

Section You — Communities

Bracing for a new siege in Deep Cove

By Irene Tomaszewski • photos by Ian Lindsay

It's strange to hear John Milroy say he wouldn't want change in Deep Cove that it's the most beautiful place in the world just as it is: "I'll probably never leave here. I can't think of any place I'd rather live, or any place I'd rather die."

The words are incongruous with the adventurous, animated 22-year-old face. He looks to urban, too rebellious, but his voice sounds sincere and echoes the sentiments of every other teenager, adult or child living in Deep Cove.

The community's 5,000 residents come from every social and financial background. But they're connected by a desire to protect their safe, sheltered, deep-water anchorage from commercialization.

It's not difficult to understand why. Deep Cove, which stretches north of the Mount Seymour Parkway and east of the Deep Cove Ridge, is a daydream of cliffs, ocean and friendly people, only a half-hour drive from downtown Vancouver. Urban visitors can imagine a childhood spend romping on the beach, instead of on concrete playgrounds.

Nestled between Mount Seymour and the salt water flowing from Indian Arm, Deep Cove is a different type of place. Trees tower over the buildings, seals come out to look at people and nature can still command a dying respect for her magnificence.

Deep Cove's core is only two blocks. The main thoroughfare is Gallant Avenue, honouring a chiropractor who was admired for his community work.

There is only one illuminated sign. A large fluorescent lightbulb hangs over a wooden plaque with the words Deep Cove Pizza carefully carved. Here an Irishman, who rolls his Rs in a heavy brogue, makes 20 pizzas an hour on an average day.

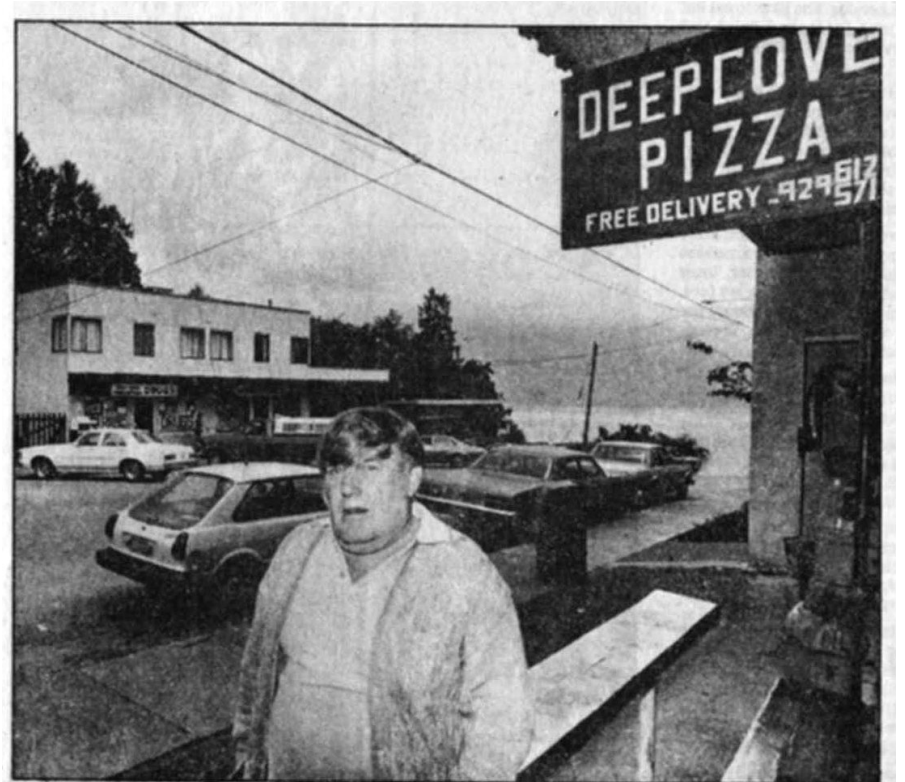
Fred McKee came to Canada 26 years ago, with two friends and a dream of peace. They arrived in Winnipeg and headed west. At the end of the road they came to Deep Cove.

"I took one look at it and said this is the Killarney (three picturesque lakes in Ireland, surrounded by mountains and famed for their beauty) of B.C. This is where I want to settle and I'll never leave it."

Colonel Jack Villiers arrived in the Cove about the same time as McKee. He'd been a jungle fighter with the British army in Burma. After the war he and his wife Phyllis came to B.C. in search of a dream.

"I'd seen a picture postcard of British Columbia from a local boy in the Canadian army," he said. "It was just the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, so after the war I thought that's where I have to go to start my new life."

"When we arrived in Vancouver, friends took us all over to Kits and point Grey but nothing fit this image I had in my mind. So



FRED McKEE, above, in 'the Killarney of B.C.' Below, boats at Seycove Marina



out of desperation they took us to Deep Cove. As soon as we turned the corner of that old road and I caught a glimpse of the harbour, I said, 'Exactly, this is where I want to live'.

"We got out of the car and I asked this old fellow walking down the street if he knew anyone who had a house for sale. He nearly embraced me, saying he had a place, and within half an hour we bought it lock, stock and barrel."

The Villiers' home is a summer cottage they've renovated and filled with souvenirs of their life in India. A wooden snake carved stand holds a lampshade and on the dining room buffet is the skin of a leopard Villiers shot on a safari.

The Cove, as it's known locally, has a rural aura without the horses and without the farms. The absence of sidewalks, honking horns and smoking pollution stacks give it tranquillity.

The wharf is where much of the community's social exchange takes place. The residents talk about the rain and the traffic, but most of all they talk about "old man Gibson" (Gordon Gibson Jr. of Gallant Redevelopment Joint Venture) and his plan to construct a five-storey apartment building in the heart of their village atmosphere.

There's a general disaffection with highrise buildings in the Cove which, most residents feel, will do away with the area's quaintness. This summer the tension is running particularly high. The housing squeeze has brought out the developers and has united local residents in a fight against urbanization.

Bill Prowse, president of the Deep Cove Dollarton Community Association, said Gordon Gibson Jr.'s residential-commercial complex, planned for the corner of Panorama and Gallant Avenues (the main intersection), will dominate Deep Cove, where no other building is higher than three storeys.

The association says the District of North Vancouver should have a rational development plan that protects the Cove's village identity.

"We'd like to retain the rural nature. We don't want to see sidewalks and curbs," Prowse said. "We like our narrow streets and salmonberries. Another thing that is significant is that the whole side of Mount Seymour remains untouched, so you can look up and see a big green mountain."

Gibson disagrees. "First of all I don't believe there is that much opposition to the project. It's only four or five people and they don't understand the project. We believe it's just going to be a beautiful project. As a matter of fact we've already had 100 requests from people who would like to move in. (He claims half of those are Cove residents).

"The businesses that will go into the commercial space will improve the services available to the people."

It's not the first time Deep Covers have felt under siege. They have a long history of banding together, fighting invaders and fighting change.

"Whenever anything like this thing with Gibson happens all we have to do is end out the word and hundreds of people show up at the association's meeting," Prowse said. "We disagree on many things but we all agree that haphazard development should not be allowed."

Joe Thornley, who ran a motel during many of his 31 years in the Cove, knows about the locals' innate opposition.

"There really haven't been any major conflicts because there's nothing major about Deep Cove," he said. "The main argument has been to preserve the Cove as it is and to conserve the concept of the boating village. If anybody tries to change that, they'll fight you tooth and nail.

"We were a community of septic tanks, oil drums and tar paper and people wanted to keep it that way because they're scared of commercialization. They'll fight any type of progress here. When the businessmen's association tried to pave the first road, people said, 'No, no, don't do that. we don't want a speedway going through town'."

Art George, who moved to the Cove in the 1930s to run a motel out of the old quarry bunkhouses, agreed controversy is a Cove tradition.

About two years ago there was a furor over houseboats settling in the Cove, said George. A committee called Anchors Away formed to get rid of the "derelicts" they felt were spoiling the view and causing sanitation problems.

"The whole thing backfired a little," chuckles George. "Council said, 'Okay, we'll get rid of all the boats but that means all of them.' Even residents would have to move their vehicles and park them on official sites. So what happens then? Another group forms called Anchors to Stay, lobbying for the right of residents to park in front of their own properties."

Thornley is convinced nothing can ever really change Deep Cove. As he points to the water, the islands and the untouched coastline of North Vancouver, he explains, "because nobody can ever change that."

But money has changed the community's social fabric. About 20 years ago Deep Cove was the Miami of B.C. with senior citizens on low budgets retiring to their summer homes. Everybody knew everybody else.

Within the last decade many of the oldtimers have died and been replaced with a new breed of entrepreneurs. Money's moving in Deep Cove. It's not unusual to see homes worth half a million dollars on 33-foot lots.

Deep Cove evolved from a logging community. It was the home of Dollarton Mill, at one time one of the largest pulp mills in the British Empire. The old burner still stands in Cates Park and traces of the skid road used to transport logs from Mount Seymour into Cove waters can still be seen.

The mill closed at the turn of the century when the area's virgin forests could no supply enough logs to keep it going. The loggers were replaced with a new breed of residents.

Summer campers who wanted to escape city life on weekends put up small, temporary cottages on 33-foot lots. Some of those still dot the hillside and a couple have been converted into quaint shops. Deep Cove really grew in the 1930s on a wave of immigrants fleeing the high cost of living in cities struck with unemployment and inflation in the Depression.

During those years the community's name was changed to Deep Waters to avoid postal confusion, since there's another Deep Cove near Sunshine Falls. Shortly afterwards, residents realized the name didn't reflect the sheltered nestiness of their haven so they returned the original name.

Where cabins once stood on Panorama Drive, Mercedes and Cadillacs now line the driveways. It's the epitome of rivalry. Everyone wants a bigger boat with better equipment. Everyone wants the prime spots on the coast.

Oldtimers say there's a different sense of fun these days.

George remembers the 1930s when the biggest activity of the day was going down to the wharf to watch the sorting of mail. It was delivered to the Cove by a mail boat which served the area until the 1960s.

Saturday night dances were the focus of the week's activities where people would come from around the North Shore to dance, drink and romance in the wilderness.

Vancouver's Regatta Days really put Deep Cove on the map for many people. As many as 5,000 spectators would come out for the yachting and canoeing races, log rolling and lavish parties.

Change used to be minimal in Deep Cove. What remains is nostalgia