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Fact maven chronicles Vancouver

Chuck Davis, 71, gathers data the way a squirrel hoards acorns, writes TOM HAWTHORN

Special to The Globe and Mail

On this day 35 years ago, an odd, shambling character wearing a bathrobe, pyjamas and sandals moved into the top two floors of a deluxe waterfront hotel. The reclusive Howard Hughes, a germophobic billionaire, cowered unseen in his Vancouver hideaway for six months. Who knew?

On this day in 1958, the \$13-million main post office building on Georgia Street opened its doors. The postmaster-general arrived by helicopter, landing on the rooftop heliport. . Who knew?

On this day in 1889, the Vancouver Real Estate Board was formed, thus launching the city's one true religion. Who knew?

Chuck Davis knew.



Mr. Davis is an author and a quizmaster, a radio host and a newspaper columnist. For the better part of his 71 years, he has been collecting factual tidbits about the city of Vancouver the way a skinny squirrel hoards acorns in autumn.

He has shared these items and stories with a loyal band of readers in two celebrated publications, one of which he describes as an urban almanac (*The Vancouver Book*, 1976) and the other as an urban encyclopedia (*The Greater Vancouver Book*, 1997). The latter was a critical success but a financial disaster, the only black ink in the enterprise to be found on the 904 pages of the book.

Despite the fiasco, the irrepressible Mr. Davis is now beavering away on what he considers to be the capstone of his career.

He is entering the later stages of completing *The History of Metropolitan Vancouver*, a year-by-year

narrative history of the region stretching from Bowen Island east to Langley.

He faced a serious roadblock before setting out on the book three years ago. "How do I do this, and how to I do this while paying the rent?"

His innovative solution has been to sell sponsorships for each year.

In exchange for a modest sum, sponsors earn a 200-word mini-history at the start of each chapter. The Vancouver Board of Trade jumped aboard as the lead sponsor, while many firms chose to be the patrons for the year of their founding. Among those the author has lined up can be counted a bank, a brewer, two hotels, two credit unions, an auction house, a drugstore chain, a restaurant chain, a motorcycle dealership, a university and several law firms.

and the Jim Pattison Group. (whose namesake founder is wealthy like the eccentric Mr. Hughes, although considerably more grounded in reality).

"I've got 80 sponsors," says Mr. Davis, proprietor of a one-man operation of his own, "and I could use some more."

An avuncular character quick to laugh, Mr. Davis has been a familiar figure on the local scene for four decades. He is a seven-letter, triple-word-score monster at Scrabble. His dream job would be as a researcher for the television quiz show Jeopardy! His grasp of facts and dates is all the more impressive for his being an autodidact whose formal education was interrupted in Grade 8.

Born in Winnipeg in 1935, Charles Hector Davis was the son of a man who owned three modest confectioneries. In December, 1944, he and his father abandoned the prairies for a new life on the West Coast. They left a city with snow piled higher than the parked cars, arriving at the train depot in downtown Vancouver to see flowers blooming. Their first home here was a former squatter's shack in Burnaby built over the shoreline of Burrard Inlet. It lacked electricity. Freight trains rumbled past just metres away.

"My dad hated it," Mr. Davis said. "I loved it."

Two years later, a fire destroyed their home and a photograph of the homeless boy appeared on the front page of the Vancouver Sun.

As a schoolboy, he remembers a teacher explaining the etymology of "breakfast." The simple explanation of breaking, or interrupting, a fast sparked a lifelong interest in the origins of words. As a student, he also began compiling lists of such things as the rivers of Australia, or the prime ministers of Hungary.

"One of these days, Charlie," his father said, "you should make a list of your lists."

He has spent much of his adult life doing just that.

The inveterate list maker perhaps was seeking order in a world offering anything but. The Davis family had broken up and he only once met his mother. By age 13, he was living with his father in Toronto, where he found work selling *The Globe* at the corner of Queen and Bathurst. His sales pitch to passersby involved a steady patter of slick talk ("almost like speaking in tongues").

Since the neighbourhood included many Poles and Ukrainians, Chuck thought it made business sense to ask one of his fellow sellers the Polish word for newspaper. Only later did he learn the day's poor sales were the result perhaps of his bellowing the Polish word for feces while waving his newspapers.

Father and son lived in boarding houses. By age 17, Chuck had worked 23 jobs. He walked past a Canadian Army recruitment office one day and decided on a whim to enlist. The Korean War was on and he figured he would get a chance to see the world. He enlisted on June 1, 1953. A ceasefire was struck eight weeks later.

Private Davis of the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry was eventually dispatched to West Germany. A call for announcer tryouts for Radio Canadian Army Europe (CAE) attracted more than 600 applicants once it became known the duty would be much easier than that of an ordinary grunt. Told he sounded like an announcer, Mr. Davis thought he'd give radio a try.

Blessed with a mellifluous voice, he instead adopted the stentorian tones of a newsreel announcer at the audition.

"The United Nations today paid tribute to Canada," he boomed.

Afterward in the waiting room, he asked a fellow from his unit to critique the performance.

"Hey, Fred, how was that?"

"Kinda loud," was the reply.

Fred Straw, who had begun his radio career as a teenager at Prince George, would join Mr. Davis as an announcer for CAE.

On his discharge, Mr. Davis was hired by CJKL in Kirkland Lake, Ont., part of Roy Thomson's chain. He was later posted to a satellite station at New Liskeard. It was the first of many moves in a peripatetic career. with stops at Kingston (CKWS) and Kitchener (CKCR) in Ontario, Victoria (CJVI) and Prince Rupert (CFPR) in British Columbia. He would eventually accumulate an alphabet-soup of broadcasting credits -- CBU, CFUN, CKWX, CJJC, CJOR in radio; CHEK, CBUT, CKVU and CHAN in television.

Over the years, he has also written more than a dozen books, including histories of North Vancouver and Port Coquitlam, as well as of the Orpheum Theatre and radio station CKNW.

The Vancouver Book was such a hit it became the second-most stolen book from the library, after Hitler's Mein Kampf. [When Mr. Davis announced a follow-up work, the newspaper columnist Denny Boyd said, "Good thing the other fellow isn't writing a sequel."] The Greater Vancouver Book was a monumental reference work for which Mr. Davis enticed dozens of the city's reporters to write brief chapters. (My own contributions included entries on taxis, baseball and the Ubysey student newspaper.) The encyclopedia won the City of Vancouver Book Award, even though it also left ill feeling among some contributors and debtors.

For his magnum opus, Mr. Davis is handling the writing himself. He is an amiable presence at the archives and the downtown library. Much material has been posted online at <http://www.vancouverhistory.ca>, where you can learn such things as the Gastown Steam Clock has never operated by steam; or that an embarrassed welder insisted on being screened from public view while repairing damage to a naked figure in the statuary group, The Family; or that the first man appointed to fire the Nine O'Clock Gun died on March 1, 1928, aptly enough at about 9 o'clock in the evening.

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