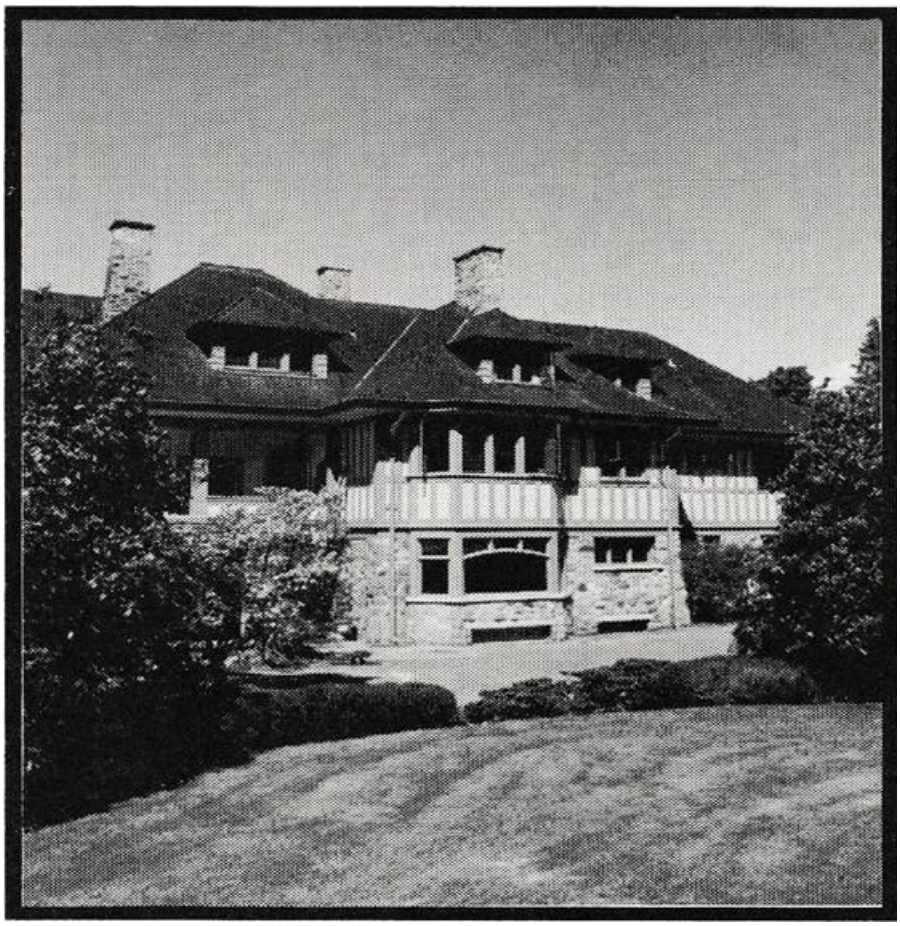
CECIL GREEN PARK

“The House on the Cliff”

A Brief History of Cecil Green Park
By Evelyn Lett, BA ‘17



The house, originally called Kanakla, "The House on the Cliff," was built in 1912 by E. P. Davis, an outstanding court room lawyer in B.C. His firm, Davis and Company, acted for the C.P.R., the leading bank and for many of the mining, lumbering and other business enterprises which were developing at the time.

By 1912, B.C. was just 70 years of age, and Vancouver was even younger. But this young city with a population under 100,000 already had its group of wealthy business and professional men. They lived chiefly in the West End in those large, ample, tree-shaded dwellings almost all of which have been torn down.

A few years previously a definite trend had begun across False Creek. New houses were being built, and not just simple working men's homes which were already there because of cheap land, but expensive residences. These residences took advantage of the view of the North Shore mountains, and were surrounded by great open spaces, so different from the crowded West End.

B. T. Rogers, of sugar fame, made plans to leave his handsome stone mansion on Davie Street for the magnificent red brick pile at 57th and Granville, known later as "The Austin Taylor Place" (and today "Shannon Mews"). A. D. McRae built Hycroft (The University Women's Club) in 1912. On Point Grey Road, J. Z. Hall built "Killarney." This gracious mansion was demolished a few years ago to make room for an apartment block, but the name is still remembered by the little park which was part of his garden.

E. P. Davis also decided to move from the crowded West End. But no simple move to the Kitsilano area or the newly developing Shaughnessy Heights interested him. He purchased from the province a magnificent site at the tip of Point Grey. His only neighbours would be the wireless operators at the Government station and Dr. Lefevre who built the original part of what is now the UBC School of Social Work (formerly the Graham House). The fact that there was no water laid on, no electricity, no sewers and but a poor access road meant nothing to Davis. He intended to build a home "away from it all" and this he did. Anyone wishing to visit the Davises came by car or taxi from the city or went as far as Alma and Fourth Avenue by street car, there to be met by the Davis car and chauffeur.

Water came from a stream flowing across what is now the university. (It was later put into a culvert, but even in recent years has been known to break its bonds and flood the area). A home-gas plant provided light, and cooking was done with coal and wood. The gas plant was in the small storage building between the house and the squash court. A staff of six took care of the beautiful garden, the house and household made up of Mr. and Mrs. Davis, a daughter and two sons.

His library was one of the finest private law collections in Canada, and the room itself was the place where he wrestled with legal problems and worked out the intricate arguments which won him such renown in Canada and at the Privy Council in London.

Mrs. Davis, who had come from central Canada, loved to travel, and her home was furnished with elegance, due to the rare and interesting articles which she carefully selected from many parts of the world.

I recall that the large reception hall had handsome heavy oak furniture and a huge cast copper bell on a stand brought from Africa or India. The drawing room was furnished in the Victorian period in ivory, gold and green. The conservatory was fragrant with exotic flowers and plants, and the walls throughout the house might have been those of a picture gallery.

The Davises were to enjoy this home with their family for only two years. The War came in 1914 and both sons enlisted. The older son, Irwin, a "chip off the old block" and already showing his ability in the law, was killed in action in 1916. The second son, Ghent, returned safely, bringing with him an Irish bride, Francie, a distant cousin. She and I later became fast friends, and it is to her I owe much of this information.

Ghent and Francie settled into the big house with the Davis Seniors and there raised two sons, Irwin and Fred. The older son studied law and followed his

father and grandfather in the old Davis firm. The younger boy became a doctor and was a well-known psychiatrist in Dallas, Texas. Both served in the Second World War. The lawyer son joined the UBC Faculty of Commerce in the '60s, in its legal section, and is now professor emeritus.

Some years of pleasant living followed the hard years of the First World War, and the Davises, both Senior and Junior, were part of the society set of the day.

The man who was later to become my husband articled with the Davis firm after World War I, and his time spent studying law at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar counted as time in the office. In due course he was invited to join the firm.

To celebrate this occasion, and also our approaching marriage, the Davises entertained at a formal dinner. Twenty-four guests were seated and served by more waiters than I had ever before seen, except in a restaurant.

I was thrilled, but also considerably awed by the lavish beauty of the appointments and the exotic nature of the menu. However, I thoroughly enjoyed it all until confronted by a two-hour session of bridge, following the delightful dinner. I could play 500, but bridge was another matter. I still remember my kind partners of that evening with gratitude.

Mrs. Davis died in the 1930s, the Depression came, and there was a cutback in this opulent life. But thanks to his great ability as a lawyer and to his business acumen, E.P. Davis made a financial comeback and re-established his fortune. Whether from over-work, anxiety or loneliness, he suffered a crippling stroke. He died after several years as an invalid, and the house went up for sale. (The Ghent Davises had a few years earlier moved to the British Properties, true to the pioneering spirit of the Davises, because Point Grey had become too crowded!).

This was 1939, just as World War II began, and there was no market for such a house. It was offered to the university but there was no money available. Finally, the furnishings were disposed of by auction and this magnificent mansion, with its lawns, tennis court and squash court was sold for $9,000 to a recent arrival from Europe, a Mrs. Schweitzer. She lived quietly there for several years and then it was again offered to the university for a modest sum as a possible residence for the president. However, the university did not act and the house was finally purchased by Senator Stan McKeen.

He spent a great deal of money shoring up the cliff property where it was falling away and furnishing the house in suitable style. They did not entertain in the old Davis way but may people enjoyed the hospitality of these gracious rooms. After some years, finding it too large, Senator McKeen sold it to St. Mark's College, for what I am told was a nominal sum. In due course it was purchased by Cecil and Ida Green and given to the University as a gift. It became the home of the Alumni Association in the Fall of 1967, and has been used since then as a "town and gown" centre.

Postscript:

When Ida Green died in 1986, she made a bequest to the University for the renovation of Cecil Green Park. In November 1988, work was begun to restore the mansion to its former splendour. A refurbished Cecil Green Park was officially opened in June, 1989.

Old plumbing, floors and electricals have been replaced, floor plans have been redesigned, wood, plaster and window work have been repaired, and a new kitchen has been installed. Cecil

Green Park has become a major wedding and reception venue, and has been used on a number of film and T.V. shoots.

The renewed mansion will continue to serve the University and the public for years to come.

-- Adapted from a talk given by Mrs. Lett in October 1966.

The Paderewski Piano

When Paderewski ended a world tour at Vancouver early this century, he put his piano up for sale. It was bought by the Marquess of Anglesey who was establishing a colony of fellow upper-class countrymen at Walhachin in the Thompson Valley, 200 miles northeast of Vancouver. He hoped the piano would supply a finishing touch to the cultural life of the colony.

With the piano ensconced in the community hall, the white ties and ball gowns of home appeared. Festive occasions were then carried off in great style with graceful waltzes, stately cotillions and, as the pace of the evening quickened, the merriment of a robust round of "The Gordons."

The piano stopped suddenly in 1914, replaced by the bugle: most of the men went off to war. The settlement shrank and was not revived. As the years passed, the piano languished.

When Cecil Green Park was being furnished in the mid '60s, the initiative of Dr. William Gibson led the residents of Walhachin to entrust the piano to the care of the University. Here it continues to be used and maintained for its historical interest and value.