



Fairbridge Chapel Angels

Ron Smith
Chapel Society Secretary

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For over 35 years there has been one mystery in the Fairbridge Chapel that has puzzled me until just recently.



This spring two grandsons of Ross A. Lort, the chapel architect and planner for most of the Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School, paid a visit to the heritage site. As we stood at the rood screen and admired the small angels they asked if I knew who had carved them. Although I didn't, some years ago another visitor mentioned to me that possibly it was a gentleman who had lived at Shawnigan Lake some years ago.

Shortly after, while gathering information about the original members of the farm school's advisory committee I turned to the *Encyclopedia of British Columbia*. One member, a former Rhodes Scholar, a J.A. Gibson was acting as Honorary Secretary for the committee. While there was no mention of this individual my eyes scanned to others with the same last name and there was a short note on a George S. Gibson. Upon reading the biography the mystery was solved.

George Selkirk Gibson was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1867 and died at his Shawnigan Lake home, Caerketton, in March 1942. The Encyclopedia states he was one of the two major architectural sculptures in the province from 1910 to 1940.

During the early years he was commissioned by both Francis Rattenbury and Samuel Maclure, renowned British Columbian architects, to do carvings or sculptures for various homes or important buildings. As it turned out Ross Lort, the Fairbridge Chapel architect, was hired as an apprentice with Maclure in 1907 and after military service in World War I Lort became his partner running the Vancouver office until 1929 when he inherited the firm upon Maclure's death. He was no doubt very familiar with Gibson's wood carvings.

I also remembered that Shawnigan Lake had published *Green Branches and Fallen Leaves*. It was the story of their community from 1887 to 1967 and a Centennial project. Although long out of print, I had a copy in my library and sure enough there was an extensive story about George S. Gibson and it is worth reprinting in part.

The late Mr. George S. Gibson, who came to Shawnigan in 1910 from his native Scotland, was an artist in every sense of the word. He was known as an architectural wood-carver, an art that was so necessary in the days when carved

wood-work was an integral part of most important buildings and gracious houses that it

would almost be called a trade. The fact that there were not too many wood-carvers and that Mr. Gibson was one of the best kept him a very busy man. His father and older brother were wood-carvers before him, and as a boy he spent several years as an apprentice in his brother's shop in Edinburgh. But the call of the west was insistent. He spent a year carving in New York, then back to Scotland and then out to B.C. where he fell in love with Shawnigan Lake, built his home here, and was joined by his wife and children.

Mr. Gibson was a versatile artist and his ability as a clay modeler was a practical asset for stone work. To the uninitiated, a visit to his studio (behind his home which is now the W.A. Cudlip House) with its orderly rows of chisels and gouges, was a revelation.

Many Island churches, private schools and public buildings hold lasting examples of his work including the panels in the reading room of the Provincial library, and the Speaker's chair in the Legislative Assembly Hall. In Christ Church Cathedral the prayer desk, reading desk, the choir screen, and the large figure of Christ outside the building are his work. Also carved by Mr. Gibson are the clergy stalls in the Cathedral built in memoriam to the late Dean Quainton. The carved font in St. Mary's Church, Oak Bay, is also his work. The tracery panelled and the eagle lectern in the chapel at Shawnigan Lake School and similar work at the former Brentwood Boys' School are due to this same man, and he has done much carving in private homes including "Miraloma," the late J.W. Nichol's residence, and the Angus home, both in Victoria.

In the autumn of his career, Mr. Gibson was commissioned by the Provincial Government to do the beautiful intricate carvings on the oak chairs to be used by their Majesties, the King and Queen in their 1939 visit to the B.C. Legislative building. Also for the B.C. Government, Mr. Gibson carved out of solid wood two replicas of the British Columbia Coat of Arms, each three feet by four feet, with a mean thickness of five inches. The crests overlooked the entrance to the province's exhibit in the Hall of Western States, San Francisco Fair of 1930

Mr. Gibson was also a painter of rare talent that years ago won him the right to hang his work in the Royal Scottish Academy. However, the exacting and more lucrative wood-carving took up most of his time. He died in 1942 after working at his trade for sixty-two years.

The two identical angels were donated by Mr. Arthur J. Hendry, a member of the Fairbridge Farm Schools British Columbia Committee. His brother-in-law was Erik W. Hamber, the Lieutenant Governor of B.C. from May 1, 1936 to September 4, 1941, had laid the foundation stone for the Fairbridge Chapel in September 1939. Both were very aware of George Gibson's work.

With the Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School just a short distance from Shawnigan Lake, and having made so many exquisite wood carvings for other Anglican churches, it was only fitting that he would carve our beautiful angels; admired by one and all.



Photo by Touy Smith, 2012

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