

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**  
**AL NEIL AND CAROLE ITTER'S FORESHORE CABIN**

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**HISTORY OF THE CABIN**

Al Neil has resided in the cabin, on and off, since 1966. Carole Itter joined him as a co-resident thirteen years later. What I know about the structure comes from conversations with Ms. Itter and from a 2-page history written by Al Neil in August 1996.



McKenzie Barge site with blue foreshore cabin on the right.

Vince Mason, one of the oldest workers at McKenzie Barge & Derrick, told Al Neil that the cabin was built by a Scandinavian craftsman in the 1930s and was originally moored on a barge in Coal Harbour. When its builder got a job at McKenzie Barge he had the cabin towed to its present location and lifted by a derrick onto pilings. The cabin became part of a small community of beach dwellers who worked at McKenzie Barge.



In September 1966, while Al Neil was acting as a fill-in light keeper at Point Atkinson, he spoke with Ralph McKenzie about the possibility of moving into then-vacant cabin. Mr. Mackenzie agreed, and provided an electrical supply to the cabin which, I think, involved running extensions from the main McKenzie site. To my knowledge, there is no running water in the cabin.

According to Neil, Bob and Brian McKenzie always considered him a beach watchman because the cabin was the only thing standing between the beach and their Marine Ways.

By the late 1970s, Cates Park was in existence and all that remained at the end of the beach adjacent to the McKenzie Barge site were two squatter shacks (dwellings of two McKenzie workers that had escaped the general razing of shacks in the later 1950s) and an illegally-beached freighter, the *Island Prince*, which was demolished in 1978.

According to Neil, after the freighter was demolished the Ports Police “zeroed in on the two squatters’ shacks on the beach.” By this time, he says, the shacks had been occupied by a series of residents including “workers from North Van, temporarily unemployed and latterly, itinerant hippies.” After the Ports Police evicted the squatters and demolished the shacks, “they spotted my cabin which always looked nice”. Then they handed him an eviction notice and “told [him] with grins on their faces to get out within a week and they just walked away.” Later, Bob McKenzie looked at the eviction notice, called the Port and arranged for the cabin to be spared. Said Neil, “he liked having me on the beach as an extra watchman.” Today, several decades later, the cabin remains on the beach where it was first deposited some eighty years ago<sup>1</sup>.

In 2005, music critic Alexander Varty writing in the *Georgia Straight* described a visit to Neil’s cabin:

After taking a hidden woodland trail to his rough cabin—which, perched on top of a small, permanently beached barge, seemed as much houseboat as house—we drank tea and discussed art and music to the accompaniment of his cat, making its delicate way across the keys of a battered upright piano. Slanting through dusty windows, the sun lit up Neil’s flotsam assemblages just as surely as the pianist’s wayward yet erudite conversation illuminated the idea that it’s possible to build a life around constant exploration. For that lesson, I’ll always be thankful, as will the thousands of others who learned it under this madman, mystic, and living legend’s persistent tutelage.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT AL NEIL AND CAROLE ITTER**

**Al Neil** (b. 1924) is a musician, composer, collage artist, sculptor, and writer, who is renowned on West Coast for his experimental and avant-garde works. A World War II veteran and jazz pianist, he began playing in Vancouver clubs in the late 1940s and was a central figure in the 1950s and 60s at the Cellar club where he performed both with other artists and with his own group, The Al Neil Quartet. He later introduced a wholly unique and unusual, free jazz style and released several recordings, which were re-issued in compilation formats in the 1980s and 90s.

In addition to music, Neil is known for his writing, visual art and his extensive artistic collaborations with artist Carole Itter. He is known for his multimedia performances in

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from its deteriorating foundation, the cabin is still in good shape with a well-constructed tongue and groove interior and a roof supported by sturdy curving rafters.

the 1970s and mixed-media collages from 1980s. His works have been exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Western Front in Vancouver, and the Musee d'art Moderne in Paris. He is the subject of a 1979 film (*Al Neil: A Portrait*) by the celebrated filmmaker David Rimmer. In 2008, Al Neil received an Honorary Doctor of Letters from Emily Carr University of Art and Design. In 2014, he received the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award at the Mayor's Arts Awards in Vancouver, which recognizes "an individual who has made significant contributions over his or her lifetime to the cultural vibrancy of the city." For the past forty-eight years he has divided his time between Vancouver and the foreshore cabin at Dollarton.



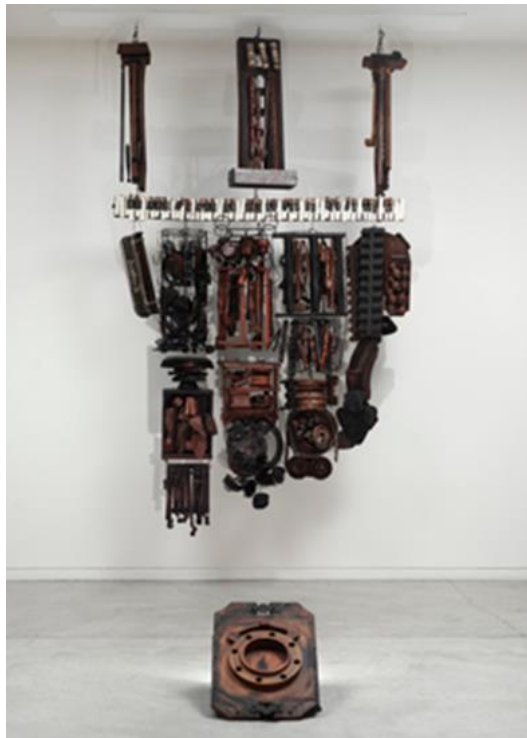
Above: Al Neil on deck of the cabin, undated (1990's?). Photo by Jim Jardine. From the website "Vancouver Art in the Sixties". (<http://alneil.vancouverartinthesixties.com/bio-cv>)

Left: "Al Neil on front deck, Dollarton, BC", 1973. From the website "Vancouver Art In the Sixties" (<http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/archive/169>)

"New York has William Burroughs, Los Angeles has Charles Bukowski and Vancouver has Al Neil." – John Armstrong, Vancouver writer and musician

**Carole Itter** (b. 1939) is a sculptor, art instructor, film maker, oral historian, and writer. She has received awards from the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council. In 1989 she received the prestigious VIVA (Vancouver Institute of Visual Arts) award. The oral history of Vancouver's Strathcona neighbourhood (*Opening Doors: In Vancouver's East End*, 1979) that she co-wrote with Daphne Marlatt was re-published in 2011 as one of the Vancouver 125 legacy books to celebrate the City's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

An experimental artist, many of Itter's artistic works involve 'found objects' and natural materials. Her opposition to consumer culture is a thread that weaves throughout her work. She has become known for large-scale installations which use re-cycled materials and objects from her surroundings to create art with emotional resonance. Works by Itter are in the collections of The Canada Council Art Bank, the Vancouver Public Library, the Vancouver Art Gallery and private collections.



Above: Photo of Carole Itter from the website "ABC Bookworld".  
[http://www.abcbookworld.com/view\\_author.php?id=716](http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_author.php?id=716)

Left: A 'playable' sculpture by Carole Itter titled "Grand Piano Rattle: a Bosendorfer for Al Neil", 1984. Collection: Vancouver Art Gallery.

## HISTORY OF 'SQUATTING' ON BURRARD INLET

For much of the twentieth century, Burrard Inlet was home to squatters living in houseboats, floating shacks, cabins, and foreshore cottages on pilings. The Inlet's most famous squatter was Malcolm Lowry, who lived between 1940 and 1954 in successive shacks at Dollarton, in what is now Cates Park, very near to the location of the foreshore cabin. Those were some of Lowry's most productive years and he wrote much of his classic novel *Under the Volcano* while living in a shack at Dollarton.

Waterfront squatters' communities evolved in the Vancouver area for various reasons, including poverty and unemployment, adjacency to work places, rebellion against social conventions and the yearning for an unfettered way of life in harmony with nature. According to Scott Watson, "Squatting in the intertidal zone is as old as Vancouver and is an important part of the history of the city. ... Intertidal squats have been established and last largely due to the ambiguity of jurisdiction over the intertidal area."



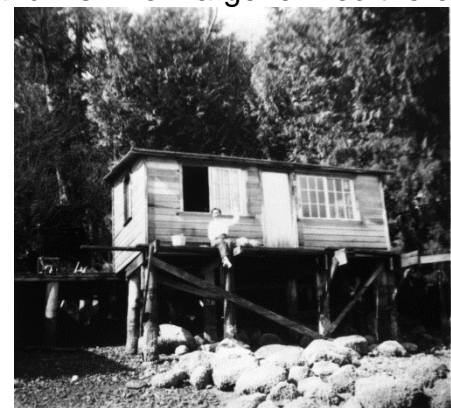
The earliest squatter settlements in the region date back to 1860 when sailors jumped ship in Vancouver harbour and settled in what later became Stanley Park. Historian Daniel Francis says, according to one source, there were 364 shacks along the Vancouver foreshore in 1894. At their height in the 1930s and 40s, over a thousand people lived in squatter communities on the Inlet. According to Francis, in 1949 there were 866 shacks along the foreshore, reflecting the housing shortage in the city. By the late 1950s, most of those communities had been destroyed.



*Left:* Floating shacks and houses in Coal Harbour, across from Stanley Park, 1925. Photo from City of Vancouver Archives (AM54-S4-: Str N11). Al Neil's cabin was said to have been built here.

Vestiges of the squatter colony in Stanley Park remained until 1958 when the last resident died. Squatters also lived on Deadman's Island (where 150 squatters lived in 1909), and at Coal Harbour (where a squatter community was dubbed "Shaughnessy Heights" for its relatively luxurious accommodations). Conditions were much different on the north and south shores of False Creek (where squatters were issued their final eviction notices in 1955) and beneath the Burrard Bridge on the foreshore of the Kitsilano Reserve (where some 300 people were living in 1936).

A sizeable squatter community (sometimes called "Lazy Bay") evolved on the foreshore near Roche Point in North Vancouver. It was first inhabited by fishermen and employees of the Dollar Mill and McKenzie Barge. Later, some of the cabins served as summer cabins for Vancouver families. Malcolm Lowry and his wife Margerie lived there for fourteen years. Other writers, including Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay, and Al Purdy, were drawn to live or visit for a while in the ramshackle beach homes at Dollarton. At its peak, writes Dan Francis, there were about 90 or more shacks there. In the late 1950s, the residents were evicted, the shacks were bulldozed, and the area became Cates Park.



*Right:* Dorothy Burt a Malcom Lowry's shack, c. 1954  
Photo courtesy Deep Cove Heritage Society

In an on-line posting from 2012, District Mayor Richard Walton talked about being a young UBC English Literature student and listening to Professor and poet Earle Birney talk about the Dollarton shacks being flattened by District bulldozers. According to Walton, Birney prefaced these words in an edition of Malcolm Lowry's collected poems:

The bright crazy little shack is gone; all the sloppy ramshackle honest pile houses where fishermen lived and kingfishers visited are bulldozed into limbo, along with the wild cherries and 'the forest path to the spring'. Now there is an empty beach and beside it a park with picnic tables and tarmac access; the sea air stinks with car exhaust. And the city that ignored him plans to cement a bronze plaque in his memory to the brick wall of the new civic craphouse.



Maplewood mud flats with squatter shacks, photo taken in 1973 by Bruce Stewart.  
From Presentation House Gallery website.

On the foreshore a kilometre west of Cates Park another squatter community grew up on the Maplewood mud flats 1969. Previous squatters on the muddy estuary had been forced out in 1961 when L&K Lumber purchased the property. When hippies discovered this area of the foreshore in the early 1970s, they set up tents, shacks and lean-tos and formed a community where the counter-culture flourished and artists and poets were welcomed. Sculptor Tom Burrows lived there for two years. Some of the dwellings were burned down by the District in 1972, while others lasted a few years longer. The films *Mudflats Living* (NFB, 1972) and *Livin' in the Mud* (Sean Malone, 1972) document that community.



The last squatter in the area, who had lived on the flats for 36 years, was allowed to stay in a home he had built from scrap lumber until 1986. This photo was taken in the year of the shack's demolition, when its 88-year old resident went into a nursing home.

Left: From a Flickr photo set:  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/canadagood/3068744135/>

Across the inlet, there were also squatter communities near Brighton Beach in Vancouver and at "Crabtown" in Burnaby, just east of the Second Narrows Bridge. Rolf Knight's book, *Along the No. 20 Line*, contains detailed descriptions of the squatter

community near where he grew up at the eastern end of Commissioner Drive. People living there were cleared out in 1951, after being evicted by the National Harbours Board. Crabtown met a similar fate a few years later. It had sprung up during a housing shortage in 1912 when a group of mill employees built a few shacks on piers along the Inlet. In 1957, eviction notices were given to the 150 families living there and two years later the last members of that community had been re-located and their shacks were destroyed.

At their height, according to Sheryl Salloum, squatter communities in Vancouver were home to about 1,800 people. Like the foreshore cabin at the McKenzie site, most squatter's dwellings had no electricity, running water, sewage or garbage disposal. And none of their residents paid property taxes, a fact that irked other citizens especially during the Depression when everyone was having trouble getting by.

According to Daniel Francis, "squatters have been part of the urban scene in Vancouver for a long time. The term is often used in a pejorative sense, but as often as not squatters, despite their marginal lifestyle, have been productive members of the community, holding jobs, raising families and, in Lowry's case, writing great literature." This was also the case for Al Neil. He moved to the foreshore cabin in 1966 after his former home in Vancouver's west end burned down. As he recounted in 1996, "I'm a writer and musician and artist and this has provided my meagre livelihood." Although he lived a lifestyle similar to that of a squatter--in a cabin without running water and utilities--he never considered himself a "squatter" because he lived there with the permission of McKenzie Barge and was considered the "beach watchman".

## **CONCLUSION**

The foreshore cabin at the McKenzie site has strong local and regional cultural, historic, and artistic value because:

- It is the last remaining foreshore dwelling from among the many hundreds of such 'squatter' dwellings in the Vancouver region that once dotted the shores of Burrard Inlet and provided homes for marginalized people, including labourers, seniors, artists, and 'free-spirits'.
- It is a highly symbolic building because it tangibly connects us to a now-vanished way of life when people could live 'off-the-grid' and on the waterfront within the bounds of a rapidly urbanizing metropolitan area where private access to the waterfront is now restricted to the wealthy and the well-connected.
- For almost fifty years, the cabin was lived in by one of the region's foremost experimental artists, Al Neil. The cabin and its foreshore site have also acted as a home and a muse for thirty-five years to Neil's partner, noted artist Carole Itter.
- On the site, in and on the cabin, and adjacent to it (on the beach, on the deck, and in the trees) there are significant sculptural works of art co-created over many years by Al Neil and Carole Itter.



## ATTACHMENTS



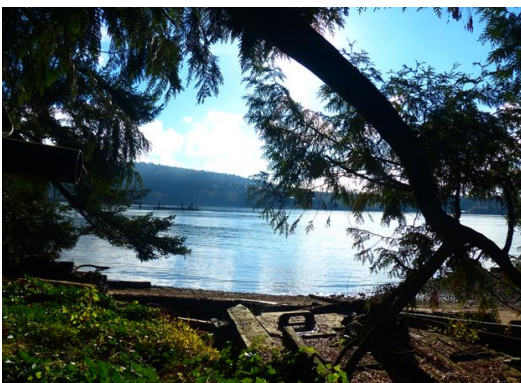
View of cabin and deck (to the right) from the water



Approaching the cabin from Cates Park



Entrance facade



View from deck toward Burrard Inlet



View of the deck





Façade facing the beach



Façade opposite the entrance



Sculptural assemblage on beach by cabin



Assemblage on entrance facade



Large assemblage in the trees



Detail of central part of large assemblage





Photograph of interior taken by internationally renowned Vancouver photographer Stan Douglas. This photo was provided to the author by Glenn Alteen.

**NOTE:** The original version of this photo is a copyrighted work of art. It may not be reproduced without the photographer's permission.

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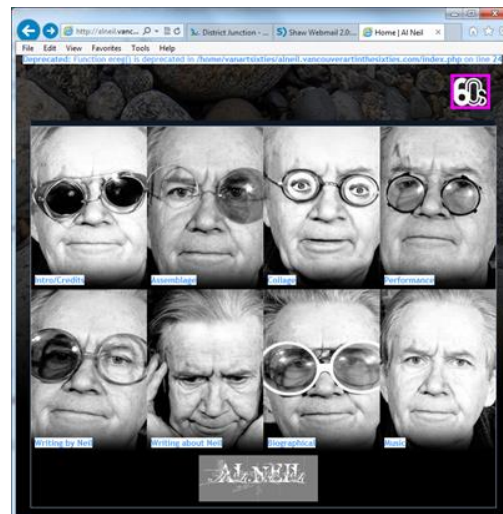
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*Right:* There is a full chapter on Al Neil in the excellent website *Vancouver Art in the Sixties*.  
<http://alnel.vancouverartinthesixties.com/>