



## Patient Beauty at the Urban Edge

*... A handsome house to lodge a friend,  
A river at my garden's end.*  
Alexander Pope

Is the 'handsome house' at the river-blessed end of Koksilah Road the work of pioneer builder Robert McLay Jr.? Was it his home, and did he build it before or after his other well-known commissions? These are a few of the many questions that have grown out of the restoration of #5241 Koksilah – questions that two years of digging have only answered in part.

David and Ulla Coulson bought the property in the winter of 2007/08 and have been working to restore its buildings and gardens ever since. Understanding the history is key, but it's surprising how few details have surfaced regarding this particular heritage home.

Most - local historians, McLay family descendents, Cowichan 'old timers' believe that the house was built by Robert McLay Jr. as his own residence. The same Robert McLay Jr. that built (acted as general contractor for) the Duncan Garage, the Whittome Building/Odd Fellows Lodge, the Cowichan Merchants Building (both the 1910 original and its 1912 replacement, following fire), the old Hydro building

on Canada Ave., and the Koksilah School House – one of few surviving wood frame buildings attributed to him.

He was talented in maths, entrepreneurial by nature, and capable of a project ambitious in scale and design. He also owned the land that the house stands on, part of the original McLay family farm known as Willow Brook.

Working on the assumption that McLay may have built the home around the time of his marriage, in January of 1911, David Coulson has elected to reinforce the structure and restore the character details before it's too late. After all, the place looks strong enough to withstand another hundred years – given the right care.

"Everything here is solid fir, knot-free. They even used premium grade fir flooring on the second storey," Coulson says. "And the wainscoting is gorgeous – 1x24 inch wide through the Grand Room and 1x18 inch in the rest of the house."

One of the most striking features inside the 2,700 square foot home is the stone fireplace in the so-called Grand Room on the main floor. The mantel is four inch thick granite – wide enough to walk on. From

Koksilah Road, you can glimpse between the cedar and maple trees the patient beauty of the river stone porte cochere, chimney, and base surrounding the house. Tight vertical rows of evenly-sized stones at each corner with a playful herringbone pattern from edge to edge. This masonry is unique, even if we consider century-old Victoria homes into the equation.

In her 1975 book entitled *And So They Came to Cowichan*, Margaret Bishop (Robert McLay's niece) recalls with nostalgia the wild hazelnuts, gooseberries, and mock orange that grew at Eagle Heights (Koksilah). But she leaves no record of her uncle's building projects at Willow Brook, only noting that he was "a very successful building contractor" and that he may have helped his sister, Robina Boal, develop a parcel of the family farm after she and her husband Jim quit proprietorship of the Koksilah Hotel (sometime after 1906).

So far, Coulson has completed: reinforcement of the pillars and foundation beneath the front porch, sensitive rebuild of damaged bargeboards and other wood details, stripping and repainting the exterior to era-appropriate colours, reveal and restoration of fir flooring throughout, modern upgrades to washrooms and water



photo: Gary McKinstry

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closets that preserve the heritage floor plan exactly, cleaning and re-shellacking of main floor wood paneling, and the return of the basement stair entry to its original position (presumably moved to accommodate ground floor suites during its history as a multi-residence). Much remains to be done, but already the house has regained some of its special patina.

Situated on the border of Duncan's residential, commercial, and light industrial areas, the McLay House overlooks a progressive community of live and work spaces – a pioneering project to create affordable housing, substantial green space, and a home for viable business on the urban edge, at the garden's end.

*In their efforts to restore this building as closely as possible to its original appearance, the Coulson family would greatly appreciate assistance from the community in the form of histories, anecdotes, documents or photographs concerning Robert McLay Jr., the house at #5241 Koksilah, or tradesmen that may have contributed their talents to its original design. Please contact David Coulson at [coulsondesign@shaw.ca](mailto:coulsondesign@shaw.ca).*



Erin Morgan Coulson's labour of love is Green Monkey Writing Services, an entrepreneurial move inspired by her father. All images of McLay House taken by David Coulson. Opposite Page; McLay House from drive. Front of house. View from Porch.

Stone Fireplace from Grand Room.

## The Silver Sisters Show and Sale

November 19-20, 2010  
Leaf & Petal Flower Shop  
101 Station Street  
Downtown Duncan

With over half a century of combined fascination with fire and metal, three local women silversmiths, Heather A. Hamilton, Michele Heath, and Morgan Saddington, have come together in their first combined show and sale to display the endless possibilities of jewelry designs in sterling silver and stone. Specializing in the various methods of incorporating semi-precious gems in her work, Michele creates unique pieces with stunning stones from all over the world. Morgan is fascinated by the fluidity and movement of wearable chains. And with hammer in hand, Heather is drawn towards three-dimensional sculptural forms. In time for the holiday season, treat yourself to a visual delight of stunning, unique, and often one-of-a-kind, sterling silver jewelry amid the beautiful floral designs with the Leaf & Petal Flower Shop.



## Holiday Theatre



Chemainus Theatre Festival is proud to present the most-loved ghost story of all time, A Christmas Carol. Written by Charles Dickens, and adapted by Jeremy Tow, this lovely holiday treat will thrill your senses. Full of carols and holiday cheer, the immortal characters tell the tale of Ebenezer Scrooge and his encounters with the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, coming together to illustrate the true meaning of the holiday season. A show for the entire family to enjoy!  
*A Christmas Carol runs November 11 to January 8. You can attend a performance to A Christmas Carol from \$39 to \$46 (plus taxes); children 12 and under are 1/2 price. Show days: Wed thru Sun. Show times 8 pm & 2 pm.*



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