

**PRESENTATION TO VANCOUVER HISTORICAL SOCIETY
on 26th January, 2012**

My subject tonight is Commercial Drive. I've happily been a resident there for more than twenty years and a devoted admirer of the place for almost thirty. As I am sure everyone here knows, the Drive (as it has been known at least since the early 1930s) is today a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-sexual neighbourhood full of restaurants and coffee shops that spill out onto the sidewalk even in the rain.

But tonight's talk is of a different time; a time before even the Italians were on the Drive in any numbers.

I will be concentrating tonight on the efforts made by local individuals and groups between 1936 and 1940 to rescue and re-invent what was then a failing Commercial Drive suburb and to link it firmly once and for all to the growing city of Vancouver and to the wider world of retail development.

The story of Charles Smith and the First Avenue Viaduct is the veritable creation story of the modern Drive, a story without which East Vancouver's history would have been markedly different.

At the same time, Louis Toban and his Reliable Drugs chain was building a modern retail store empire with its headquarters at Third and Commercial. And he encouraged the Drive's other merchants to follow and adapt to the revolutionary changes that were affecting retail in the 1930s and 1940s.

But before that, we need to trip lightly through the early years to set the scene.

As Vancouver became settled in the 1870s and 1880s, the hills east of the False Creek flats -- the hills with the 'grand view' of the growing city --

remained attractive primarily due to their availability for logging. The loggers built 'skid roads' through the woods to service their waterfront operations with the two main 'skids' running roughly along the present-day paths of Commercial and Victoria Drives below Hasting Street down which they disgorged huge trees into Cedar Cove.

Even though Grandview had been pre-empted in 1871, portioned off in various sales throughout the 1880s, and had been included in Vancouver's city limits at the city's incorporation in 1886, it had never been settled; and it seemed far from obvious that this high ground would figure prominently in Vancouver's growth. However, in 1890 the land owners of Vancouver and New Westminster -- boosted by their respective mayors and financial elites -- decided it had become prudent to link the two cities by means of an electric interurban railroad; and that changed everything.

No-one was fooled that this was anything other than an effort to enhance real estate values along the chosen route, but this was a period when the conjoining of public need and private profit was a vital element in the breaking of new ground.

The route chosen by the engineers left Vancouver heading east along Venables Street and then swung south along the westernmost of the skid roads before turning off on its run down to New Westminster. This westernmost skid-road along which the first streetcar clattered in the fall of 1891 had been cleared the year before to create a path to Buffalo Park, the land for which had been donated by E.J. Clark in 1889. The street was then known, therefore, as Park Drive.

A few early pioneers built small houses just off the right-of-way in the 1890s, but this early rush to settle Grandview's hills had hardly even begun when it was stopped in its tracks by the global economic downturn that reached British

Columbia in the mid-1890s. Vancouver's frantic pattern of growth was checked for much of the decade, and the concept of Grandview as a residential suburb almost disappeared from local consciousness. In those years, the shallow grades of Mount Pleasant, just across the Westminster Avenue Bridge from downtown Vancouver, proved easier to develop than the rough ground of Grandview.

Many years later, in an interview with Major Matthews, former Mayor Thomas Neelands claimed that there was no such place as Grandview in 1901, and Major Matthews himself described Park Drive as running through a clearing at that time. But that was soon to change.

Local landowners had been busy lobbying, and by 1903 a series of unpaved north-south streets -- Clark Drive, Commercial Drive, Victoria Drive -- had been linked east-west for a few blocks by Kitchener and Grant Streets and by First Avenue. Chain gangs from the Powell Street jail then built 2nd and 3rd avenues and gradually, more and more houses dotted the clearing. By the end of 1907, with a proliferation of newspaper ads from realtors offering attractive deals, Grandview had become an integral part of Vancouver's renewed rush for growth.

Several gentlemen were early boosters for Grandview and Park Drive. These included Edward Odium, world-class scientist, highly opinionated writer on all topics, and an aggressive realtor; George McSpadden, an Irishman, the City's first building inspector, census-taker and military enthusiast; and John J. Miller, an Australian real estate magnate who worked hard to look exactly like King Edward VII, and who later invented the PNE.

These three along with a small group of other wealthy landowners built huge turreted mansions for themselves in the blocks just east of the Drive. And they briefly made a play for Grandview as a genteel up-market alternative to an

increasingly stuffy West End for the city's elite. But the financial uncertainties which followed the collapse of the real estate boom in 1912, made many of the larger homes difficult to maintain. McSpadden had moved to Kerrisdale by the end of the Great War, John Miller's 'Kurrajong' would eventually be converted into the Glen Hospital, and other fine houses would be chopped up into apartments, with large lots subdivided and in-filled with decidedly more modest housing.

This period has been described as one in which "Grandview seemed to have slumped." But the "slump" was more apparent than real; in fact the district merely continued on its way slowly filling up with working families attracted by cheap housing and the streetcar links. These new families added depth and breadth to a community that gave little thought to the difficulties of McSpadden, Miller and the other rich folks.

At the same time, Park Drive was beginning to find its own place as the commercial centre for Grandview. By 1909 and 1910 there were a dozen or so real estate operations on the Drive, just about one for every block. They often had shacks on an empty lot and they all preached the virtues of having streetcar access to and from downtown.

In 1911 City Council was lobbied to change the name of the street from Park Drive to the more businesslike and progressive sounding Commercial Drive. And the Drive benefited greatly from the building boom of 1910-1912 so that by the time the First World War began, a good portion of the lots on Commercial from Venables in the north to Fourth Avenue in the south had been filled with buildings of great variety.

Unfortunately, the impact of the Great War and the business downturns immediately after, left the Drive without much opportunity for further development and expansion. These difficulties were exacerbated a decade later

by the economic disruption of the Great Depression which had a devastating effect on the people and households in Grandview. Hundreds of lots in the district were surrendered to the city for failure to pay taxes.

With the vast number of empty lots and the consequent lack of any need to provide reasonable transportation to those sections, the City had not felt it necessary to spend any of their limited resources on grading, paving or servicing many of the streets running east of Victoria Drive.

While almost fourteen hundred houses and apartments were built in the west side of Vancouver in 1935, less than three hundred were constructed east of Ontario Street that year. And most of the houses in Grandview were already considered older stock and many were run down and dilapidated, causing locals to campaign often about what they called the “slumification” of East Vancouver.

A City Engineer had contemptuously described Grandview in these years as the City’s “back door”: it wasn’t that important in the scheme of things and could be allowed to become shabby in a way that a front door never would be. The *Highland Echo* was no doubt accurate when it editorialized that westside and downtown interests, including the daily metropolitan newspapers, saw Grandview as an *unpleasant* sort of place inhabited by an *unpleasant* sort of people, namely the working classes. By 1935, Grandview had become identified, in one newspaper’s words, as “the Cinderella in the family of Vancouver suburbs.”

But Commercial Drive itself proved more resilient than Grandview as a whole. The original building boom in the years just before the First World War had filled up most of the lots from Venables to Fourth, and a second important burst of construction in the mid- and late-1920s filled in many of the gaps,

replaced a few old structures and began the development of the blocks around 5th and 6th Avenues.

There were no buildings taller than three storeys along the Drive, and many buildings were single-storey structures with flat roofs. Some of the bigger buildings were constructed in brick, but wood framing was standard for most of the others. Many of those with residential units above the store sported bay windows that had become a local feature.

The Depression had hit hard, of course, but the number of empty storefronts on the Drive wasn't much larger in the mid-1930s than it had been in 1928. There were two dozen grocery and produce stores in 1935, the same number as in 1929, and nine of those businesses had made the leap across the bad years. In fact, a surprising number of the Drive's businesses had survived and some had clearly prospered during those difficult times. There were even a couple of empire-builders-in-the-making among the local businessmen of 1935.

However, there were limits to the success even the best businessmen on the Drive could achieve; limits set by the urban planning consequences of Grandview's geography.

Grandview and Commercial Drive sit on the high ground just east of the then-undeveloped False Creek Flats. Trapped behind this barrier, Commercial Drive was cut off in a material way from the developing city that seemed so close.

Motivated partly by the need to detour around the Flats, City planners had developed the primary east-west routes to and from downtown Vancouver to be north of Grandview along Hastings Street and south of Grandview along Broadway. Traffic coming along Kingsway was also prevented from visiting the district because Commercial still ended at Clark Park, leaving no direct road connection from Kingsway to the Drive.

This configuration left Commercial Drive stuck in the middle of nowhere, and it seemed quite possible to some that the suburb might simply disappear as an independent business centre.

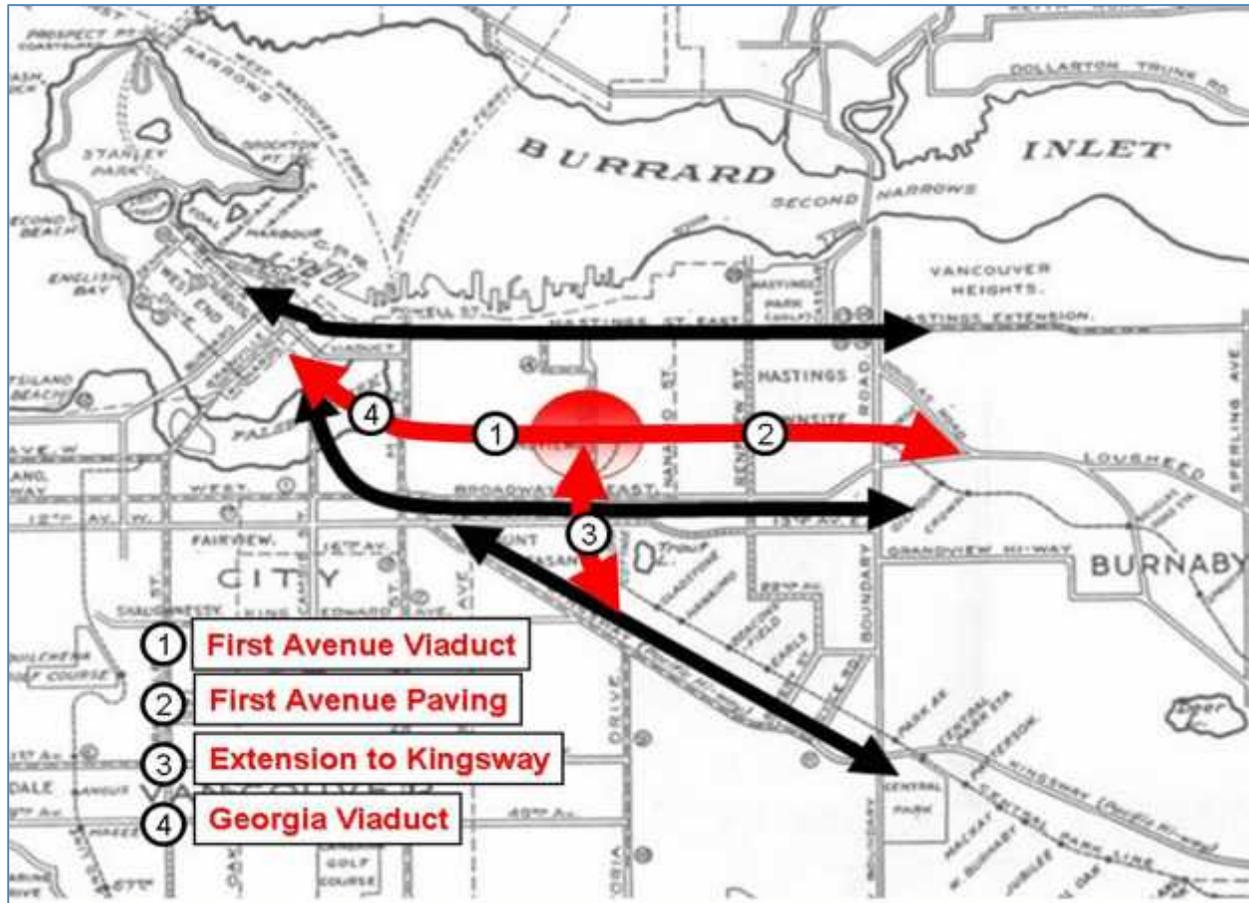
But there *were* ways out of this transportation trap. In fact, a Grand Plan had been proposed by Charles E. Smith since at least the early 1920s.

Smith was an Australian who landed in Vancouver in 1907. He arrived in steerage and with a tourist landing permit, but within two years he held many thousands of dollars' worth of property on Commercial Drive. Between 1909 and his early death in 1948, there was little of importance that went on around the Drive that Charles Smith did not have a part in. As a realtor, building manager, legal advisor and insurance agent, Smith was the consummate insider and he covered all the big deals.

Smith's Grand Plan included a major new east-west thoroughfare right across Vancouver with First & Commercial as a primary intersection. He proposed that the newly constructed Lougheed Highway bringing traffic from the east and the south be linked to First Avenue at Boundary Road. The traffic would then be carried through the centre of Commercial Drive's shopping district, and onto a viaduct or bridge over the False Creek Flats from First & Clark to Terminal Avenue, and thence down to Main Street. From there, he suggested another viaduct that would take this traffic downtown to Georgia Street and onwards. The Fraser Valley would thus be linked through Commercial Drive and Vancouver to the new Lions Gate Bridge by an almost straight thoroughfare.

At the same time, Commercial Drive would be extended south to connect with Kingsway in an attempt to divert some traffic away from an already clogged

Main Street and, not incidentally, to divert that traffic from downtown to Commercial's retail interests.



If such a plan could be achieved then riches indeed would flow to the merchants of Commercial Drive. However, looking back from today it is difficult to understand just how much a leap of the imagination was needed for this vision. The very idea of First Avenue as a major east-west thoroughfare was a fanciful idea in the nineteen-twenties and early thirties.

The First Avenue of those years was an unimpressive roadway at best: From its intersection with Commercial, it traveled five blocks west down the steep hill to Clark Drive, where it simply stopped: It had nowhere else to go, with the cliffs

and the Flats in the way. Gravel-topped and with grass verges where the sidewalks should be, it could have been a country lane.

Traveling east from Commercial, First Avenue wasn't fully graded, it was narrower than standard, and travel east beyond Victoria Drive was very uncomfortable over a series of short, sharp hills all the way to Rupert Street. There were few cars on that route and the intersection with Commercial had no traffic control of any kind; it didn't need any so long as you watched out for the streetcars. It took a strong dose of imagination – and probably a pro-Commercial Drive bent -- to see First & Commercial as a thriving urban centre, let alone as the hub of a miles' long highway corridor linking the eastern borders of the metropolis with downtown Vancouver.

This was a desperately ambitious program and the barriers to success were very high. In order to have any chance of success at all, the boosters of Commercial Drive needed to tell a really good story, to develop a master narrative within which they could position their proposals, a background against which the proposals made **some** sense; and the master narrative that Commercial Drive's boosters chose was a story of neighborhood victimization.

They launched claims of a constant discrimination against the east end of the city in general, and against Commercial Drive in particular, in favour of downtown and Westside interests. They positioned Grandview as the neglected colony of the indifferent Vancouver empire, and they pitched their demands as reasonable requests for deserved equal treatment.

A man with aristocratic bearing and a fine voice, the Grand Plan's author Charles E. Smith was happy addressing any audience. He spoke often and eloquently to anyone who would listen on the discrimination he claimed Vancouver and its civic bodies had shown against Commercial Drive. He ran

for alderman in 1930 on this very program, claiming that he and Grandview should not have to suffer another two years of stagnation and vacillation.

The First Avenue Bridge or viaduct was the key component of Smith's Grand Plan to free Commercial Drive from its transportation trap. The viaduct would make it easy for traffic to cross the False Creek Flats and access Commercial from First Avenue, which itself would become a thoroughfare from Commercial to Main. Crucially, once First Avenue had been thus established at its western end, pressure could be bought to extend it eastward toward Boundary Road and the Lougheed Highway.

The history of this project fed directly into the narrative of the neglected suburb: Commercial Drive merchants, following Smith's lead, had demanded the viaduct for many years without any satisfaction, and this had bred resentment.

The target of all that resentment tended to be City Council. However, it has to be said that Vancouver City Council had on three separate occasions put all the money needed for the First Avenue Bridge to the electorate as part of City Council's overall plans for the following year. And on all three occasions – in 1930, 31 and 32 – the bylaws had been defeated by the voters. Apprehensive for the future in troubled financial times, and not seeing any advantage for themselves, the majority of voters elsewhere in the city had pulled tight the drawstrings on the public purse and denied the Drive its desires.

But the discrimination narrative was useful; a monumental spin for effect, and successful, too, in many ways. Whenever an occasion arose, speakers from the eastside continued to harp on the terrible conditions that, they said, were the result of a cumulative process of deterioration due entirely to neglect by the civic authorities. By mid-1938 it had been said so often that the *Vancouver News Herald*, at least, seems to have bought into the story. They wrote that the

people of Grandview have been “very patient, and repeated defeats would have daunted less courageous people.”

The story had legs, too. As late as 1953, every speaker at a municipal all-candidates’ meeting agreed that Commercial Drive had been neglected for years. And local candidate Syd Bowman’s aldermanic campaigns from 1950 to 1955 were based in large part on a re-statement of the same discrimination story.

The abolition of the Vancouver City ward system in 1935 had removed the most obvious political avenue for a local party of municipal discontent. But the group of leaders – Charles Smith and his friends -- that emerged on the Drive in the 1930s and 40s were in general independent merchants and salaried professionals who were far more interested in commerce than they were in ideology. In fact, they were stridently agnostic when it came to party politics.

However, without an alderman of their own, the purveyors of Commercial Drive’s Grand Plan and the narrative that supported it needed to find another institutional base from which to launch their proposals, and they also needed a propaganda outlet not controlled by the downtown interests. The Grandview Chamber of Commerce, originally founded in 1917, and its mouthpiece *The Highland Echo*, a successful weekly neighborhood paper, neatly filled both roles.

The Grandview Chamber of Commerce had had a number of high points in its history. In 1928, for example, it led the fight to create Grandview Park on Commercial and they managed to persuade City Council to invest \$10,000 in new park facilities. Two years later, this time led by Catherine Bufton and the Ladies’ Auxillary, the Chamber had a War Memorial built in the Park and consecrated by Archbishop Depencier. On both occasions, the events were concluded with large and popular street dances.

At the height of the Depression, Mrs. Bufton, Charles Smith and the Chamber of Commerce were front and center in turning Victoria Park into the greens and clubhouse for the new Grandview Lawn Bowling Club. They managed to persuade both provincial and municipal governments that this was a work relief program and many local craftsmen got useful employment as the park was rebuilt. And as recently as the summer of 1936, the Chamber had organized a popular weekend long event – with a parade, the selection of a neighbourhood Queen, and a party in the Park -- to celebrate Vancouver's Golden Jubilee.

But, like many local organizations, the Chamber was reliant on the interest of unpaid volunteers to keep it going, and there were times over the years when the organization almost ceased to exist. After the success of the Jubilee celebrations that summer, the Chamber entered one of these periods of quiescence. But these were important and difficult times and some thought the Chamber was needed now more than ever. A small group of businessmen with definite plans for the future – and strongly supported by the *Echo's* weekly editorials -- gathered around Charlie Smith, "Pete" Brown of Brown Bakeries and Alf Higgins of the Commercial Drive Garage. Their nominations got Brown elected president of the Chamber in November 1936, along, of course, with Higgins and Smith.

Looking back a couple of successful years later, Higgins would claim that the new Chamber had worked to a pre-planned program so that they could quote tick off the achievements one by one endquote. That was, no doubt, an over-statement of their pre-planning, but at least they were awake and active. And their renewed agitation about the slowness of the Lougheed Highway construction, for example, was already being noticed by the *Province* newspaper in April 1937. More directly, they were keen to see progress on the First Avenue Viaduct.

When the flamboyant lawyer and monetary theorist Gerry McGeer was elected Mayor of Vancouver at the end of 1934, a deputation from Commercial Drive led by Charles Smith took pains to visit the new mayor and discuss their issues, most notably the First Avenue Bridge. Smith and his allies were careful to pitch their arguments to include benefits to sections other than Grandview. For example, they claimed that such an artery as they proposed along First Avenue would be of tremendous assistance in helping to solve the daily problem of incoming and outgoing commuter traffic which had already resulted in what everyone agreed was a serious aggravation of traffic conditions on Kingsway, Broadway and Main Streets. But it would not have been missed by anyone hearing the proposal that the area most benefited by it was Commercial Drive.

No matter. McGeer gave his immediate and enthusiastic support. He declared in fact that he would have the bridge built before the end of his first term in office.

Unfortunately, by January 1936 there had been no movement on the project and the financing the Mayor had said he would use for the construction appeared to have been “diverted to other uses,” as the *Echo* put it.

Annoyed, the Grandview Chamber passed a resolution of complaint and sent it off to the Mayor. The resolution noted McGeer’s previous assurances that the First Avenue Bridge project was second in importance only to the new City Hall. The resolution and the resulting press coverage seemed to do the trick. McGeer came to Grandview and gave a rousing speech confirming his assurances about the viaduct, and a Council committee was struck straightaway.

In February 1936, the committee members visited the site of the proposed crossing, some for the first time. After the visit, during which the Councillors were educated at length by Charles Smith, the *Echo* had the impression that quote opinion is veering towards the view that the bridge is vitally needed end quote. The only problem, of course, was funding. Under the circumstances of the Depression, *and* after three failed plebiscites, no funds from general revenues could be expected. No matter. Mayor McGeer was sure his baby bonds could be stretched to fit the need.

Baby bonds were a controversial municipal financing measure that McGeer was pushing through to pay for the new City Hall and for other civic work projects. At the time of the Council Committee's visit to the bridge site, provincial authority for the bonds had not yet been granted and so the Committee could not make a final decision. But that spring "baby bonds" were approved in Victoria, and the Mayor's enthusiasm for the viaduct cleared away all other delays.

The preliminary surveys and test holes were completed that summer and contracts were signed with the Dominion Construction Company in January 1937. The lump sum bid for the work was \$208,000. Substantive construction work began that March and the building would take a year to complete

In anticipation of the new traffic from the Bridge, the City Board of Works approved \$5,500 in improvements to First Avenue from Clark Drive to Commercial, and the widening of First Avenue by three feet between Commercial and Victoria at an additional cost of \$1,000.

Charles Smith's history with the Town Planning Commission in the 1920s, and his negotiations with Mayor McGeer, along with whatever motives crossed the mercurial mind of the Mayor himself, probably had most to do with getting the

Bridge built. However, in a mighty gesture of self-congratulation, the Grandview Chamber of Commerce hosted 250 residents and friends at a banquet in the Masonic Hall on First Avenue. Guests included Reeve Solomon Mussallem of Haney and Reeve J.B. Leyland of West Vancouver. These two symbolized the two ends of the string that the Grand Plan's boosters saw linking Lougheed Highway with the brand new Lions Gate Bridge.



City Council gave \$3,000 to help celebrate the opening of the viaduct which took place on Dominion Day 1938, and tens of thousands thronged to witness the opening of the bridge and the subsequent revelry. There was a parade of course, which stretched twelve blocks and included huge animal balloons that bounced along. Bands included contingents from the American Legionnaires and the Kitsilano Boys Band. When the parade arrived at the central span of the bridge, the dignitaries disembarked and at 9:45am, Mayor Miller cut the twisted strands of blue and yellow ribbon with a special set of golden scissors presented to him by Charles Bentall of the Dominion Construction Company. There were cheers all around.

Alderman John Bennet declared the day to be “the dawning of a new era for Grandview and the city. It is the realization of a dream of twenty-five years of a thriving community,” he said. Many in the crowd held placards proclaiming

“This Is Grandview’s Great Day – Watch Grandview Grow.” The crowds stayed throughout the day, enjoying the carnival games that lined the bridge. In the evening, at 8pm, the crowd sang “*O Canada*” and the dancing began. Fun was had until the rain started about ten-thirty. This was Vancouver after all.

There were differing views as to the purpose of the First Avenue Bridge, and they depended on where you were standing. Downtown and on the west side, the Bridge was seen as a way for people on Commercial Drive to have direct access to Vancouver’s shopping centres. They also saw it as an exit from the city to the Fraser Valley: a “valuable new artery,” as Mayor Miller called it.

On Commercial, however, the Viaduct was seen as making the Drive an easy destination for the growing numbers of Vancouver’s car-driving shoppers. The *Echo* prophesied that “once traffic has discovered this new convenient route more vehicles will cross at First Avenue & Commercial in a day than crossed it in a week before.” In addition, realtors were sure there would be a general increase in property values as a result of the tremendous amount of home building they expected to take place.

The immediate success of the First Avenue Bridge was confirmed as early as February 1940 when a survey from the Town Planning Commission showed that in one two-hour period 565 vehicles had used First Avenue east of Clark Drive. In 1937, just three years earlier, a similar survey had shown only 17 vehicles on that same stretch. And in the hindsight of just a few years’ use, it became clear that routes to and from downtown Vancouver and the westside had changed significantly to take advantage of the improved connection the bridge afforded.

It is hard to imagine today Vancouver traffic without the First Avenue connection. And that the building of the Viaduct turned First and Commercial into a well-known and popular intersection is clear. Perhaps more importantly,

the very existence of the First Avenue Viaduct and its obvious success gave the Grandview Chamber of Commerce and others the confidence to push for more changes – the improvement of First Avenue east, for example, more transit links, the extension of Commercial to Kingsway. When these were finally achieved, the Drive thrived and I would argue that the success of the campaign to build the First Avenue Viaduct created the very foundation on which the modern Commercial Drive was built.

While Commercial Drive merchants and the general population were reveling in the new freedom and opportunities that the vital new transportation links had opened to them, some businessmen were readying themselves to face the retail revolutions that were sweeping North America in the 1930s and early 40s.

In the mid-1930s most retail businesses on the Drive were still stores rather than shops, by which I mean they had apron-clad clerks standing by ready to take a list of goods from a shopper. The clerks would then take the required items from bulk storage and put together an individualized package for the customer, probably for delivery. The shopper was not expected, nor probably wanted, to do anything other than supply the list. Delivery of everything from groceries to dry goods, from fresh fish on ice to hot fish & chips, was free and almost immediate, often on horse-drawn carts or in the baskets of boys' bicycles. Full service of this kind was both expected and given.

The main competition for the local business was generally a downtown department store, and the easy availability of the streetcar on Commercial Drive was the ally of the competitor. Reporting on a survey of shoppers in the 1930s, the *Echo* was obliged to admit that many women “habitually do their buying in the larger stores for a variety of reasons, of which the chief is that they enjoy the experience.”

Retail historian Rachel Bowlby has noted that the “department store offered an experience of aristocratic grandeur to every woman customer. There, she could act the queen and be treated like royalty. Department stores flattered women into seeing themselves as part of a beautiful environment.”

There *were* a few establishments on the Drive that made shopping a luxurious experience. For example, Joan Proctor in her memoir has vividly described a millinery store of this period in the 1300 block Commercial. She writes that

“the thickly carpeted place seemed calming. Cream colored cabinets with sliding doors beneath held hat stands displaying feathered, bowed and veiled hats to dream about. A low counter with upholstered velvet chairs held gold-framed swivel mirrors where you could sit and view yourself from different angles.”

But these sensory experiences were the exception rather than the rule. As for most of the stores on the Drive, full service retailing was the norm, but it was becoming an expensive business, especially with the economic conditions of the Depression to deal with. Luckily for them, a revolution was sweeping the retail world. And this was the revolution of self service.

It might be hard to believe from today’s perspective that self-service actually had to be invented **and** that it was invented less than one hundred years ago. But it was, and we have Tennessee grocer and inventor Clarence Saunders to thank.

For Saunders, the issue was one of time; specifically the time it took to serve each customer in his store. In 1916, to improve the flow of business he designed the Piggly Wiggly system, in which customers collected their own goods from shelves they found on a circuitous but directed route from store entry to cashier. Piggly Wiggly was such a novel idea that Saunders was issued

a U.S. patent for the concept in 1917. Saunders saved money on staff and he slashed prices. Other merchants rushed to copy him. Lower costs for the merchant and lower prices for the shoppers: it was an unbeatable combination.

But there was more to come.

Invented at the beginning of the 1930s, supermarkets differed from other self-service stores by selling produce, meat and household goods from the same space. With their huge piles of basic commodities, cheap prices, open spaces and bright lights, they became like the older department stores: they were destinations to which shoppers traveled with a special purpose. However, instead of the luxury and personal service that shoppers associated with the downtown department stores, supermarkets, nearly all of which were in the suburbs, offered functionality and standard products without clerks or frills. Instead of the pleasures of being served, consumers rapidly sold themselves on the idea that they should be congratulated for doing without services they didn't really need, thus saving money.

However, this bonanza of cheap products brought its own problem. Sylvan Goldman, who owned a chain of Humpty Dumpty supermarkets around Oklahoma City, noticed that his customers had a tendency to stop shopping when their handheld baskets got too full or too heavy. That got him to thinking about shopping carts, and at the end of 1937 he had launched the Folding Basket Carrier Corporation to sell his carts to stores around the country. Within just three years, shopping carts had found so firm a place in American life as to grace the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

The shopping cart helped create the supermarket boom and by 1939 there were more than 2,000 supermarkets in North America. Vancouver was not left out of this flood of new-style stores. In 1940 and 1941 Safeway opened five new supermarkets in the city, two of which were on the Drive; one at Broadway,

and another on the southwest corner of First & Commercial. The latter of which was positioned specifically to feed off the traffic from the First Avenue Viaduct.

Newspaper articles trumpeted these custom-designed buildings that offered gleaming plate glass and shining chromium, refrigeration and air conditioning, abundant light and generous floor space. In addition they had shopping carts, huge discounts on certain products, and plenty of parking. These were the latest advances in economical food distribution bringing streamlining to the retail environment.

At the same time Safeway streamlined the very look of First & Commercial. The southwest corner of the intersection had been anchored by the big old barn of a place that had housed Sam Oki's grocery store since the 1920s. But Sam's Grocery and a few of its neighbouring stores were demolished over the winter of 1940 to make way for Safeway's new building, which – as the Royal Bank – remains to this day.

Safeway's supermarkets, with their wide range of foodstuffs and housewares, challenged the market not just of grocery stores, but of butchers, bakers, produce and hardware merchants, too. Some of those challenged by the new stores, like the Grandview Meat Market – almost next door to Safeway, responded quickly. The Meat Market had just been taken over by A.M. Brink, a veteran butcher who immediately cancelled telephone orders, delivery and credit to cut costs. He slashed prices and advertised the shop as cash and carry only and proud of it. Many of the produce and meat stores along Commercial followed suit and for some this meant lower revenues, consolidation and a loss of independence. The two Superior Store's outlets on the Drive, for example, were swallowed up by the larger Ray's chain soon after Safeway opened. But others were far more successful.

Commercial Drive businessman Louis Toban, for example, was a pharmacist and therefore not directly challenged in the 1940s by the rise of supermarkets. However, Toban recognized that the current novelties in produce shopping were symptomatic of deeper changes in society's relationship to retail.

He understood that self-service involves a significant psychological shift from older patterns of commerce. It is a transfer of initiative from salesman to buyer, as customers can now contemplate the product and form a judgment in their own time, without being hurried by the talkative real-life salesman. One design expert of the time wrote that "the public today are being educated to walk from department to department, to inspect and handle the goods, and *to make up their own minds.*" The shop must now be seen as not just storing goods but as being used for showing and suggesting. To achieve this, wrote another expert, the properly arranged store has "no unnecessary barriers. It lets women and merchandise meet."

Toban, owner of the growing Reliable Drugs chain, had been steering his drug stores towards a more open design for some time now. In 1926, having just completed his pharmacy degree, Toban purchased Allen Davis's drug store which had stood on the northeast corner of Commercial and Third since 1910. A second store followed in 1929 and there were four in the Toban chain by 1938, three on Commercial and a fourth in Kitsilano.

Over the years, Toban's stores were endlessly remodeled and refashioned to produce a more enticing sales experience. In the summer of 1937, he persuaded the owner of the building to spend a reported \$10,000 putting new stucco on the entire building, fixing up offices and apartments above, and combining the 1848 and 1850 storefronts into a single large store -- which Toban's Reliable Drugs headquarters immediately occupied. Soon he would buy the building to gain better control and in 1957 he thoroughly overhauled the store once again.

By the time Toban sold his chain to Cunningham Drugs in January 1969, there were 11 stores in his empire and more than 100 employees. He put down his success to realizing “that the average person would respond to our efforts to make their shopping both pleasant and easy.” Louis Toban was an immensely influential figure to other store owners on the Drive. His success encouraged innovation and change. By the time the prosperous years following World War Two arrived, the majority of Commercial Drive’s business had followed his lead and modernized from stores to shops.

There were a few regional and even international chains represented on the Drive in the 1940s – Safeway, Woolworth’s, Sterling Markets, for example – but on the whole, the Drive was filled with locally owned and locally managed businesses. They had an attitude that was more neighborly, perhaps, than the downtown stores. The *Echo* described it well when they wrote:

Commercial Drive is a friendly street. Friendly people work in the stores ... People all along the Drive stop and pass the time of day [in a] leisurely fashion with their friends. Shopping is important, but there still seems a moment to spare to exchange a few words of greeting. There is always an acquaintance to say hello to in the lineup at the bank ... and it is a pleasure to know the name of the person who serves you in any of the innumerable stores on the Drive. These little things create a pleasant and happy atmosphere. These are the reasons why many people choose to shop on Commercial Drive rather than take the ... streetcar to the downtown department stores.

Moreover, with little or no input from downtown interests, the people who lived and worked on the Drive had developed for themselves a self-reliant and self-sustained community in every respect. Their isolation from the city had allowed

them to retain the local pride and definite individuality of the early pioneers. In 1938, the *News Herald* wrote that there was no area of suburban Vancouver which shows more clearly a definite community life.

Looking forward from, say, 1940, the Chamber of Commerce would spend another twenty years nagging civic authorities to get First Avenue graded all the way to Boundary, to get the extension built that links Commercial Drive to Kingsway, to rid themselves finally of the streetcar and put in place an improved bus service. Hand in hand with the Vancouver East Lions and the YWCA – and without any central municipal assistance -- the community put in place a youth and community services centre at Commercial & Adanac. And they fought hard for the proper development of the old Grandview Commerce School site on the north west corner of First and Commercial.

In all these matters the old neighbourhood discrimination rhetoric was used and expanded in public campaigns. And in some cases the neglect seems obvious. For example, regardless of its obvious value to the merchants and people of Commercial Drive, the Kingsway diversion might never have been built if the bus company hadn't finally wanted it for their own needs in the early 1950s. Their proposal was accepted immediately by the same authorities who had ignored the Grandview Chamber's entreaties for decades.

And the sordid tale of deceit, disdain and neglect that created the sixty year delay before Grandview got a Branch Library deserves a lecture all on its own.

But the fact is that, by the 1950s, the men and women of the Grandview Chamber of Commerce who had delivered the First Avenue Viaduct and its valuable commercial traffic; and the Louis Tobans of the Drive who had understood the new needs of retail, had between them prepared the ground to be ready to accept the wave of Italians who would sweep in and make the Drive their own. And later, as the twentieth century moved to a close, this long

history of self-reliance amid change created the conditions under which further waves of immigrants, multi-cultured, multi-ethnic and multi-sexual could find a comfortable place to rest awhile, and to leave their mark on this very special part of Vancouver.