

TITLE: **WEST END STORIES**

by Aaron Chapman

Voice of Aaron Chapman: Welcome back to the West End Car Free Storytellers series and segment 4 - this one with me, I'm Aaron Chapman an author and historian in Vancouver with 4 books on the history of the city. I'm currently working on a new book that deals with some of the underbelly of the history of the West End. Oh and by the way, to the listener I'll say the following story may be a little racy for the younger listener. Kids if you're listening with your parents this could get embarrassing! You may want to sit this out until you're 19+.

Our trip starts at Davie and Jervis, as we head west down the hill in the direction of Denman Street. Walking or biking one's way down this part of Davie Street, to me is, well—there's no better gateway and welcome to the West End. As you head down this slope of Davie, past Nicola Street, and past Cardero, on a pleasant day you'll see a wedge of English Bay come into view, that greets you at the bottom of the hill, like a friend who's arrived early, waiting to meet you.

But it's the path on our way down those tree lined streets, past some of the 1950s & 60s-era smaller apartment buildings which are still found here, that make this stretch of Davie one of the most consistently enjoyable strolls to take—especially in the early evening, as do so many of the sides-street's around this neighbourhood are as well.

Take a note of the old Gabriola mansion to your right at the north side 1500 block of Davie for later. In fact, give yourself a little time to take it all in. Like other areas of the city, it's likely to change in the coming years as the West End grows and changes—as it always has—and the sight of new larger residential towers replace the older ones, and become more common.

You should be coming up to the corner of Davie & Bidwell, and you'll soon spot the little yellow building to the left that's currently the home to a JJ Bean coffee shop location. Now might be a good time for an early pause, grab a coffee if you need one. It's also a good time to stop and talk about one of the most notorious and mythologized places in the West End—that little yellow building, where the truth is really more valuable than fiction.

[music in background: Limehouse Blues - by Ambrose And His Orchestra....]

Because if there was a list of most notorious spots in the West End that's had a wild reputation, Maxines at 1215 Bidwell must surely be at the top of that list. It was originally built in 1936, and standing here we can at least still appreciate the preserved front facade of the old Spanish Mission Revival-style that was Maxines. But while the larger building that was behind this was demolished in 2009, the scandalous rumours of what happened there have long managed to remain.

This was once the home to Maxine's Beauty School, run by Maxine E. MacGilvray. MacGilvray had originally sold beauty products, giving talks on skin care at Spencer's Department Store in the years before the First World War. By all accounts, she had quite a following, and also owned two hair salons which granted thousands of Vancouver women the chance to walk in as a plain Jane, and walk out, looking like Clara Bow.

The 1920s were a time of liberation for women across North America. Flappers smoked in public, danced the new dances, and were more sexually liberated than the generation before. Women were given the right to vote in British Columbia in 1917, two years before their American sisters were constitutionally permitted to.

But Maxine MacGilvray stood out among the crowd. She was a particularly enterprising business woman. In the 1920s, she opened another salon at the bottom floor of a house at 1211 Bidwell, and founded “Maxine’s College of Beauty Culture” in the house next door. There, young women attended as students, learning all the hairstyle and makeup techniques that were popular at the time. Back when young women “bobbed” their hair, and shortened their long Victorian skirts to the knee, which might have been considered just-too-much altogether in their mother’s time.

But there were more than just hemlines changing back then. Vancouver as itself was changing.
[music fades...]

At the beginning of the 1920s the population of greater Vancouver was 175,000 people. Within ten years that had grown to nearly 250,000, with the West End being one of the prime locations for such residential growth.

For Maxine, business and life could have never been better. By 1931, she had consolidated her other salons to the Bidwell Street building, and hired architect Thomas B. McArravy, to design a brand new complex to replace the original school.

MacGilvray showed her sense of taste once again. The style of the building from which we can still enjoy in the front facade of today was much talked about and admired in the west end when it opened in 1936. And Maxine’s growing local success and even celebrity branded her with a new, sophisticated moniker of “Madam Maxine” that fit with the style of marketing in the cosmetics world, and she was featured in advertisements for the school.



Maxine’s Beauty School Class of 1936 Credit: CVA 99-4476

With 150 students at its peak, it was believed that Maxine's was perhaps the largest beauty school in Canada, with students attending from all over the country, and the United States.

When the Second World War came, Maxine decided to close the school in 1942, and converted the building into a small hotel. It continued as such well into the 1980s, when it became a Fogg & Sudds restaurant chain location, then Mescaleros Cantina, then Balthazar restaurant, and finally a cabaret called Maxine's Hideaway - where the operators in the early 2000s played up what they either believed to created Maxine's steamy and sordid hidden past, which just happened to fit perfectly well as a setting for the burlesque shows they produced here.

[suspenseful music in background]

For it was rumoured there was a long secret tunnel that connected the the building down to English Bay, where rum runners during prohibition times could smuggle alcohol to and from Maxine's—which only operated under as the cover a Beauty School, but was in fact it was said one of the largest brothels in the city.

There was indeed even an apparent second tunnel, lined in red-velvet that connected Maxine's to the famed Gabriola Mansion, that you'll remember we passed earlier at the 1500 block of Davie. The mansion was home to Benjamin Rogers, the BC sugar baron, and one of the wealthiest men in the city. There, Rogers, it was said, held court with a steady stream of booze and young women to satisfy his libidinous appetites late into the night. There were even evenings when Rogers apparently stalked the tunnels to Maxine's alone, like a ravenous wolf only to take one of the women offered to him, before he crept back to his lair and the sun rose the next day.

There have even been claims made that actor Errol Flynn, who legendarily died in Vancouver, had in fact not died while attending an impromptu party at a nearby west end apartment in 1959, but in fact had expired in action at one the fabled orgies at Maxine's, with his body secretly and hastily spirited to the apartment that ambulance, police and the press officially attended to, because the secrets could never be revealed about Maxine's and the tunnels. Legend even has it, that even Maxine herself was murdered there, and even decades afterwards her spirit haunted the building in ghostly torment late at night.
[music fades out]

The problem is—despite many local newspapers and magazines who cited or alluded to all these Wicked, Wicked ways, or the stories that circulated that a friend-of-a-friends Grandfather had once been in the tunnels, well might be fun to listen to or imagine— none of them are true.

As much the Brothel/Smuggling operation has been mythologized, the details upon real scrutiny never really added up. As my friend historian John Atkin has noted, “apart from the absurdity of the idea itself, the elevation change between Gabriola, and Maxine's, would have made the proposition an incredibly expensive engineering feat. More significantly, it's forgotten that Maxine's was built in 1936, long after prohibition ended in British Columbia, and three years after it was repealed south of the border. So there was no need for any bootlegging operation let alone tunnels in the building. And the idea that the tunnel network was first used by Rogers to access the bordello at his leisure? Atkin reminds us is further absurd, because Rogers died in 1918.

So how did these rumours actually begin? Is there any truth to them? Almost all seem to appear around the time that the operators of Balthazar and Maxine's Hideaway took over the building in the early 2000s, perhaps in an effort to spice up their venue, and match the sizzle of their burlesque shows they produced

at the cabaret. There's nothing so vividly told as fish stories told by nightclub people, after hours at the bar.

The rumours that Maxines was in fact a brothel perhaps partly stem from the name "Madam Maxine" which to those decades later sounded like a completely different sort of Madam. Another suggestion that some of the students at Maxines had a secret past, comes from another thread. During the years of the Beauty School, Judge Helen McGill, British Columbia's first woman Judge often contacted Maxine over a girl who had "gone wrong" and found herself in front of Judge McGill's court. Arrangements were apparently not uncommonly made with such a girl being admitted to the school, where many of these women were trained and went on to become independent and successful salon workers and owners themselves.

The rumours that surround Maxine and persist to this day perhaps tell us something more about the danger in incorrectly mythologizing our city.

It's often dismissively said that because Vancouver is such a young city, there's no history here. Now, if you're like me, you don't believe that at all. But it does show how perhaps we sometimes fail to connect with our own history, and we fail to appreciate what's right there before us. How much do we misinterpret or are we distracted by details of a location, a figure, and idea, or a neighbourhood—when the real history might be far more valuable, and fascinating.

Because Maxine McGillvray should be remembered here as a pioneering local businesswoman, in a town that had in many ways just left its pioneering days. She is certainly someone in our city history who deserves better and more fitting recognition than she's been given.

Oh, and as for Maxine being murdered? By all accounts she died quietly and peacefully in 1951.

And in reality, the truth was stranger and wilder than fiction at Maxines!—with Maxines Hotel being the background to one of the great true crime stories of the century. In 1960 Adolf Coors III, the heir to the Coors beer empire was killed in Colorado in a botched kidnapping attempt by Joseph Corbett Jr. After the murder investigation, FBI commissioner J. Edgar Hoover named him Public Enemy No 1. The manhunt was the largest in North America since the Lindberg kidnapping, with Corbett becoming the most hunted man in America since John Dillinger.

But Corbett had in fact fled to Canada, making stops in Toronto and Winnipeg before arriving here in Vancouver's west end and checking into, you guessed it, Maxines Hotel. The law was never far behind on Corbett's trail. And eight months after the murder of Adolf Coors, a squad of Vancouver police in unmarked cars joined by a squad of newly-arrived FBI agents acting on a tip, swarmed Maxines Hotel on October 25th 1960, and arrested Corbett. He was extradited back to the United States where he was found guilty and spent 18 years in prison.

The incident was probably the biggest thing that had happened to the West End since, well, just twelve months earlier, when Errol Flynn died in Vancouver. For a while, the West End of Vancouver to the rest of the world seemed rife with wild stories of international celebrities and true crime intrigue. Oh, and dear Errol died not in one of Maxines non-existent tunnels, but at a party at an apartment at 1310 Burnaby Street. But that, as they say, is another story.

[suspenseful music in background]

Well I feel a little bad letting the air out of the balloon for you about Maxines. But don't worry, there's still some mystery to the old girl. There *are* long standing accounts from those who lived or worked in the building over the decades from the Beauty School, to later Hotel days, that Maxine's was haunted!

George Pappajohn who owned Maxines hotel in the 70s when interviewed by the Vancouver Sun, stated he'd lived in the building himself for years until ghosts who wandered its halls became simply too much for him. "I don't believe in the supernatural", Pappajohn told The Sun in 1976 "but there were a lot of things I couldn't explain and gave up."

But it didn't sound like humans had the most to worry. Pappajohn stated that no cat was ever able to live in the building, and that tenants who moved into the furnished apartments in the hotel found their pets disappeared after the first night, their cats nine lives presumably all gone in one evening, and never to return. The old timers in the neighbourhood still say, that on certain nights, you can hear a sound of mewling cats coming from somewhere within the building

[music out]

OK, ok I made that last line up. See how easy it is to start a rumour and make up history? Well, I hope those ghosts at Maxines don't follow us for it, and we'll stick to the truth.

Moving ahead, we're coming to about the end of this segment, as we approach the intersection of Davie and Denman. In the spring and summer there's no finer spot around here to feel like you're on a sub tropical vacation. With the Palm trees by Morton Park where the Laughing Statues smile at you, or at least with you. It's awfully hard not to relax here, as the wind comes off the beach.

I don't know of another place quite like it in Canada. Even in the rainiest days in autumn, or a frosty day in winter, it's nothing like the fiercely subzero climate that the rest of the country endures. There are those thousands of kilometres away in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal who profess pity for Vancouverites, picturing us buffeted by gales of rain and constantly darkened skies, but we know better, and on even a mild day, this is our secret.

[jazzy piano music in background]

Thanks for spending a few blocks with me in the West End. I feel like a cocktail, and I think I'll run over to the Sylvia Hotel—Vancouver's first cocktail lounge that opened in 1954. Maybe I'll see you there? It's been a pleasure being in your brain for a few minutes. I like what you've done with the place! Oh and I didn't even look in that drawer there where you keep the...well you know what. I'm Aaron Chapman and you can find me at www.chapman.net or just somewhere around the city. Thanks for listening!

[music fades out...]