

Shuswap's famous reclusive artist

A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

There was a large crowd of people enjoying the celebrations in Seymour Arm on August 5<sup>th</sup> to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Collings mansion, hosted by the property's owner, geologist John Rivette. Many of those involved dressed up in pioneer outfits for the fun occasion that included live music, games, gold panning, cake and displays. As well, the public had an opportunity to tour through the well preserved home built by one of the Shuswap's most famous artists, Charles John Collings.

Born in Devonshire, England in 1848, Collings received some training in London, but he was primarily a self-taught watercolour artist. He worked for 20 years in a solicitor's office before deciding to pursue art more seriously. In the early 1900s, he began exhibiting landscapes in London galleries. But although Collings won praise from the critics, his work was considered similar in style to another well-known artist named J. M. W. Turner; which infuriated him and led to his withdrawal from the city and to eventually decide to immigrate to Canada with his wife, Melora who was a concert pianist and their two teenage sons, Carl and Guy.

Landing in Sicamous, the family first travelled to Kelowna. But the dry, sparsely wooded Okanagan hillsides did not appeal to Collings and he returned to the Sicamous where he met an agent of the Seymour Arm Fruit Lands Ltd. who took him by boat to visit the new community. Collings liked what he saw and purchased the property. He and his sons immediately began building their home, as they quickly learned homesteading skills from books and other local homesteaders. While Collings focused on constructing the fireplace and chimney, his sons framed up the small house around it which they moved into from their tent on Christmas day.

During the following two decades, the Collings family settled comfortably into pioneer life as they developed their property into an English style estate, complete with their Tudor mansion, formal gardens, cultured dinner parties and piano concerts. Collings continued to provide income through his paintings, which were sold primarily through the Carroll Gallery in London. Meanwhile, his sons worked in logging and construction, kept bees, smoked salmon, hunted for wild game and for a short time even operated a small fruit cannery under the name Seymour Arm Brand. Carl became adept at photography and Guy was a skilled cabinet maker and constructed most of the furniture for their estate.

Collings often travelled to the Rockies, where he climbed with the English Alpine Club and painted the magnificent mountain landscapes. These dramatic paintings were hailed as outstanding and his romantic retirement from civilization earned him the title, "Recluse of the Rockies." He developed a unique technique that involved soaking the paper for days and then applying the pigments directly to the paper, allowing the colours to flow and bleed into the paper to create forms and hues of great beauty. His

impressionistic style was influenced somewhat by his love of oriental art, as some of his most treasured possessions were antique Japanese paintings and woodcuts.

As with most of the early Shuswap Lake settlers, transportation was primarily by steamers and smaller boats. Consequently, winters would often present challenges especially when ice prevented boats from reaching Seymour Arm. Often the boats from Sicamous would drop off supplies in Albas where it was transferred to pony sled equipped with long poles that offered some protection if the load slipped through thin ice.

When a load of records did not arrive as planned in the winter of 1929, Guy decided to head to Sicamous on his bicycle to get the records desired by his father who was ill. Nearing his goal he encountered thin ice and fell through. Somehow, he managed to crawl out of the hole and run the remaining four miles to Sicamous with his clothes frozen to his body. The next morning he headed home on skates with the records on a sleigh, stopping by the hole to recover his bicycle.

Collings passed away in 1931 and his wife followed him in 1936. His sons never married, but continued to live on the estate. Carl was sickly and died young in 1950 while Guy lived until 1976. In his later years, Guy opened the estate to the public and gave historical tours. He also attempted to convince the provincial government to purchase the property and operate it as a museum and gallery. Paintings by Collings can be found in art galleries around the world, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Royal Academy in London and the Whyte Museum of the Rockies.