

Fraser River Heritage Park

7494 Mary Street
Mission, British Columbia

Description

The Fraser River Heritage Park is a large park located on the former site of St. Mary's Indian Residential School in Mission, British Columbia. The park has a panoramic view of the Fraser River Valley and Mount Baker. It is predominantly a large open space with mature trees, paths, benches, newer wooden structures, a restaurant and administration building. Special features of the park are the foundations of the school buildings, the original orchard, the heritage plants in the rhododendron and rose gardens, and the reconstructed Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Heritage Values

The Fraser River Heritage Park is valued for its historic, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic significance.

Historic

The Fraser River Heritage Park has a strong historic relationship to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who came as missionaries to offer a Christian influence and to educate the children of Native people. St. Mary's Mission, founded by Father Leon Fouquet, was constructed between 1882 and 1885. A girls' school was added in 1868 and staffed by the Sisters of St. Ann. The buildings were located closer to the Fraser River from 1863 - 1882, but the Mission had to relocate to the upper bench land to accommodate construction of the CPR.

The park is also associated with Bishop Durieu, who presided over the Easter retreats in the 1870s and oversaw the construction of the Grotto and blessed it at its consecration in 1892.

St. Mary's Mission is also remembered for its vital part in the flood relief of May/June 1948, when it provided a home to hundreds of displaced farm animals. Stories are still told of how over 200 cows were milked daily during this period.

At the northern boundary of the park is the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, a reconstruction of the original structure which was consecrated in 1894. It was the first Marian shrine built in B.C. and is attributed to Bishop D'Herbomez of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This six-sided cupola is topped by a dome and a white cross and was a landmark for travelers. The shrine had been restored in 1954, then was demolished in 1965. It was reconstructed in 1996 thanks to a large community effort, the Knights of Columbus and the Mission Heritage Association.

The Mission Heritage Association was founded in 1980 with the mandate to preserve the cultural heritage of Mission and, in particular, the park site. Under the leadership of the group's first president, Norma Locke Kenney, the Association lobbied the provincial government for the creation of the Fraser River Heritage Park in 1986.

Cultural

The Park preserves the roots of our many cultures and of the settlement of the community. The physical remains of the residential school buildings are significant for reminding visitors of the relationship between early Christian groups and aboriginal

people from their first encounters to the changing attitudes of the 1960s. The survival of the site in its entirety provides a common ground for cultural dialogue and for healing. In 2001, the Mission Indian Friendship Centre Society erected a magnificent post and beam structure, the St. Mary's Memorial to continue the process of reconciliation.

The park is a destination for family occasions, picnics, dog walking, sports, and kite flying, and hosts community celebrations, music concerts and festivals. It is a "memory place" with benches, plaques, and scrolls that honour people involved in their community.

The park continues to be a gathering place and a landmark. It embodies the seed of Mission's existence and forms the core of the community that grew around it. St. Mary's Mission has been an integral part of the community even before the founding of Mission City. The mission gives Mission its sense of time and place.

Spiritual

The park is significant for being a focal point of religious activity for European and Native people for over 140 years. The Easter pilgrimage took place from 1882 and continued through till 1961 and from 1997 to the present day as a celebration in August. The Passion Play drew crowds of thousands. People continue to come here for the strong spiritual feelings and reconnection to a larger world and purpose.

Aesthetic

The park is a beautiful place with open spaces, mature deciduous trees, rhododendron and rose gardens, plus the spectacular view of the Fraser Valley and Mount Baker beyond.

Character-defining Elements

Natural elements such as

- wide open space
- mature deciduous trees planted by the priests, brothers and students
- mature chestnut trees planted in the 1920s
- an orchard on the north slope
- large lonely rocks
- D'Herbomez Creek
- the spectacular view of the Fraser Valley and distant mountains.

Man-made elements such as:

- the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes
- the foundations of the residential school buildings
- the meandering pathways and benches
- the original cast iron bell from the Mission that was donated by the Sto:lo people
- 'Norma Kenney House' named in honour of the founder and first president of the Mission Heritage Association.