

THE FEATURES PAGE

Getting old feels good in

Golden Ager's' utopia

They're well bred, well fixed, well behaved,

well . . . Victoria loves them



Isabel MacRae and father Alexander, 87: the number of elderly affects familiar community values and acceptable standards.

BY BARBARA YAFFE

VICTORIA
TRAFFIC SIGNALS here are among the slowest in Canada and motorists drive below the speed limit as a matter of course.

Nobody honks. Nobody tailgates. Buses idle patiently at their stops as each passenger climbs aboard and settles leisurely into a seat. Sidewalks, lined with neat cedar-wood benches, are sloped at intersections to eliminate curbs.

This is a city for old people. God's waiting room, as it has been dubbed by local residents. St. Petersburg North.

It's Florida, with medicare, for Canada's retired. Miami, but better: situated on the 48th parallel Victoria enjoys a Mediterranean climate and a sparkling view of the Pacific Ocean. Rarely does it get much warmer than about 27 degrees Celsius or drop below freezing in winter. Rainfall amounts to about 27 inches a year — less than half what Vancouver gets just across Georgia Strait.

Crocuses start in January; daffodils in February; Japanese cherry and plum trees burst forth with bright pink blossoms in March; April brings azaleas and roses bloom in June. White dogwood blossoms are ready to pop about now and they'll flower again in autumn.

And that's why the people have come here.

One in four or five of Victoria's 62,500 residents is over 65 (and of these, 80 are more than 95.) Other cities of similar size — Dartmouth, Kingston, Guelph, for example — count less than one in 10 over 65.

Who are these silver-haired folk? A scant 4 per cent were born in Victoria and just over half are of British origin. Two-thirds moved here from other parts of British Columbia and the Prairies after retiring from professional and managerial jobs. Ontario and Quebec used to be home for nearly 20 per cent, and a small number bid goodbye to the Atlantic provinces and the United States.

Their mobility at this stage of their lives indicates the healthy state of their finances. Solid middle-class people with conservative values, many have bought houses and condominiums. For the most part, they live comfortably in a city that appears to bend over backwards to do their bidding.

And why not? They're as important to the local economy as the 18,000-member provincial civil service based here. The retirement industry, as it's termed somewhat callously by regional planners, "provides the same payroll as a shipyard employing 6,800 men and exporting all its production."

Moreover, old people don't pollute.

A study conducted by regional planners in 1969, but still considered relevant, says the elderly bring into local circulation fresh funds from pensions and investments.

This money — in the form of federal transfer payments, civil service, military and private pension schemes and general investments — is rock solid, based on the health of the Canadian economy as a whole. It carries none of the risk of investment based on local enterprise or subject to the fortunes of a single region's economy.

Bankers love the old folks and credit ratings in the region are more stable than elsewhere, according to the study. The money arrives in steady amounts and bolsters the city's retail and service industries.

Victorians maintain that, per capita, there are more banks, credit

unions and trust companies than anywhere else in the country.

Local merchants regularly advertise discounts of between 10 and 30 per cent for the over-65 community. "Golden Age Perm Special — \$10 off the cost of your perm at The Natural Look Hair Design," reads a recent advertisement in a Victoria daily. A bookstore on downtown Government Street displays in its window *On Death and Dying*, and *To Live Until We Say Goodbye*, both by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Other bestsellers deal with afterlife, spiritualism and yoga. Victoria has an unusually large number of health care workers and medical centres for a city its size.

Nobody mentions it, but Victoria's Yellow Pages suggest there is a lot of business for funeral directors and old age homes (although government estimates show the institutionalized elderly account for only 6 per cent of over-65s, which is similar to national figures). Guelph, with a

population of 60,085, has seven funeral directors, compared to 16 in Victoria, and 10 homes for the elderly, compared to 42 in Victoria.

"The retired person is an ideal person to have come to your community," says Brian Small, manager of the Chamber of Commerce. "The retired have earned their in-

come elsewhere and tend to spend it. They use the least amount of services in the community, and pay school taxes. They don't pose many social problems and they donate their services. Are they good citizens? You better believe it — they're terrific as far as I'm concerned."

Not only do the elderly do their share to prop up the industry-free economy of this immaculate city, but they also bring in tourists and, in business terms, are self-generating. "Over 20 per cent of the present retirement households successfully encourage friends or relatives to retire in the region," the 1969 study says, adding bluntly, "This situation . . . can be linked to corporate capital investment to replace 'depreciated' machinery."

The presence of so many elderly is overwhelming to an outsider. "Grey heads are everywhere," says Isabel MacRae, a former Ontarian now working as a professor of nursing at the University of Victoria and specializing in gerontology.

Community centres have sprung up in recent years to cater to the elderly. Silver Threads Service appeals to older people who live on modest incomes, serving them hot lunches at bargain prices and organizing everything from lip-reading lessons to old-time dancing soirees. New Horizons groups tend to attract a more intellectual type who may have had a profession; they go in for field trips and guest lectures. The Old Age Pensioners Association

gives the bingo crowd its daily fix.

Wealthier elderly reside in the fashionable Oak Bay district. (They've been labelled the "tweed curtain set" because of a symbolic tweed curtain, drawn along Foul Bay Road, which separates them from the more plebian elements in the Victoria community. Oak Bay

Smug and conservative, the place may be the last word in WASP

residents are also known to be "more British than the British.")

The tweed curtain set gathers in its own drawing rooms to discuss wise investments and the good-old-days-when-youngsters-had-manners, as one woman, who describes herself as being on the fringe of the group, put it.

Favorite activities of the elderly tend to be shopping, gardening and visiting, and all are possible year round thanks to the mild climate. But those with money set off in winter for Hawaii and Nevada, even though snow in Victoria is a rarity. "It snowed one day last year, a couple of days before Christmas," Jack Glover, a local resident, recalled. "You wouldn't believe the mess."

The unusually heavy concentration of elderly in a relatively small city has made community values and acceptable standards different from those in places like, say, Guelph, Kingston or Dartmouth.

"So smug, so conservative . . . this is one conservative-minded town," Prof. MacRae said as she sipped coffee and gazed out the window of a mainstreet restaurant. Her comments are direct — the place is the last word in WASP.

A distinct air of the old-fashioned pervades Victoria. Gaslight-style lampposts, cobblestoned sidewalks and restored buildings take strollers back to the nineteenth century. Strict height bylaws prevent modern-style buildings from predominating, Mayor Michael Young poin-

ted out. Relative isolation from the mainland has allowed the city to urbanize more slowly and in a more civilized manner.

High tea with crumpets and Devonshire cream is an afternoon ritual in many restaurants, cord or string is known as "twine" and old greystone churches are everywhere. There's no point in looking for the flavor of continental Europe — no espresso or cappuccino coffee. Just tea, delicious tea.

Shopping is done the British way, each item purchased individually in a separate specialty shop. Most stores are in the centre of town with buses routed to radiate through the city and return to the centre.

Dress is a trifle dowdy, but proper. Quality woollen tweeds, proper hats (no brims), a short strand of pearls and a brooch for the ladies. Elderly men sport handkerchiefs in breast pockets.

The conservatism tends toward parochialism and uniformity, ac-



Some leisurely bridge: come winter and Hawaii calls.

ording to Prof. MacRae. John Duffie, a retired Torontonion who used to enjoy the ethnic bustle of Dundas Street, agreed, saying days go by when he doesn't see a black face.

Victoria has but one synagogue and for months a rabbi could not be found to head its congregation.

The distinct population groupings have affected police services, said Constable Ron Brown of the community services branch of the Victoria Police Force. "What we've got here are newlyweds and nearly dead."

There's little violent crime — one or two armed robberies last year. Indeed, a getaway would be complicated by the requirement of a ferry ride to the mainland which, with travel time to and from the docks, takes a good three hours.

Police here are experienced in dealing with purse snatching and driving home elderly people who get confused about where they live after riding for hours on city buses. Consumer ripoff schemes are also common and tend to affect the elderly.

Const. Brown spent a morning recently chatting with a New Horizons group about ways to protect themselves. (Blow a whistle into the receiver when confronted with an obscene telephone call; keep handy a tape of a barking dog to ward off night prowlers; spill the contents of a purse for thieves who would be unlikely to stoop and scoop up the goodies.) The main message delivered by the constable, who that morning was wearing his holster and gun, was not to be intimidated by policemen.

But for the most part, life in Victoria is quiet, geared to tourism which blends quite nicely with the retirement industry.

The air is pollution-free, freshened by ocean breezes; the pace is slow; the place is peaceful. The quiet is broken only by the cry of seagulls, the blasts of tiny tugboats and great ferries moored in the harbor and the ubiquitous church bell chimes which at 3 p.m. on Sunday afternoons ring out O Canada and at 4, God Save the Queen.

Tuesday: radicals need not apply.