

# ROOTS

## An Agricultural History of Oak Bay

by Ben Clinton-Baker



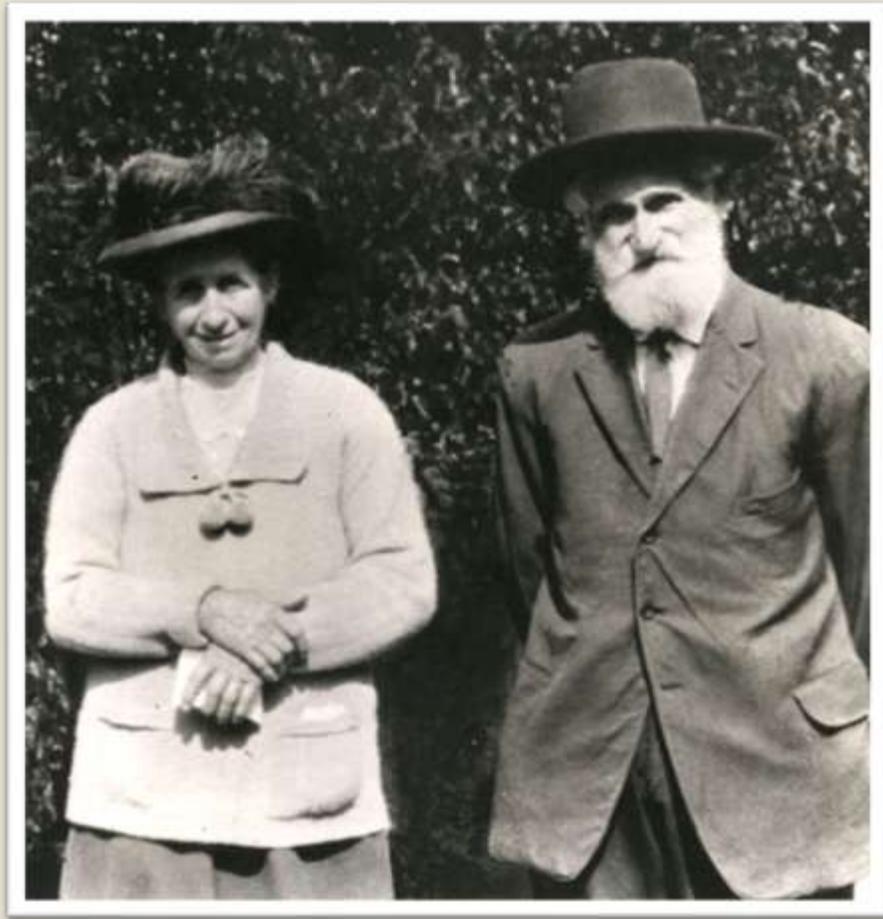
When we think and talk about Oak Bay today it is unlikely that agriculture is a subject that comes to mind. After all, it has been at least 50 years since the last herd of cows walked our laneways or the last plow furrowed what used to be our fertile fields. To consider the earlier times when such sights were common, however, is not merely an exercise in nostalgia. To recognize our agricultural roots is to reconsider our connection to the land and to cultivate a greater appreciation for its gifts.

Although the photographs in this display depict a relatively short time-span in Oak Bay's history it is important to recognize that Aboriginal people were cultivating the land in their own unique ways well before the arrival of the first Europeans just as they continue to do today. Produce of both land and sea have been harvested for millennia in this region in ways that we have much to learn from and it is by no means our intention to obscure this fact by focusing on the more recent history in this exhibit. Rather, it is hoped that through an attempt to re-imagine and reconnect with that more recent past-- the sights, sounds and smells which remain in the living memories of many residents of Oak Bay today-- a conceptual doorway might be opened a little wider to more ancient ways of living and connecting with Nature which have their roots in all regions of world where people have made their homes since time immemorial.



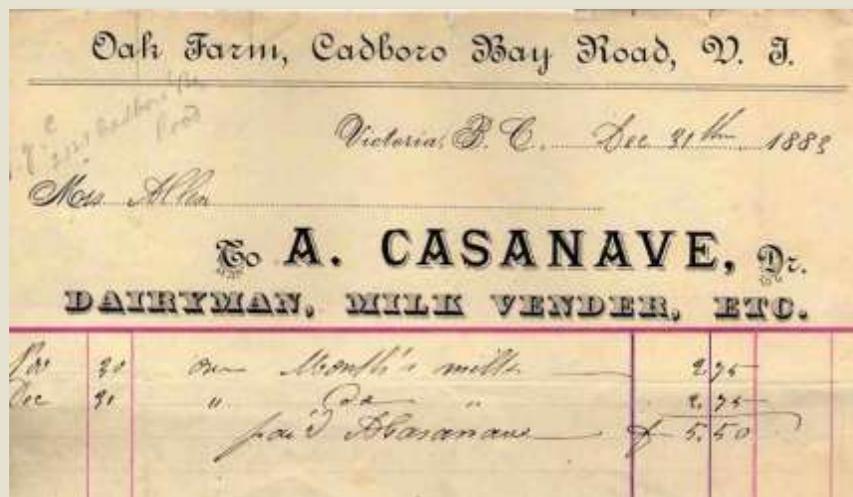
Agricultural exhibitions have occurred regularly in the Victoria area since at least the 1860s but it was not until 1889 that the BC Agricultural Association, which oversaw the promotion and development of agriculture in the Province, moved their centre of operations from Beacon Hill Park to what were then the open fields of Central Oak Bay. A grand new building, widely referred to as Victoria's "Crystal Palace", was

soon built on this new site in order to showcase the agricultural produce and wares of the region. In 1907 the grounds were extended to include an adjoining racetrack and numerous additional facilities assured a diverse and entertaining venue for many years to come. Although the grounds and buildings underwent various transformations throughout the first half of the twentieth century they remained prominent features in the physical and cultural landscape of Oak Bay for more than 60 years, as some of the memories quoted in this exhibit reveal.



Mr and Mrs Alexis Casanave of Oak Farm, Cadboro Bay Road, c1910

The Casanaves emigrated from the Pyrenees region of France in 1862 and, after a period in the goldfields, settled on ten acres of land on the site of what is today Oak Bay High School. The eventual family of nine operated a successful dairy farm and an orchard with upwards of 250 fruit trees there for two generations.



*We had to play [baseball] over at Casanave's dairy farm... They had an old stone house by that tree that's still standing there. There used to be a fence there. If we hit a ball over, the old lady would say, "You've got to pull out the weeds before you get the ball back."*

*She'd go and hide the ball...  
(Dave Pite interview, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985)*



Clara Unwin in a pony cart used for delivering goats milk, c1925

*He was Cecil Unwin and she was Clara Unwin and they had a child, Mary. He worked for the post office. I think he was a sorter. Anyway he used to work the evening shift, but during the day he kept goats and sold goat's milk. They had thirteen goats at one time in that single lot with a little barn behind to keep, really only a shelter, where they had straw for the goats to feed. He used to fill up his bicycle basket with the milk—bottles of milk, and he would go and deliver the milk by bicycle.*

(Daphne Baldwin interview, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

To learn more about the history of Oak Bay contact:

**Oak Bay Archives**  
2167 Oak Bay Avenue  
Victoria, BC V8R 1G2  
Tel: 250-598-3290  
Email: [obarchives@oakbay.ca](mailto:obarchives@oakbay.ca)