

Emily Carr's Neighbourhood by Shelley E. Reid

Emily Carr (1871 - 1945) is one of Victoria's most famous residents. Best known for her painting, she was also an accomplished writer, a traveller, and in her own fashion, an ambassador for British Columbia's land and its people. Emily's images of totem poles, native villages and forests were her trademark and were appreciated by many people.

Emily Carr lived her life creatively and independently, in an era when women were not encouraged to do so. She also struggled with financial, social, physical and artistic obstacles throughout her life.



It was in the last decade of her life, after years of artistic struggle and experimentation, that Emily's paintings began to appeal to the general population. She was invited to exhibit her works with the Group of Seven and at several of the larger galleries across the country.

For most of her life, Emily Carr lived in one small neighbourhood of James Bay (within walking distance of the Royal B.C. Museum). She died in 1945, at the age of 74.

Emily was born in the family home at what was then 44 Carr Street (now 207 Government St). This lovely Italianate-style home was built in 1863 for the Carr family by architects Wright and Saunders, who were known for their design of the Fisgard Lighthouse. Her parents, Richard and Emily Carr, lived in this home with their seven children for many years. The house was built on what was called the Beckley Farm, which was originally Hudson's Bay Company land, bordering on the wilds of Beacon Hill Park. Other prominent merchants and people in government built homes nearby in the eastern region of James Bay, including Helmcken, Dunsmuir, Spencer, Pendray, Irvine and Trounce.



Today, Carr House is open seasonally as a heritage attraction, operated by the provincial government. It is recognized (but not necessarily protected) by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board plaque system.

For many years, Carr House remained the centrepiece of the family's activities and fortunes. When Richard Carr died in 1888, he left his eldest daughter, Edith, in charge of the family and the property. In 1911, the original acreage was divided into lots, with the Carr sisters claiming five for themselves.



Several of the Carr children, including Emily, built houses on the family property, and this area was defined by Carr family members for a number of years. Carr House, Emily Carr's "House of All Sorts" on Simcoe Street, and two of Emily's sisters' houses on St Andrew's Street still stand today. In fact, the 200 block of Government and St Andrew's streets contains many interesting and lovely historical homes.

Emily Carr's "House of All Sorts" (646 Simcoe St) was built in 1913. Emily ran a boarding house in this building, and many of her escapades and unusual boarders are featured in a book of the same name. At one point, Emily painted a First Nations eagle design on the attic roof; fortunately, this painting is now protected by a provincial heritage designation.

Another interesting home is the Alice Carr House (218 St Andrew's Street). This house was built in 1913, and was known as "the schoolhouse" because Alice taught kindergarten here. Sometimes, Emily used this home as a studio, and gave painting lessons to children.

Edith Carr also built a home in 1913, across the street from Alice's (231 St Andrew's St). Today, the owners of this house operate a Bed and Breakfast; the house has provincial designation as a Heritage Property.

Another significant building in Emily Carr's neighbourhood is the James Bay Inn, at 270 Government Street. This hotel, which was built in 1911, was part of the original property owned by Edward (Bishop) Cridge. During World War II, the Sisters of the Order of the Love of Jesus used this building for the St Mary's Priory Guest House. It was here, in March 1945, that Emily Carr spent her last days. She was buried beside other family members, in Block H, Plot 85E, off Road 15, of the Ross Bay Cemetery.

The Royal B.C. Museum has a small number of artifacts in the collections that have an association with Emily Carr. The Ethnology Collection holds several bracelets, small argillite totem poles, a flute, a rattle, and a canoe bailer. The bracelets belonged to Emily and her sister Alice, and the argillite flute was a gift from Emily Carr to Willie Newcombe, the son of Dr Charles Newcombe. In our History Collections, we have a handmade ceramic bowl with the words "Klee Wyck" etched in the bottom. Klee Wyck ("Laughing One") was the name given to Emily by the Nuu-chah-nulth people of the west coast of Vancouver Island. It also became the title of Emily's first book, and the name of her pottery.



I hope that this brief glimpse into the life and neighbourhood of Emily Carr will inspire you to take a short walk to Emily Carr's neighbourhood and to read more about Emily Carr. Many of her works of art are preserved in museums and galleries (primarily the Vancouver Art Gallery). It is also important to preserve the legacy of historic homes and properties in Emily Carr's neighbourhood.

Shelley E. Reid is Registrar of Anthropology Collections at the RBCM.

Carr House is open daily to the public from 10 am to 5 pm. It features a newly restored front hallway and a new "People's Art Gallery", in the spirit of Emily Carr, featuring local artists.

You can also visit Helmcken House (built in 1852), located outside the main entrance of the Museum, adjacent to Thunderbird Park. Dr J.S. Helmcken was an important figure in the early history of Victoria and the province.

Top left: The Carr sisters - Emily Carr is on the lower right. (BCARS HP5131)

Lower right: Carr House, the birthplace of Emily Carr, as it might have appeared on a fine spring day around the turn of the century. (PHOTO JEFF BARBER/INFOCUS; COURTESY HERITAGE PROPERTIES BRANCH)

Left: C.F. Newcombe's photograph of the Kwakwaka'wakw village at Blunden Harbour: Emily Carr used it to create one of her more famous paintings, entitled Blunden Harbour. (RBCM PN258)

Map: Walking Tour of Emily Carr's Neighbourhood: (1) Carr House, 207 Government St, built in 1863; (2) Emily Carr's "House of All Sorts", 246 Simcoe St, built in 1913; (3) Alice Carr House, 218 St Andrew's St; and (4) Edith Carr House, 231 St Andrew's St.