

Vancouver souplines: Dow

by Deb Wilson

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FROM THE KITCHEN door at the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement convent, the bread line grows one by one until by noon it stretches down East Cordova Street, around the corner, down Dunlevy Street and up the alley. Almost 1,000 of them. They huddle by the convent railing against a grey and damp Vancouver day, waiting for the biggest meal of the month on the city's skid road soup circuit.

Some of them stagger here for meals year in and year out. They're the ones with the empty eyes, sticky hair, flaccid skin, the bloated features of alcoholics or the gaunt faces of addicts.

Some of them remember the 1930s - when the lines first grew long - but more and more of them these days are 17-year-olds, 18-year-olds, who have never had a real job. Many are recent arrivals from clear across the country, here because they looked for work along the road and found none. Because Calgary just gives them a few hostel and meal tickets and sends them on, and because there aren't any missions at the end of the ferry ride to Vancouver Island. Because the Vancouver skids are where they land, the last station. As far as they can get.

This is the end of the line.

At one o'clock, the first hundred turn in their tickets. A volunteer waves them into the basement hall. Another ushers them briskly to four long tables with a hundred place settings. Coffee, dinner and dessert are all cooling there, with paper plates and plastic forks. They are small meals, but clean, and the food doesn't taste bad. The coffee flows strong into bottomless cups. One pale and silent man barfs - on himself, on the floor, in a box Brother Tim passes under him. A couple of guys try to get rough but it's no use; Brother Tim's a big bruiser who worked Rykers Island prison in New York city until his superiors began to worry when he started to walk, talk and look like the cons. He's playing bouncer for this event.

When the door opens and they file in, the air collects the smell of boozy sweat. Sometimes, leaning over a thin man to take a plate or fill a cup, there's that odd, acrid smell of the rooming houses, of piss-stained linoleum and empty wine bottles in musty hallways. The afternoon wears on and hands begin to shake. It's a Sunday with two weeks to go until the next welfare cheque. No money, no booze. Those few who've managed to procure something to dull the day teeter to chairs. Later, outside again, they walk on the backs of their heels as though the ground might suddenly shift and send them reeling.

A small army of parishioners from the suburbs are assembled to serve. They sweep the debris into green bags as each diner leaves, wipes the table and reset another hundred places. The

men and women file in again, eat and leave. The whole act takes about a half hour. Reset file in eat and leave. The teenagers and matrons and clean-faced men are dressed and powdered and pressed against the contagion of poverty like they might bundle against the cold.

Among the brown and grey of the diners locked in feeding frenzy and the suburbanites and trays and ladles in the aisles and the scullery, the seven Sisters of the Atonement move, grey hair tucked under brown habits, dispensing instructions, coffee and assistance. But no prayers. That's their policy. It's the first meal in a long time for many of the diners, and they eat as if they would swallow the plate whole. For the sisters, it's another day. Tomorrow there will be sandwiches at four and another line at the door.

The line doesn't shrink with the evening business pages' announcements of renewed investor confidence. It grows as steadily as the numbers of declarations by government leaders and corporate analysts that economic recovery is just around the corner.

The man with the purplish web of broken blood vessels running a fine pattern over his cheeks and nose chews out the insides of his baloney sandwich and chucks the crust on the grass of Oppenheimer Park, across the street from the Sandwich Sisters. A mushy bit of white bread is pasted to his right cheek. Slowly he turns to the woman sharing the bench and starts small talk. Yeah, he mumbles into the wind, he fled the farm in Salmon Arm, B.C. for the big city in forty two. No money to be made on thirty five acres. Became a seaman. Sailed to Australia and back. Married there.

Nineteen forty two. That's forty one years. Musta been just a kid. He looks like a geezer but the booze does that. I want to know if it was the same for him then as it is for the kids now joining the line up across the street. Did his generation run on the same thin mix of hopes and guts and charity?

"Yeah, but there were jobs then. People had dreams but they forgot about them when they had something to do. Me, I never thought about anything but my work in the shipyards. . ."

A mess of pigeons on a sandwich safari wiggle in a rough line towards today's paydirt. A big white seagull swoops down and scarfs the whole thing. I head over to the convent kitchen.

The old man with a torn upper lip is cleaning up around the scullery and the convent daycare. He's been around, off and on, for fifty years. He's seen the old buildings come down and these already shabby ones go up. Seen the line grow long in the Depression, longer when men started to ride the rails after the Second World War and longer still as they began to be replaced by machines in their jobs. He looks at something far away. Yes, it was different then. He always had a job too.

The line starts to wind around the corner, growing by ones and twos. Old men and a few women, young men and women who have never even had a job and can't find one. No experience, little hope. And unless there are some big changes, says the scullery man, a lot of them will be standing there 40 years from now. "But I'll be long gone by then," he snorts, and he goes back to his chores.

And then there are these kids. In each hundred-seat setting there are about fifteen of them, 18 to 25 years old. They don't stagger, and they don't puke under the tables. Few of their hands shake when they hold out their cups for a refill. And they look away from the sisters and the volunteers, unaccustomed to their charity.

The kids are different than the others. They might find a warm spot to sleep in a cheap hotel or near a heating duct outside, and they might find food in soup lines and industrial trash bins. But they just don't fit in.

...standing in a sandwich line 600 long in the February rain...

Ed Maksylewicz and Dwayne Rockwell peer from under their umbrella against the hedge, looking like a couple of heavy metal fans in a concert ticket lineup.

They've got no use for the kind of people who settle into a

