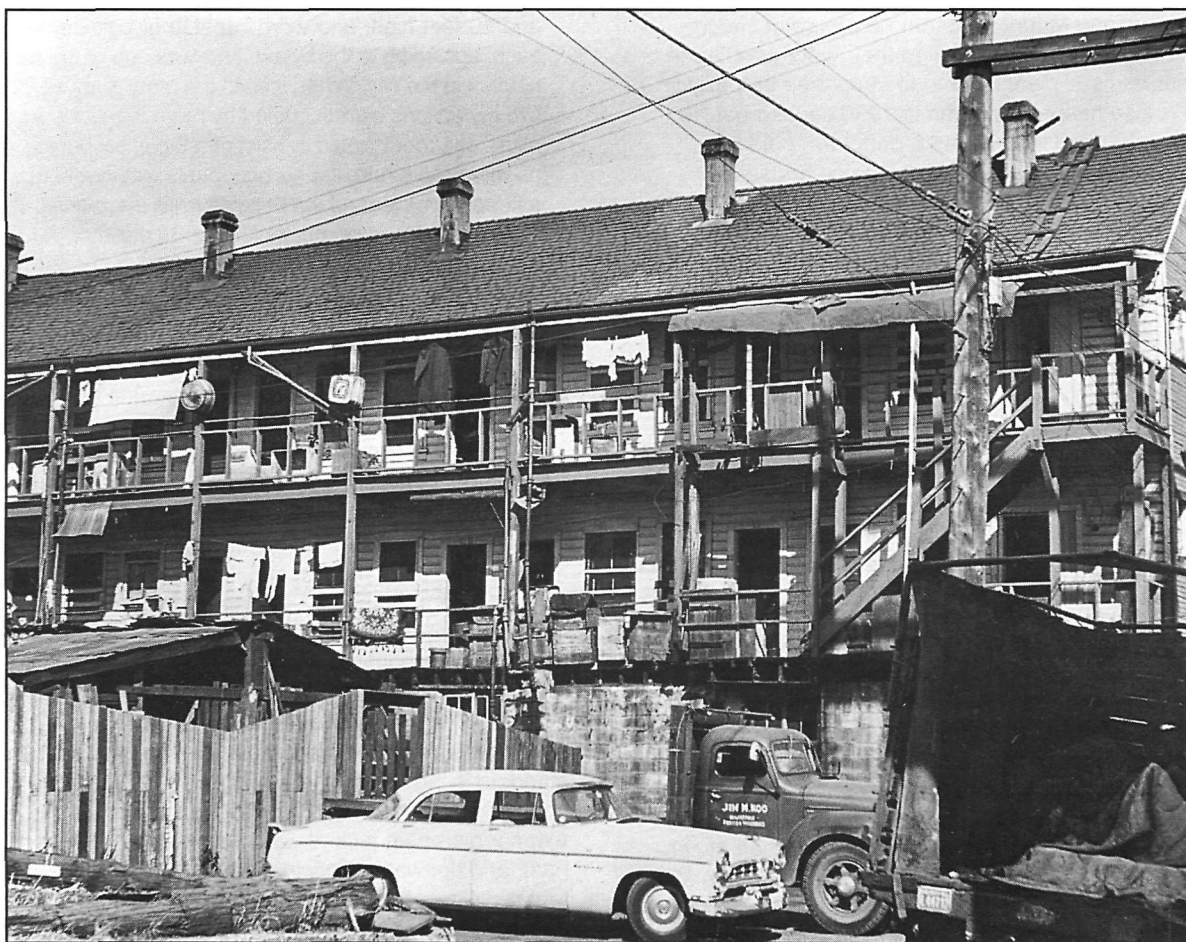
Boardinghouse conditions were no better in the 1930s, when Chinese men received bed tickets worth sixty cents per week rather than twenty cents per day like white relief recipients, and when many met with refusals for assistance. The larger community in Chinatown cared for numerous destitute individuals inhabiting these boardinghouses. In particular, the Yip family accommodated many old, indigent men in a building on Canton Alley leased from the city. By the end of World War II, hundreds of Chinese men still lived in boarding houses such as the old Marshall Wells Limited warehouse on Shanghai Alley.

### ***Living Conditions in Lodging Houses***

The reports of civic officials and housing activists reveal sub-standard living conditions in lodging houses of all types. These conditions included overcrowding and doubling up, interior and exterior disrepair, lack of adequate natural light, ventilation, heat, and hot water, deficient or insufficient cooking and sanitary facilities, absence of fire precautions, infestations of pests, and increased risk of diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid. This residential environment was especially inappropriate and even harmful for children and the elderly. Over time, but particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, conditions worsened as lodging houses aged and as conversions occurred in neighbourhoods outside the downtown area.

Still, like foreshore shacks, some lodging houses offered better living conditions than others. For example, a 1941 civic report noted differences in congestion and costs in premises located in the West End and the business district.<sup>33</sup> The most crowding and the cheapest rentals occurred in the centre of the West End and in Yaletown, and the best, more expensive rooms lay west of Denman Street and around St Paul's Hospital on Burrard Street. The quality of management varied, too. The Vancouver Housing Association claimed that owner-operated lodging houses in the West End were well maintained compared to speculative properties east of Burrard and that, in particular, rooming houses in Strathcona suffered from bad management and defective structural conditions.<sup>34</sup> By the 1950s, housing activists described cabins in Strathcona as "the City's poorest type of accommodation."<sup>35</sup> Vancouverites like the mother of historian Rolf Knight thought of "coolie cabins" as "the black hole of Calcutta," but Knight himself saw one of these places in a much better light.<sup>36</sup> His friend Pat Fitzpatrick, a bachelor on

Armstrong lodging house was a two storey brick building with 27 rooms upstairs. The rooms were 20 feet long, 13 feet wide,



*Figure 4: These East End cabins, photographed in about 1960, are examples of the dreary alternative lodgings available to the False Creek shacker. Source: National Archives of Canada, PA-154626.*

pension, lived in a comfortable, “roomy enough” cabin partitioned off into bedroom, kitchen, and living room areas. Thus, depending on congestion, cost, location, management, and maintenance, surroundings in individual lodgings varied from miserable to cheerful.

### *Jungles*

The most extreme form of marginal housing was the jungle, which represented absolute homelessness. In the 1930s, a “floating population” of jobless, homeless, single men wandered in and out of Vancouver according to the season, work opportunities, relief conditions, and political protests about their hopeless predicament. Hundreds of men spent their days in department stores, poolrooms, libraries, streets, and railway stations and their nights in refuges and parks. Many stayed in jungles, or camps, in close proximity to the railway tracks that

brought them into town. During the summer of 1931, about 1,000 homeless men occupied four east end jungles.<sup>37</sup>

Jungles offered no control over shelter and no access to social and financial public services. Yet, strange as it may seem, contemporary observers noticed that even the jungles varied in terms of the wretchedness of their conditions. In a camp near the Canadian National Railway yards bordering Prior Street, the men used packing boxes, corrugated iron, tar paper, barrels, tea boxes, and even old Ford cars found in the nearby city dump to construct huts supposedly “as healthful as in campfire.”<sup>38</sup> They arranged their shacks along trails named after Vancouver’s major streets. Water came from a tap on adjacent city property, and the men exercised care in the disposal of human waste. By contrast, in a jungle under the Georgia Viaduct, conditions could only be described as bad. Some men built temporary cover against the British Columbia Electric Company Railway fence, and others slept under the floor of an old

warehouse. All residents of this jungle used one privy thrown up during the construction of the British Columbia Electric gas tank. They obtained water at a nearby service station.

In sum, the conditions in Vancouver's marginal housing ranged over a spectrum from satisfactory to squalid and from home to homelessness. While the False Creek shacker was content with life on his houseboat, another old-timer of eighty-one years lived a "life of disarray" in his Keefer Street room.<sup>39</sup> The shacker had some measure of control over his life. By contrast, without family and friends to care for him in his "physically and mentally ailing" state, the Keefer Street old-timer had relied upon missions and social services for aid and finally was found dead, "nesting in a mound of refuse," after almost a week. For the shacker, the houseboat was home, but, for the old-timer, the room meant homelessness. Furthermore, if some working men and women, widows, students, and elderly bachelors found inexpensive yet well run homes in "respectable" neighbourhoods, others were at risk of homelessness in shacks and downtown lodgings. Still others experienced absolute homelessness in the jungles of the Great Depression.

### ***Response of Residents to Marginal Housing***

What did the residents of marginal housing themselves think about their accommodation? Although the False Creek shacker wrote the mayor to explain the positive side of the squatting issue, many tenants complained to the city about filthy, insanitary, damp, cold lodgings and about the transgressions of operators and neighbours.<sup>40</sup> When low-rental housing proposals came up, other tenants were desperate enough to write letters to the city asking to be considered for units.<sup>41</sup>

Some residents also exhibited a quiet, stubborn determination to undermine the health inspector's orders. They kept or returned to the housing so objectionable to the city and the activists but so important to themselves. Concerned about over crowding, water supply, fire hazards, petty crime, and sewage and garbage disposal, the city razed shacks along the False Creek and Burrard Inlet shorelines from the 1890s to the 1950s. Yet the shackers came back. They rebuilt their shacks, or they towed their floathouses, houseboats, and fishing boats to other spots on the waterfront. As well, in the early 1930s, the city cleared jungles, which it regarded as "a hot-bed for every form of disease, physical, moral, and social," only to find that the homeless, jobless men returned within two weeks.<sup>42</sup> Time and again, health inspectors also ordered the operators and tenants of Asian boardinghouses to remove highly combustible partitions cutting off natural lighting and ventilation. Nevertheless, the men understandably wanted their privacy, and they either kept or rebuilt the partitions.<sup>43</sup>

In at least four instances, shackers and tenants used petitions to assert, however unsuccessfully, control over the fate of their housing. In 1936, sixty-eight of the eighty-seven foreshore squatters on the Kitsilano Indian Reserve petitioned the city for a five-month postponement of eviction on the understanding that they would vacate the site at a more suitable time.<sup>44</sup> Provincial and

civic authorities stayed the eviction until a mutually agreed upon date, but, although some shackers left False Creek altogether, others moved eastward to the Burrard Bridge area.

In 1940, the city received two petitions from squatters threatened with eviction from their Fraser River shacks east of Nanaimo Street.<sup>45</sup> Wishing to stay in their homes, nineteen of twenty-six households petitioned the city to lease or buy the property in question and to make improvements in compliance with municipal health by-laws. The shackers submitted a second petition and attended a special committee meeting, but the city went ahead with the eviction.

Early in 1952, the low-income tenants of the Davenport Rooms on West Pender Street also petitioned the city.<sup>46</sup> Officials had asked the operator for alterations in toilet and bathing arrangements, but twenty-three tenants asked the city not to enforce its order (with unknown results). Although they would have liked some sanitary improvements, the tenants argued that higher rents "would force them back into one housekeeping room, and ... lower ... [their] standard of living." As well, they praised the clean, pest-free premises for good lighting, adequate sanitary facilities, and "a nice lobby on the ground floor with chesterfield and chairs, with plenty of reading material, where ... [they] could read or talk."

Some shackers used other strategies in disputes with the city. In 1909, under the influence of a City Beautiful lobby, civic officials decided to clear the Stanley Park waterfront of "hideous shacks" and obtain complete jurisdiction. Sustained by a new lease for the park from the federal government, the city tried to evict a squatter, Thomas Ludgate, who threatened to clearcut Deadman Island of its trees and erect a sawmill. Ludgate and another squatter fought off an invasion of "fifteen policemen and a bum politician" [the mayor] in "a real Irish, stand-up and knockdown fight."<sup>48</sup> The shacker forces won the skirmish but eventually lost the island in a legal fight. As well, in 1925, several descendants of the original Stanley Park squatters took their claims to the Supreme Court of Canada.<sup>49</sup> Only one descendent could prove sixty years of occupancy. The other five lost their claims to the city and became tenants in their own shacks.

### ***Importance of Marginal Housing to Its Residents***

Why was marginal housing so important to these tenants and shackers? Clearly, affordability was a major consideration. Most would have moved on to better accommodation if they could have afforded the rent, but they were limited in their options by poor earnings, small social assistance payments, and low old age, disability, or veterans' pensions. Some preferred to stay in places where they could supplement their incomes by gardening or raising cows, pigs, ducks, and chickens.<sup>50</sup> One fellow found dead of pneumonia in the Ferry Rooms had supported himself by packaging and selling peanuts.<sup>51</sup> Another important consideration was availability. Housing shortages following both wars and depressions drove families into lodgings and shacks where ordinarily they would not have lived. Such short-





*Figure 5: Many residents of lodging houses in downtown Vancouver had lived in bunkhouses such as these photographed in 1922 at the International Timber Company's Camp 4 on northern Vancouver Island. Source: The Museum at Campbell River, Gerti Kusba Collection, 14951.*



*Figure 6: Foreshore shacks in Vancouver were much the same as this floathouse belonging to the handlogger, trapper, and bounty-hunter August Schnarr, who lived with his family north of Campbell River, B.C., in the 1920s. Source: The Museum at Campbell River, August Schnarr collection, 14388.*

ages left less space for low-income people. As the city's social services administrator observed, if the cheap, bad housing were torn down, "then the tenants would be out on the street."<sup>52</sup>

Yet there were other reasons for living in marginal housing besides affordability and availability. Some residents apparently found their accommodation adequate, agreeable, and even cheerful. Others sought out cabins or shacks because they were independent spirits.<sup>53</sup> In fact, many elderly people stayed without complaint in appalling residential conditions to avoid institutionalization in the Riverview mental asylum, Vancouver General Hospital, St Joseph's Hospital, known as the "Oriental hospital," Taylor Manor, referred to as the "old folks' home," and boarding-houses for the aged licensed by the provincial government.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, while some tenants were on relief and had shelter allowances, others wanted lives free of dependence upon public support. Still others searched for a setting that complemented their work as fishermen, millhands, and even artists and writers. Malcolm Lowry and Frederick Varley found freedom to write and paint in shacks at Dollarton and in Lynn Valley in the North Shore Mountains.<sup>56</sup>

Friendships, family connections, and ethnic ties were also major considerations for the occupants of shacks and lodgings. In the face of discrimination by the dominant white society, Chinese workers and seniors occupied boardinghouses in Chinatown provided by extended families such as the Yips. In the 1940s, younger men cared for elderly Chinese men who were ill, disabled, or waiting for the war in Asia to end before returning home.<sup>57</sup> In the east end cabins, old bachelors passed the time of day while splitting firewood and kindling for their woodstoves.<sup>58</sup> In Dollarton, the reclusive Lowry and his writer wife had several close friends among the squatters, although they never fit in with the larger community.<sup>59</sup> In the West End, Helena Gutteridge, a fiery, longtime social activist and former city alderman, retired to the top floor of a lodging house, known as "the CCF house," where her landlady, neighbours, and visitors were political comrades.<sup>60</sup>

Much of Vancouver's marginal housing was "an impoverished but relatively peaceful semblance of the camps" in British Columbia's resource industries.<sup>61</sup> It met the expectations of many workers and their families. Indeed, some of this housing was built before the city's incorporation in 1886, when the Burrard Inlet shoreline was itself a frontier, resource-based community.<sup>62</sup> Many tenants had probably lived in boardinghouses similar to those of the Canadian Western Lumber Company Limited at Fraser Mills near New Westminster, or they may have bunked down in floating, logging, and summer camps like those of Comox Logging and Railway Company and International Timber Company on northern Vancouver Island (Figure 5).<sup>63</sup> Some working as handloggers, trappers, and bounty-hunters may have owned floathouses, which they towed from workplace to workplace along the rugged British Columbia shoreline (Figure 6).<sup>64</sup> Others may have stayed in cabins provided by canneries along the West Coast from Steveston to the Alaska Panhandle, or in bunkhouses located next to industries in Van-

couver itself.<sup>65</sup> As well, a good many residents of foreshore shacks were active in resource industries as fishermen, loggers, tug boat crew, and mill workers.<sup>66</sup> Finally, old bachelors like Pat Fitzpatrick fixed up their rooms "very much like the cabin beside the Bridge River, where, ... washing gold a decade earlier," Rolf Knight's parents had first met him.<sup>67</sup>

The attachment to their homes, however modest or at risk those places might be, was often very strong for residents of marginal housing. The best documented example is the bond between Malcolm and Margerie Lowry and their shack in Dollarton. Between 1947 and 1954, "eviction was always preying on their minds and they were heartbroken about the possibility of losing their beloved shack."<sup>68</sup> When the eviction finally came and they left for overseas, Lowry's despondency and sense of loss intensified his alcoholism, and in 1957 he died by misadventure in Britain.

Thus, between the extremes of the squalid jungle and the snug Kitsilano housekeeping suite stood the Lowrys and the False Creek shacker, individuals with homes but at risk of homelessness, or Pat Fitzpatrick, an old bachelor with a cabin regarded as a horrible slum by some and a camp-like home by others. Any depiction of early marginal housing in Vancouver, then, is best sketched in washes of black, grey, and silver rather than solid black. Yet, in the recent past, we historians have not achieved a very balanced interpretation of home and homelessness in marginal housing in Vancouver or elsewhere in Canada: we have taken into consideration the cold facts of statistics and the judgmental assessments of bureaucrats and activists, but we have not been sensitive to the sentiments of the residents themselves. How in the end may we historians assess the justice and the effectiveness of interventions like eviction and relocation by those bureaucrats and activists if we do not understand the emotions and the attitudes of the residents affected by change?<sup>69</sup> By listening to all the players, we may well arrive at a picture of past marginal housing that, despite touches of fuzziness and contradiction, is more accurate than the highly resolved depictions of previous studies.

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I am grateful to Bob McDonald for early discussions about the nature of marginal housing, to Richard Harris, John Weaver, and several anonymous readers for their invaluable suggestions for improving this paper, to Eric Leinberger for the map, and to Louise Robert for the translation.

### *Notes*

1. City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter cited as CVA), Records of the City Clerk (hereafter cited as CC), 27-D-7, file 28, A.H. Horsell to L. Telford, 5 May 1940.
2. *Vancouver Sun*, 30 November 1938, 1. Clearly, the use of "Shaughnessy," which in Vancouver connotes upper-class grandeur, exaggerates the character of the living conditions in a squatting community. However, Vancouverites often associated the word with better quality workers' housing. For example, they referred to Fraserview, the post-World War II veterans' sub-division, as the "workingman's Shaughnessy Heights." See CVA, Newspaper Clippings, M3335-1, 16 November 1948.
3. CVA, CC records, 27-D-5, file 17, "Slums of the Water Front," 1939.

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4. CVA, Records of the Town Planning Commission [hereafter cited as TPC], 77-B-5, file 6, "Sir Raymond Unwin's Impressions of Vancouver," 1939.
5. In this paper, marginal housing is defined by its inferior physical condition, its limited extent, and its frequent documentation in archival and printed records. The rather tenuous social status of the residents and the often questionable legal status of the dwellings are two other legitimate factors in defining marginal housing, but this case study lacks the space to deal with them in depth. In contrast to John R. Miron's definition in *Housing in Postwar Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1988), 21, 154, marginal housing, however unsuitable, was inhabited year-round in Vancouver. For an example of the predominance of single houses in Vancouver before 1950, see Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics (hereafter cited as DBS), *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931: Census Monograph No. 8, Housing in Canada*, prepared by Harold F. Greenway (Ottawa: King's Printer 1941), 39, 145, table 4. In 1931, a total of 61,250 dwelling houses, or places "in which one or more persons sleep," included 48,656 single houses, 1,067 semi-detached houses, 10,375 apartment houses and flat houses, 432 row houses and terrace houses, 601 hotels and rooming houses, and 119 "other and not specified" units. The reader should be aware that the total of types other than single houses does not represent the extent of marginal housing in the city at that time.
6. H. Peter Oberlander and Arthur L. Fallick, *Homelessness and the Homeless: Responses and Innovations; A Canadian Contribution to IYSH, 1987* (Vancouver: Centre for Human Settlements, University of British Columbia 1988), 11, 13-4. John C. Bacher and J. David Hulchanski also use this very broad definition in *Keeping Warm and Dry: The Policy Response to the Struggle for Shelter among Canada's Homeless, 1900–1960*, "Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine" 16 (October 1987): 148. See also Sheila Baxter, *Under the Viaduct: Homeless in Beautiful B.C.* (Vancouver: New Star Books 1991), 7-11.
7. In particular, see Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897–1929* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1974), 70-87; Michael J. Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900–1921* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press 1979), 125-42; John T. Saywell, *Housing Canadians: Essays on the History of Residential Construction in Canada*, Discussion Paper, no. 24, (Ottawa: Economic Council of Canada 1975), 114-49; Donald G. Wetherell and Irene R.A. Kmet, *Homes in Alberta: Building, Trends, and Design, 1870-1967* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press and Alberta Culture, Multiculturalism, and Alberta Municipal Affairs 1991), 151-80. With some exceptions, my own *Houses for All: The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver, 1919-50* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1994) also paints a black picture of residential conditions. Painters and art historians, too, have treated shacktowns bleakly; see the work of Lawren Harris in Charles Hill's *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1995), figures 46, 51, 61, 64, 101, 161. For an American study that regards "informal housing" in a more positive light, see Anne E. Mosher and Deryck W. Holdsworth, "The Meaning of Alley Housing in Industrial Towns: Examples from Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Pennsylvania," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18, no. 2 (1992): 174-89. In *Housing the North American City* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1991), 423, Michael Doucet and John Weaver observe that "we shall always know too little about how families endeavoured to fashion their shelters into homes." While I agree with them, I would also suggest that we historians have not yet systematically searched for whatever evidence is available in our local archives.
8. Canada, DBS, *Census Monograph No. 8*; idem, *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941* (Ottawa: King's Printer 1949), vol. 9, *Housing*; idem, *Ninth Census of Canada, 1951* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer 1953), vol. 9, *Housing and Families*; Deryck W. Holdsworth, "Cottages and Castles for Vancouver's Home-Seekers," in *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History*, ed. R.A.J. McDonald and Jean Barman (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1986), 11-32; Wade, *Houses for All*, passim.
9. CVA, Records of the Board of Parks and Recreation (hereafter cited as BPR), 50-F-1, file 1, Album of Newsclippings and Photographs, 1925-1931, 2, 7 July 1925. For more on this early built environment, see R.A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1996), 3-32.
10. *Vancouver Daily News Advertiser*, 19 and 27 August 1894, cited in Robert M. Galois, "Social Structure in Space: The Making of Vancouver, 1886-1901" (Ph.D. diss., Simon Fraser University 1979), 458, note 106; Patricia Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer 1980), 30.
11. Canada, DBS, *Sixth Census of Canada* (Ottawa: King's Printer 1923), Bulletin XIII, 13, table X. We do not know with certainty that these one-room dwellings included waterfront shacks.
12. Wade, *Houses for All*, 50-51, 58-59, 111-2; Bruce Macdonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History* (Vancouver: Talon Books 1992), 42-43.
13. CVA, Records of the Health Department (hereafter cited as HD), 145-C-4, [Report of the Health Inspector (hereafter cited as HI) on the shack below Burrard Bridge], and 145-C-5, [HI report on a houseboat at the foot of Cardero Street].
14. CVA, CC records, 28-E-2, file 20, "Foreshore Survey, February 1949." See also Macdonald, *Vancouver*, 46-7.
15. Sheryl Salloum, *Malcolm Lowry: Vancouver Days* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour 1987), 14, 16.
16. Rolf Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line: Reminiscences of the Vancouver Waterfront* (Vancouver: New Star Books 1980), 75, 79.
17. CVA, TPC records, 77-B-6, file 3, Secretary, zoning matters, to the special committee re Fraser River shacks and waterfront area, 10 July 1939.
18. CVA, TPC records, 61-C-6, file 14, [Report of the special committee on housing], 15 November 1937.
19. CVA, CC records, 27-D-4, file 2, S. Murray to the building, civic planning, and parks committee, 16 November 1938.
20. Wade, *Houses for All*, 58-9.
21. Ibid., chs. 1 and 2, passim.
22. CVA, Public Documents #11, Reports of the Medical Health Officer, 1911-13; CVA, Records of the Permits and Licenses Department (hereafter cited as PLD), 126-B-11, Business License Register, 1929.
23. CVA, TPC records, 61-E-5, file 7, R.C. Singleton to A. Haggart, 20 January 1939.
24. CVA, TPC records, 61-E-5, file 7, M. Travis-Barker to A.J. Harrison, 9 October 1938.
25. CVA, Records of the Mayor's Office (hereafter cited as MO), 34-A-2, Housing Act, 1940 file, A. Haggart to the building, civic planning, and parks committee, 20 November 1940.
26. *Vancouver Sun*, 4 June 1931, 18; CVA, TPC records, 61-C-6, file 14, [Report of the special committee on housing], 15 November 1937, 2.
27. M. Allerdale Grainger, *Woodsmen of the West* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1964), 15.
28. CVA, PLD records, 126-B-11, Business License Register, 1929.
29. Leonard C. Marsh, *Rebuilding a Neighbourhood* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia 1950), 9. For the few remaining cabins, see Michael Kluckner and John Atkin, *Heritage Walks around Vancouver* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books 1992), 19-20.
30. CVA, HD records, 145-C-4, [report on the cabins at 343 Alexander Street].
31. Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter, ed., "Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End," *Sound Heritage* 8, nos. 1-2 (1979): 118.
32. Canada, Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, Session 1902, *Report*, Sessional Paper, no. 54 (Ottawa: King's Printer 1902; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press 1978), 14.
33. CVA, MO records, 34-B-4, West End Survey, 1941 file, "The West End Survey," May 1941.

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34. Vancouver Housing Association, *A Survey of Rooming Houses in the West End and Downtown Districts of Vancouver* (Vancouver: The Association 1951), 2, 6-7, 9-10.
35. Marsh, *Rebuilding a Neighbourhood*, 9.
36. Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 51-3.
37. Wade, *Houses for All*, 42, 44-5, 59-60; Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1973).
38. *Sun*, 25 July 1931, 2.
39. Quotation from H. Peter Oberlander, cited in Baxter, *Under the Viaduct*, 8; CVA, HD records, 145-D-1, [HI report for 750 Keefer Street], attached clipping for *Vancouver Daily Province*, 22 October 1948, 42.
40. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-5, [HI reports for 663 Cambie Street and 77 and 304 West Cordova Street], 145-C-6, [HI report for 767 East Georgia Street], 145-C-4, [HI reports for 1216 Alberni Street and 1230 and 1370 Burnaby Street], 145-D-2, [HI report for 840 Nelson Street], and 145-D-4, [HI report for 110 Water Street].
41. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-6, [HI report for 1263 Davie Street], and 145-D-1, [HI report for 210 Keefer Street].
42. CVA, CC records, 15-D-4, Relief Officer, July-September 1931 file, H.W. Cooper to W.C. Atherton, 3 September 1931, and Cooper to W.J. Bingham, 21 September 1931.
43. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-5, [HI reports for 509, 517, 535, and 537 Carrall Street], and 145-D-2, [HI report for 23 East Pender Street].
44. CVA, CC records, 16-E-2, file 9, [Petition from the committee representing the residents of Kitsilano Reserve foreshore to the mayor and members of city council], 3 November 1936. See also CC records, 27-C-4, file 12, for more on the Kitsilano Indian Reserve issue.
45. CVA, CC records, 27-D-7, file 28, [Petitions submitted by the residents of the Fraser River waterfront dwellings east of Nanaimo Street to the building, civic planning, and parks committee, 4 March 1940, and to the special committee on foreshore shacks, 3 May 1940]. For the Fraser River shacks, see CC records, 27-D-4, file 2.
46. CVA, HD records, 145-D-3, [HI report for 1124 West Pender Street, including the petition from the tenants of the Davenport Rooms to the metropolitan health committee, 25 February 1952].
47. CVA, BPR records, 50-E-4, Album of Newscippings, 153, 23 October 1913. For more on the City Beautiful movement's plans for the park, see R.A.J. McDonald, "Holy Retreat" or "Practical Breathing Spot"? Class Perceptions of Vancouver's Stanley Park, 1910-1913," *Canadian Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (June 1984): 127-53.
48. For the entire, colourful story, see CVA, Newspaper Clippings, M2378, 29 May 1943. For an earlier controversy over the island, see Mark Leier, "The Deadman's Island Dispute of 1899: A Monument to Stupidity and Vandalism," *British Columbia Historical News* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-4.
49. CVA, BPR records, 50-F-1, file 1, Album, 2, 7 July 1925, and 189, 28 May 1931. In 1955, one shacker still occupied a cottage near Brockton Point; see CVA, Newspaper Clippings, M8839, 10 May 1955.
50. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-4, [HI report for the shack below Burrard Bridge], and 145-C-7, [HI report for 650 Gore Avenue]. See also CVA, TPC records, 77-B-6, file 3, Secretary, zoning matters, to the special committee re Fraser River shacks and waterfront areas, 10 July 1939; Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 79; *Province*, 2 April 1938, 14. -
51. CVA, HD records, 145-C-5, [HI report for 57 Cordova Street].
52. CVA, HD records, 145-D-1, [HI report for 750 Keefer Street], attached clipping for *Province*, 22 October 1948, 42.
53. Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 84.
54. See, for example, CVA, HD records, 145-C-4, [HI report for 1139 Bute Street], and 145-D-2, [HI report for 1165 Nelson Street]; Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 80.
55. CVA, CC records, 27-D-7, file 28, [Report of the special committee re fore shore shacks], 23 January 1940, and L.R. MacNeish to C. Jones, 26 March 1940.
56. Many squatters lived near their places of employment; see the petitions in notes 44 and 45; CVA, TPC records, 77-B-6, file 3, Secretary, zoning matters, to the special committee re Fraser River shacks and waterfront areas, 10 July 1939. For Varley's sojourn in a small Lynn Valley shack, see Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley*, Canadian Artists Series, no. 6, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada for the National Museums of Canada 1979): 22, plates 32, 34.
57. CVA, HD records, 145-C-5, [HI reports for 1 to 25 Canton Alley and 517 Carrall Street], and 145-C-6, [HI report for 631 Dunlevy Street]. See also CVA, Records of the Social Service Department, 106-A-6, file 12, "Report on Aged and Indigent Chinese in Receipt of Social Assistance," 3 August 1946.
58. Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 51-2.
59. Salloum, *Malcolm Lowry*, 19, 30.
60. Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1992), 240-2.
61. Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 54.
62. For this community, see McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 3-32.
63. *Historical Atlas of Canada*, vol. 3, *Addressing the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald Kerr and Deryck W. Holdsworth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1990), plate 22; Special Collections Division, University of British Columbia Library, Fire insurance plan by B.C. Fire Underwriters Association, Plan Department, for Canadian Western Lumber Company Limited and Fraser Mills Sash and Door Company Limited, November 1922, IAO-BC/Fraser Mills/1922/SP/Loc. 7; D.E. Isenor, W.N. McInnis, E.G. Stephens, and D.E. Watson, ed., *Land of Plenty: A History of the Comox District* (Campbell River, B.C.: Ptarmigan Press 1987), 198-9; Reta Blakely Hodgins, ed., *Merville and Its Early Settlers, 1919-1985* (Merville, B.C.: Merville Community Association 1985), 6, 72; Ken Drushka, *Working in the Woods: A History of Logging on the West Coast* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour 1992), 120.
64. Drushka, *Working in the Woods*, 100, 147; Grainger, *Woodsmen of the West*, 38; Liv Kennedy, *Coastal Villages* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour 1991), passim; Ted Laturnus, *Floating Homes: A Houseboat Handbook* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour 1986), 2-13. For some recent "dream home" examples, see Chris Rose, "A Shore Thing," *Harrowsmith* 105 (October 1992): 70-7.
65. See, for example, Geoff Meggs and Duncan Stacey, *Cork Lines and Canning Lines: The Glory Years of Fishing on the West Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre 1992), 40, 110, 112, 114; Duncan Stacey and Susan Stacey, *Salmonopolis: The Steveston Story* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour 1994), passim. See also, CVA, HD records, 145-C-4, [HI report for the bunkhouse, Queen Charlotte Fisheries Limited, 610 Bidwell Street].
66. See the petitions in notes 44 and 45.
67. Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*, 53.
68. Recollections of William McConnell, 1984-85, quoted in Salloum, *Malcolm Lowry*, 118; see also *ibid.*, 28, 44. Lowry died of an overdose of alcohol and prescription drugs; *ibid.*, 121-2.
69. An excellent example of a vital shacktown devastated by relocation is Africville, Halifax, Nova Scotia; see Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis William Magill, *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press 1987).