

north shore news

ANDERSON: Highland Cleaners couple to retire

The Motts put in 50 years at the Edgemont Village business

[Laura Anderson](#) / North Shore News

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After more than 50 years at Highland Cleaners in Edgemont Village, Gary and Sandra Mott are looking forward to a new life in retirement. PHOTO MIKE WAKEFIELD

"It's going to be tough to say goodbye," says Sandra Mott. "The customers that started out with us are grandparents. Their children and now their grandchildren come to us. It's like being part of the family."

After more than 50 years at Highland Cleaners in Edgemont Village, Gary and Sandra Mott are looking forward to a new life in the Fraser Valley. Sandra plans to grow flowers and Gary, potatoes. Their cat, Penny, will continue to rule the household.

Both Motts hail from the Prairies. Sandra's family left their hometown of Acme, Alta. - population: 320; grain elevators: seven; and a one-room school - for Vancouver's West End in 1955. The Prairie girl who rode horses, cows and even a pig or two, "continued to roam on my bike." Sandra learned to fish off the Coal Harbour wharf and took the Vancouver Sun free swim classes at Lumberman's Arch pool in Stanley Park.

On summer visits back to Alberta, Sandra revelled in life on the farm.

"I'd say, 'Let's clean the pigpen!' but of course my cousins weren't as keen as I was. They did those chores every day," she says.

Gary's route to the coast was less direct. First, he ran away from his Winnipeg home and joined the circus. After a season touring Prairie towns, Gary was all set to go south to the circus's winter home in Florida. With no papers, he got only as far as the United States border. When his next job, on an Alberta ranch, came to an end after the harvest was in, Gary hopped a freight train bound for Vancouver. He got a job with an uncle in the dry cleaning business, bought himself a 1938 Plymouth and found a home in a West End rooming house.

At a dance at St. John United Church in the West End, he met a girl wearing a pink dress. Her name was Sandra Wenstob.

During their courtship, Gary and Sandra rented rowboats at Lost Lagoon, hired riding horses from the stable on the edge of Stanley Park and, one cold winter, skated on Beaver Lake.

"All of us would pile into Gary's car and drive to King's Burgers in North Vancouver. Burgers were 19 cents!" remembers Sandra.

She was expecting and Gary was learning the dry cleaning business, working two jobs, when he took on another at Highland Cleaners in Edgemont Village.

"I was talking with a customer today," says Gary. "He said he's been bringing his dry cleaning to us ever since he moved here in 1962. 1962. That's when I started working here."

The Mott family, which now included son Ronald and daughter Wendy, moved to upper Lynn Valley in the late '60s. "That was a great place for kids," remembers Sandra.

Wendy agrees. "We had the mountains all around and our neighbours, the Pearces, had a couple of horses. That was back when we kids would be gone all day and home in time for supper," she says.

Approximately 10 years after the family moved to North Vancouver, owner Jim Green decided to retire and sold Highland Cleaners to Gary and Sandra. Working alongside them were daughter Wendy (who put in 30 years in the business) and employee Wah Wong (20 years) who is also retiring.

This team of Highland Cleaners is most proud of caring for the flags during the 2010 Winter Olympics.

"We had been looking after the RCMP ceremonial flags," says Gary, "and then the Olympics came along."

"Imagine, flags for every one of the 80 countries participating in the Winter Olympics," says Sandra. "There were flags and boxes everywhere you looked. We got each and every flag pressed, packed and shipped to their sites." Gary and Sandra are in proud possession of one of the six official 2010 Olympics flags, a gift from games organizers in appreciation of their contribution.

Sandra and Gary are looking forward to returning to their country roots though the prospect of leaving the Edgemont community is bittersweet. "Edgemont is like a small village," says Gary. "You're at home with everybody here."

Sandra looks on the bright side. "Now we can have our honeymoon."

"We're still on our honeymoon," counters Gary.

Sandra smiles.

Laura Anderson works with and for seniors on the North Shore. 778-279-2275 lander1@shaw.ca (<mailto:lander1@shaw.ca>)