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Craig Heritage Park & Museum Farmers' Market



Shop & Learn!

David Morrison photos

By David Morrison

As every reader will know, a great many Vancouver Island street names, parks, facilities, topographical features and much more were named for the pioneers, civic leaders and preeminent figures of early European settlement. I live on Craig Street in Nanaimo, one location I presume was named after James Craig (1863-1946), a man who made a substantial contribution to the emergent Oceanside area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Craig and his family's local history is beautifully presented for a largely hands-on experience at the Craig Heritage Park & Museum (1245 E. Island Highway).

Since moving to Canada a little under nine years ago I have spent hundreds of greatly rewarding hours exploring my new island home. Its beauty, wildlife, unique atmosphere,

rich cultural landscape and, indeed, fascinating history will never be lost on me. And with my relocation has come a totally new way of life, one in which a tangible sense of community has seen me rediscover the vital importance of supporting independent concerns. While to Islanders in smaller communities such an attitude may seem like a no-brainer, this manner of conducting oneself in daily life can be so easily forgotten somewhere like the hectic-paced, large British city whence I came.

Imagine my joy, then, to encounter a situation where I can learn more about the area's bygone days whilst spending money on local goods and produce. I am referring to time spent at the lovely farmers' market held on Friday evenings at the Craig Heritage Park & Museum. Now into its second year, the market is a wonderful idea that the whole family can participate

in, all bases covered. With all the will in the world, kids will get bored and restless when out shopping with parents, but with so many distractions as the (mainly outdoor) museum provides in terms of learning and entertainment, everyone is happy! What's more, the usual museum admission costs are waived when the market is held.

I recently spoke with David Haynes, Vice President of the Parksville Museum & Archives, and one of the pivotal figures in bringing this (presumably) unique concept to fruition.

"It all began serendipitously," Haynes explains. "One of the members of the Executive of the museum sent me an article stating there was a waiting list for the farmers' market, so I suggested we should have one (at the museum). It took off immediately and 'avalanched' from that moment. From inception to launch, including a few minor obstacles

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to overcome, was about three weeks. It was lickety-split, boom-boom-boom!”

The market is a truly lovely experience, with a wide variety of vendors scattered amongst the cluster of heritage buildings that were assembled on the site in the early 1980s. The way in which it is laid out promotes leisurely meandering, so one can perhaps pick up some fresh vegetables or pastries here, then take a look inside a century-plus old post office over there. The site is picturesque and quite small, yet on market days contains a deceptive amount that can easily occupy the three open hours (5:00 pm-8:00 pm) in respect of shopping and interesting exhibits.

Concerning the vendors, from the outset Haynes had definite ideas for the ideal market, saying: “In my head I had a virtual shopping cart, which I wanted to turn into a ‘concrete’ shopping cart. So, I wanted this vendor because they have sausages, this one because they have eggs, this vendor because they had greens, and so on. I went through my

shopping cart and invited those vendors from other local farmers’ markets I’d attended that were held on different days and, lo and behold, most of them showed up!”

Consequently, although it may differ slightly each week, there are vendors selling farm-fresh vegetables and fruits; meats and sausages; baked goods; desserts, confectionery and breads; skincare and health products; flowers, fresh pasta, art and...oh, a whole lot more. It is an unusual sight at such a market, but due to the recent changes in B.C. liquor laws there is also wine, beer and spirits on sale. Visitors can even have a delicious dinner at the market, with such as wood-fired pizza and freshly cooked samosas available.

The museum itself really is something to behold. Antique agricultural and logging machinery, crucial to establishing the early settlement that ultimately became Parksville, and the remarkably preserved and maintained buildings provide a fascinating portal into life in this region well over a century ago. James Craig was one of the very earliest settlers here, a central

figure making his name as a man of many invaluable skills. For starters he was a farmer, road builder, and noted cougar bounty hunter, earning the nickname “Cougar Craig” for his efforts.

When visiting the market, besides supporting the independent businesses vending their wares, be sure to thoroughly explore the museum. The beautiful Knox Heritage Church, originally opened in 1912 and still used, is a sheer delight. The Craig Cottage, tiny Montrose School and two separate post offices are also

utterly charming. I don’t spoil it for you by revealing more, as the joy of any museum or historical site is the thrill of discovery.

Haynes has been amazed and overjoyed at how the concept of markets at the museum has been greeted by the community. “My expectation was that we would have 200 to 250 people,” he says, “but on our first night each year there has been around 1,000. There definitely seems to be a ‘come, buy your stuff, and hang around awhile,’ mentality at our market, whereas - because ours is at an open museum - other markets do not have that aspect to them. A lot of people come and it’s their Friday night ‘date.’ We have food, wine, music, events going on, things for people to look at and talk about; people meet friends here, so it’s a charming place to visit, with the feel of a village. We seem to have a core group of around 600 people, but when tourism kicks in and school’s out we expect that number to rise by 300 to 400 people.”

One knock-on effect of the market’s success is the way visitors have responded to where it is held, a consequence that, as someone so engaged with conserving local history, Haynes is delighted about.

“In doing this, the museum has also hugely benefitted,” he says. “We’ve raised our membership six-fold, increasing our coffers three- or four-fold. It’s really good, as one of the main purposes of this whole idea is to get people into the museum to see what’s going on, but the farmers’ market is a wonderful spinoff.”

Due to the positive response to the Friday farmers’ market, which will run until October 9, the museum is also hosting an Artisans’ Market on Sunday afternoons (1:00-5:00 pm), until August 30. Haynes is also formulating plans for an inventors’ - or ‘makers’ - market, to be launched next year, so it’s all go at the Craig Heritage Park & Museum. In a place where so much pioneer history is gathered, it seems pioneers of a very different kind are creating a little local history of their own!

The Craig Heritage Park & Museum Farmers’ Market runs every Friday from 5:00 pm to 8:00 pm. For further information please visit parksvillemuseum.ca or telephone (250) 248 6966.

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