

Roedde House museum: more than a house

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VANCOUVER, British Columbia- Rainy days are not always a welcome sight in Vancouver but they are all too common in winter. It could be a perfect time to take a tour of the Roedde House heritage building, a restored late {1893} Victorian home in Vancouver's West End. A day in a warm, old house accompanied by a cup of tea is a lovely way to spend a dreary Sunday.

Roedde house was built in the "Queen Anne revival" style, for Gustav and Mathilda Roedde in 1893. The house was designed by architect, Francis M. Attenbury who also designed the provincial parliament buildings, the famed Empress hotel and the Vancouver art gallery.

The conservation of this particular house is an interesting story. After the Roeddes moved out, the house's condition began to wither. When it became a rooming house in the 1960s, it was bought by the city of Vancouver, and joined the ranks of nearby houses that were to be torn down to make space for a large park.

"In the late 50s, early 60s, Vancouver was booming. The city just exploded," says Shirley Sexsmith, one of the volunteers at the Roedde House Museum. "The zoning changed, and the West End was zoned for high rises. And the houses were doomed, because they would just be demolished, and high rises would go up."

When citizens around the area became concerned they urged the city not to tear down the historical site. The city finally agreed to authorize the Roedde House as a Class A Heritage Building in 1976.

Its grand opening was in 1999 and as the fight to save the Roedde house had been won, the community decided to rescue the other houses on the block as well. Nine houses in total have been saved. One of them is a wellness centre, and the other a senior centre and the block has been renamed Barclay Square.

A touch of old mystique

The story of the old house is quite typical. Gustav and Matilda Roedde, with six children of their own, one adopted son and Gustav's beloved St. Bernard dogs lived in the modest Roedde house.

Gustav and his wife were German immigrants to Canada, and when they settled in Vancouver, Gustav started Vancouver's first book-binding business, which flourished beautifully. The house was built in 1893, and the expansive family lived there until 1925. It was a newer house in its generation and was built near English Bay and Stanley Park, where the children often went for a swim in the summer.

A closer look

In the Roedde household, everyone had a room. The girls had their shared bedrooms and the boys theirs. Mrs. Roedde had a small sewing room, and her indoor garden, which was also a tiny attic. Mr. Roedde had a rec room with a gramophone, and the piano room off the foyer.

Filling the rooms are toys and gadgets from the era. Old-fashioned telephones, queer looking swimsuits, miniature sewing machines and an ancient shaver for Mr. Roedde and the boys are on display at the house.

The children's toys were quite different from the modern ones of today. Nothing is battery powered and nothing connects to the internet. There are dolls and knitting spools for the girls and soccer balls and stamps for the boys.

Judging from the displayed household items housework was more tiring than it is now. With heavy irons, clumsy 'state-of-the-art' vacuums, and hand-washed laundry; it's no wonder housewives were occupied all day long!

Many events are held at the museum, such as a Christmas gathering, and an upcoming Valentine's Day treat, with songs and tea. Definitely not to be missed. For more information, visit www.roedde-house.org.