

WHERE MEMORY LIVES

By **MATT CAVERS**

Sunshine Coast Museum & Archives

If you drop by the museum in Gibsons, the first thing you'll see as you enter the downstairs gallery is a wooden rowboat. It's a traditional, carvel-hulled boat, five metres long, painted white on the outside and green on the inside. Seventy-five years ago its former owner constructed it by hand from local timbers – red cedar for the planks, yellow cedar for the ribs. It shows the wear of years of hard use, but it's in good shape otherwise.

What stories live in an inanimate object like a boat? Here's one. That boat was built by a gentleman by the name of Hubert Evans, author of *Mist on the River*, *O Time in Your Flight*, and countless other pieces of fiction and non-fiction. He built it at his Roberts Creek home in 1934, and as the Depression wore on, he used it to troll for salmon to supplement his writer's income. More a believer in a satisfying life than fame and a full bank account, Hubert Evans was content to balance storytelling with manual work that tired the body but not the mind.

That boat is a trace of a wise writer's way of life, and it's a symbol of a philosophy I admire, held by a man who once lived just down the road. And I think that says something about a museum's role in a changing community: it's where we keep stories that mean something to us; it's where memory lives. We keep artifacts here not just because they're interesting in themselves, but also because they remind us that there was a Sunshine Coast before we got here.

Almost fifty years ago, a schoolteacher and amateur historian named Lester Peterson opened Gibsons' first museum – in his basement. Gibsons was really a small town in the 1960s, and in keeping with that, the basement door was always left unlocked.

"We'd be having dinner, and we'd hear voices from down below," his son Dale told me. "If [Peterson] was available he'd go down there and chat."

The displays were rudimentary, with rough, typewritten artifact labels, but the artifacts were precious: tools and treasures from local pioneer families who couldn't use them anymore, First Nations artifacts given by Sechelt people with whom Peterson had built up a rapport.

The basement museum was built out of Peterson's lifelong passion for the stories of his hometown. Coming to Gibsons as a young child in 1923, Peterson grew up among the area's earliest settler families. These people and their way of life left their mark on him: "He grew up to respect and admire the original settlers," said Dale. "It wasn't like he wanted to live in the past, but the past was fascinating – it was real." The past, in 1960s Gibsons, was also vulnerable. Most pioneers didn't preserve their lives with pen and paper – they were too busy wielding other tools. As the first generations of Gibsons settlers disappeared, so did their stories.



Lester R. Peterson (1917-1991), teacher, author, historian, and museum founder.

And Peterson concluded his best-known book, *The Gibson's Landing Story*, with a look ahead: "Just as George Gibson, as he died, could hardly have visualized the village grown to its present stature in fifty years, so we today can have little perception of how the maturing communities will look fifty years from now." Well, that was nearly fifty years ago. Sure enough, the Coast has been through a lot since that book came out, but the biggest change can be boiled down to two words: more people. People have come to the Sunshine Coast from all over the place, for all sorts of different reasons. Many of the pioneer families familiar to Lester Peterson

are still represented on the Coast, but they now share a place with thousands of recent arrivals. Telling the story of the Sunshine Coast nowadays is a bigger and more ambitious project, since there are more stories to tell.

Back to today's museum, where scores of Peterson's original acquisitions are on display upstairs, silently telling of a way of life that had already vanished when they found their way into that basement on Abbs. In 2009 the plows and axes, cross-cut saws and butter churns are even farther removed from the everyday. Every now and then a visitor tells me that their great-grandfather used a saw just like the one on display, or that their great-grandmother washed clothes with a washboard, and so on. But there are others, like me, who inherited no memory of clearing land, blasting stumps, and scratching a hard subsistence from sandy soil. My own forebears did that so long ago that those tools are foreign to me. What's more, I'm the first of my family to live on the Sunshine Coast, and my past here goes back only half a decade. There are lots of other people like me who've come here in search of a good place to call home, and I wouldn't be surprised if many of them haven't ever considered visiting our museum – why should they, if the displays tell of people long departed and a pioneer life they'll never live?

Remember the boat? It was built seventy years before I moved here, but it helps me begin to understand what it is to live in a place that existed long before I arrived. It's true that I'll probably never build a boat like it, and that I've never caught a fish in my adult life, despite my best efforts. But I feel like that boat gives my imagination a place to take root. Far back, in the past of this place, lived someone with whom I feel admiration and maybe some kinship. That helps me to feel like I really live here. Maybe that's what Lester Peterson intended. **CL**

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Hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 10:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.