

# the Steveston Fisherman's memorial

This unique memorial to local folk who went to work on their vessels from Steveston harbour and never returned has gained world recognition.

BY TIM LYNCH

**S**teveston is Canada's largest industrial fishing port. Founded around 1870 by fishermen from Japan, Steveston is also one of the oldest fishing ports on the West Coast. As with fishing communities around the world, Steveston exists because over the decades local residents have gone to sea to provide for their families and also to search for adventure and excitement (See Steveston, the Jewel in Richmond's Crown, *Fisherman Life* October 2007).

Reflective of the high-risk nature of the fishing industry, many of Steveston's residents went to work on their fishing vessels and did not return to their families and community. When such industrial deaths occur a vacuum is created in the lives of many people. Often deaths at sea occur without the body of a loved one being found, making closure difficult for the family and the community. As the number of people from Steveston lost at sea grew there was increasing talk during the 80's about the need for a local memorial.



Steveston Fisherman's Memorial



Steveston Fisherman's Memorial base

## An Inter-denominational Memorial

Under the leadership of Ted Lorenze, a committee was established by the Steveston Community Society to develop a Steveston Fisherman's Memorial. Lorenze, a member of the Richmond Fire Department, along with Ken Eliston, a Cannery Manager with Great West Fisheries, proposed that rather than the customary image of a sailor at the wheel battling the waves, the Memorial should be a net mending needle.

Coming out of a chequered past of racial discrimination, including government enforced internment of long time local residents of Japanese descent, the Committee decided that the Steveston memorial would be the fishnet mending needle. The Committee, particularly Lorenze and Elston, saw the net

mending needle as symbolizing the universality of the fishing profession. Regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender or nationality all fishing folk around the world know about the net mending needle and how to use it. Having had some experience in design, Joe Bauer, a local fisherman and native son of Steveston, was asked to come up with a preliminary design. Following a public competition Bauer's design was chosen by the Committee to represent their vision.

Initially the proposal was met with controversy. Some members of Richmond City Council objected because they thought it would be seen as a phallic symbol. When it was finished the "nay-sayers" had to admit that the Steveston Fisherman's Memorial defined and added to the distinctive culture that defines Steveston.

The Memorial, dedicated May 4, 1996 was made possible with generous donations from the City of Richmond, the BC 21 Fund - Province of British Columbia, Steveston Community Society and the many friends of Steveston. A 26 ft. tall aluminum net mending needle, donated by Raider Aluminum, is perched atop a six foot circular plaque with carvings of waves and salmon being netted. These images are symbolic of the salmon that pass along the South Arm of the Fraser River within a few feet of the memorial's base. On its south westerly outer wall the names of local fishing vessels that went down along with their crews are listed, along with individual Steveston residents who lost their lives in the local fishing fields surrounding their community.

The memorial rests on a compass rose which represents one of the main instruments used for navigation. It is located on the southeast corner of Garry Point just in front of the entrance to Steveston Harbour. The Memorial is being maintained through the support of the local Sea Scouts, thereby passing on community history to the next generation.

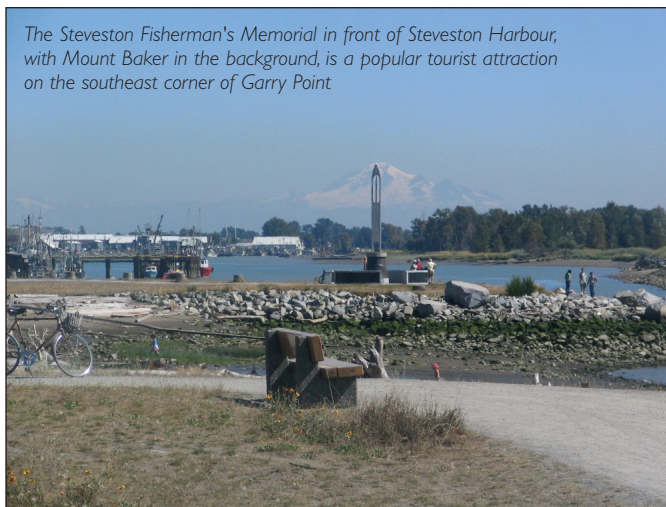
### Listing Names on the Memorial

Commenting on the names listed on the Memorial, Bauer explained, "In order to be recognized the individuals listed have to operate from a Steveston-based vessel. This was decided by the Memorial Committee as a means of promoting the history of Steveston. There was concern that

the people moving into Steveston didn't fully appreciate the fishing history of the community. I have always had a problem with that because originally when I got involved we were thinking of the whole Lower Mainland and up river," said Bauer. "All the people who travel up north or up river all stop in Steveston. But the decision by the Committee was that only Steveston vessels be acknowledged in recognition of Steveston being Canada's largest industrial fishing harbour.

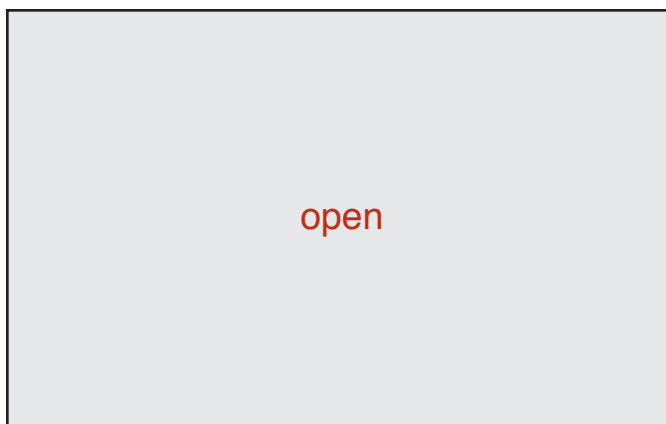
"We had a particular problem with the seine boat fishermen in the 40s, 50s and 60s," continued Bauer. "They would use the Steveston docks in the summer time when the gillnetters were out fishing. They got their net work done in the local net lofts. Then in winter there was no place for them to tie up in Steveston because the gillnet fleet returned home so they used to take their boats into Vancouver. Technically, seine boat people were working out of Steveston although they may not have used Steveston as their home port."

Bauer nodded towards the memorial, "You see the *Scotia Cape* is on there, which is a Steveston-based vessel, but the crew was from the East Coast. The father of one of our long established fishing families made application to have his son who had grown up in Steveston listed on the memorial. It's sad, but unfortunately he was not fishing out of Steveston



The Steveston Fisherman's Memorial in front of Steveston Harbour, with Mount Baker in the background, is a popular tourist attraction on the southeast corner of Garry Point

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when he was killed. Same with one of our local fellows who moved to Nanaimo as his home port because the work was there. When he was killed the family could not have his name included on the memorial either.”

### The Annual Fisherman's Memorial Service


Continuing his leadership role in the community, Joe Bauer officiated at this year's Fisherman's Memorial Services on April 28, 2008. This service was held at the Steveston Fisherman's Memorial as part of the National Day of Mourning the workers who were killed or injured on the job, or who suffer from work-related illnesses. Bauer told the crowd gathered, "From researching on how best to remember those listed on the memorial, we found that in 1984 the Executive Council of the Canadian Labour Congress first endorsed an annual event to observe a Day of Mourning. Since then the Day of Mourning has grown into a worldwide event observed by unions, central labour bodies, labour councils, municipalities and national governments. It has been formerly endorsed by the International Confederation of Free Trade Union (ICFTU) and several countries are in the process of formally recognizing the day, following Canada's example in 1999. The Day of Mourning is now observed in nearly a hundred countries worldwide."

Bauer described the weather on the day of the service, with its battleship grey clouds, sharp breeze and low temperature, as "familiar fishing day weather." In front of a gathering of about 50 people, 10 persons gave speeches about the need to remember the people listed on the memorial and the contribution they made to Steveston. There was also frequent reference for the need to prevent such tragedies from happening again. RCMP Constable Debbie Hunwicks served as the usher escorting wreath bearers. In addition to representatives of DFO, fishing unions and associations, wreaths were laid by Mrs. Morizawa and sisters for her husband Choichiro Morizawa, *FV Spring Bride*, Magnus Anderson for *Kaare II*, Fred Alexander for his father Sam Alexander of *FV Miss Jean* and Glenn Budden for his father Doug Budden of *FV Cape Mark*.

Ed Dowling of WorkSafeBC noted, "In 2007 four fishermen

did not come home after a fishing trip or opening." He told the crowd that "more than 80% of fishermen who died in the last 15 years died as a result of drowning." He acknowledged the critical role of Fish Safe BC in preventing tragedies, stressing the "importance for fishermen to participate in safety training and educational programs, such as vessel stability awareness to prevent fatalities and accidents." Dowling noted "Fish Safe's Stability Education program is doing a great job of raising awareness about what impacts stability such as vessel modifications and overloading."

Talking about the importance of the ceremony in the City of Richmond calendar, Councillor Bill McNulty said, "This event is most important to the history of our city. Newcomers to our community do not recognize the sacrifices made by families involved in the fishing industry. Steveston owes its existence to these people coming here from around the world to fish the bountiful harvest and make a living. They brought their families here; they were pioneers and leaders in our community. These were the people who inhabited this Island when it was a lot more primitive than we see it today. It is important that we remember them even as far back as a hundred years ago. They all came out here to try and earn a living, to build with their families and I respect the contribution they made to the community. Many families are short by their loved ones risking their lives on a dangerous task in trying to earn a living. We need to continue to remember them," concluded McNulty.

The worldly vision of those Steveston residents who served on the Memorial Committee has resulted in a unique memorial to local folk who went to work on their vessels from Steveston harbour and never returned. The presence of the memorial gives some degree of closure to many of the local families who have lost loved ones and means that their courage, dedication and contribution to the development of Steveston will never be forgotten. 

*Tim Lynch is a public policy analyst living in Steveston. All articles referred to above are available at [www.infolyнк.ca/bcmaritimepolicy.html](http://www.infolyнк.ca/bcmaritimepolicy.html). Send comments to [tim@infolyнк.ca](mailto:tim@infolyнк.ca).*

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