

Richmond lots, \$300 the acre – 80 years ago

by Sabine Eiche

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I headed for Richmond Archives to read the earliest surviving issues of the local paper, looking for support for an idea I had. I didn't find it, but my forays into Richmond's past were rewarding, letting me glimpse moments of our community's former life from a down-to-earth perspective.

Most of these windows on to bygone times were found in the classified ads. In the first issues of the paper, from the 1930's, they could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Regular items advertised for sale were goats, pigs and chickens. Mink farmers sought old cows and horses as feed for their animals. Occasionally someone would plead for the return of an overcoat, taken from a public place by mistake. One remarkable ad stated that a cardigan had been found, which the owner could claim by paying for the ad. Even more memorable was the ad announcing that a set of false upper teeth had been found. Clearly, 80 years ago, losing an item of clothing (never mind the dentures) was considered a serious matter. People looked after their belongings because they were meant to last. Clothing was mended or altered and handed down, just as toys were repaired and played with by generations of children, not tossed out for the latest craze.

The classified ads also listed real estate, for sale and rent. The lots were often large – six acres were for sale on Woodward's Road between No. 2 and No. 3, in June 1935. The property comprised a three-roomed house as well as a chicken house and fruit trees. In November of 1935 half an acre of garden land was offered for sale on Bennett Road and described as a snap to the right buyer.

L. Stubbs, of Eburne, placed an ad in May 1936 to sell a “cultivated acre – excellent soil, new modern bungalow, near schools and tram (5¢ fare to city) electric light, water, paved road. Priced specially low for quick sale.” Unfortunately the price was omitted from the ad.

Features mentioned again and again in connection with Richmond properties are chicken houses, cow sheds, root houses, fruit trees and berry bushes. The site at the corner of No. 2 Road and Westminster Highway, where the Chevron station sits today, was for rent in June 1938, when it included a house, 15 different fruit trees, a chicken coop and barn as well as a seeded garden. In the days before processed foods and supermarkets, people were self-sufficient, growing and raising most of what they ate.

Prices for sales and rentals are occasionally provided. In December 1937, ten and a half acres, with house and buildings, were offered for a quick sale for \$3,500 although the true cost was claimed to be over \$8,000. A year later, the property was still for sale, the owner declaring it was a “Sacrifice, only \$3,700 – terms.” Interested parties were to apply to 575 Geal Road, Woodward's Station, but it's not clear if that's also where the large lot was located.

Today the price of a piece of land is many times greater than that of the house sitting on it, but in the early part of the twentieth century the house normally had the higher price tag. In 1938, a five-room house with attic, on Garry Street and 4th Avenue, was being sold for \$1,200. A couple of ads from 1938 and 1941 suggest the average price for an acre of land was then \$300. In Bridgeport, a 66 ft. corner lot at Smith and Charles Streets was advertised for \$400 in January 1941 (since the most common measurement of an acre was 66 x 660 ft, this may have been an acre lot).

Rents were high in relation to sales prices. In May 1936 a “wanted” ad appeared for a “four-roomed house, not over \$10 a month. Must be within two miles of Marpole.”

The following year, a new bungalow on Blundell Road, with a living room, bed room, sleeping porch, kitchenette with sink and shelves, woodshed and garage, plus garden space if desired, was advertised for \$15 a month. Also in 1937, Mrs. Mortimer offered "Frimley Villa", consisting of a new modern house, five large rooms, finished attic, full plumbing, shrubs, fruit trees, double garage, and almost one acre, fenced, on No. 9 Road, for \$22.50 a month.

Richmond's population increased by slightly over 2,000 between 1931 and 1941, but already in May 1936 the paper ran the headline "Building Permits Are Up By Over \$12,000," continuing with the statement: "Richmond is experiencing something like a small building boom." Vancouver's new airport was being expanded (costs estimated at \$33,000), and there was also considerable construction activity in the private sector, often with lumber supplied by Mr. Phil Buswell of Lulu Island Lumber: the paper lists W. H. Moore, for a store on Douglas Road near the Diversion, with another store being built across the street by a Japanese. Private houses constructed with Mr. Buswell's lumber included one by H. R. Lawrence on Patterson Road (26 x 32 ft.); another by Frank Bene on No. 4 Road (26 x 30 ft.). Mrs. Moldowin's new house (26 x 30 ft.) on Lansdowne Road, replacing the one destroyed in a fire in March, was almost ready in May. Joseph Jones had nearly finished his house on No. 3 Road, and Mr. Urkevitch was building an addition to his house on Cambie.

Lulu Island Lumber wasn't the only place builders could go to at that time. In April 1936 Eugene Greczmiel, a Richmond pioneer, started advertising in the paper that he was selling building materials from the Vancouver Cannery on Sea Island.

Real estate agents, of which just one – J. W. Fairhall, on Marine Drive – was listed in the paper in the 1930's, began to proliferate in the next decade. The Realty Investment Corporation, whose office was at 771 Dunsmuir, advertised in the paper in 1941, stating that it wanted listings and had clients waiting, with a particular interest in "homes and

small acreage.” Also A. I. Johnston of Lulu Island Real Estate, 488 No. 3 Road, cried for listings.

After the end of the Second World War, Richmond’s real estate market went into high gear. The population almost doubled between 1941 (10, 370) and 1951 (19,186), and housing was in demand.

On January 1, 1950, the paper reported that Council had upheld the new zoning by-law “when they turned down an application to subdivide with less than 66 feet frontage.” In February, a feature called “House Suggestions” started to appear, with plans and drawings prepared by the Small House Planning Bureau of St. Cloud, Minnesota. The house sizes ranged from 28 x 24 to 30 x 38 feet.

Between 1950 and 1951 three further agencies – Vancouver Investments, H. A. Roberts Ltd., and E. R. Weedon Agencies, at 370 Moncton – entered the Richmond real estate market. By 1955, Newcombe Realty, Delta Realty and Rivers Realty were advertising in the local paper, and Richmond Realty, at 688 No. 3 Road, had enough work to keep ten salespeople (including women) busy.

House prices were climbing. A four-room stucco bungalow, with large fruit trees, close to school and bus, could be had for \$4,200 (half in cash) in May 1951. Less than four years later, in February 1955, Richmond Realty was advertising a two-bedroom house for \$8,500; a bungalow on a corner lot for \$11,500; and a five-room house, two blocks from Brighthouse, on half an acre clay soil, for \$5,200. The following year, the asking price for a two-bedroom house was \$10,200, whereas a so-called executive house, with three bedrooms, cost \$13,750. For people who wanted to live close to businesses, a four-bedroom house, in the heart of Brighthouse, on a lot measuring 75 x 220 feet, was offered at \$15,750.

In April 1956, A. E. Austin & Co. placed an ad announcing: "Lots for sale / Attention Builders. 30 lots, choice location; \$1,050 a lot, can be sold separately." Isn't it remarkable that 60 years later, it sounds strangely like the message on signs we see posted along some of Richmond's arterial roads? Only the price tag has changed.