

KAREN'S CORNER



Stories of the people, places, and history of Eagle Bay written by Karen Loerke and published in the Eagle Eye and saved on the Eagle Bay Website at <https://www.eaglebaybc.ca/history>.

Reflections of the Hamster Days

This article challenges the notion that meaningful culture can only emerge in big cities or professional venues. The Hamsters' story is a joyful romp that shows how a handful of neighbours—propelled by infectious enthusiasm, laughter, and a fun-loving spirit—created a theatrical legacy that united Eagle and Blind Bay. Their story invites us to celebrate the playful, spontaneous side of grassroots creativity and to recognize how much fun and laughter can spark a community's identity. For over thirty years, the Hamsters brought joy, friendship, and a unique artistic spirit to the region—achievements too numerous to cover in a single article. This edition focuses on their formative years, 1990 to 1999; a subsequent edition will explore their journey from 2000 to 2020.

Last summer, I had the privilege of visiting Dot Salter, the oldest living member from the Hamsters' formative years. Dot recounted her 14 years with the Hamsters with remarkable clarity, reflecting on how each production brought people together and forged friendships among participants and audience members alike. She spoke candidly about her eventual departure, prompted by difficulty hearing her fellow performers and the technical cues. During those formative years, her husband, Bob, served as master of ceremonies, captivating audiences with his stories and humour between scenes.



The Hamsters chose their name to reflect their purpose: “the oldsters hamming it up.” From the start, their shows celebrated fun—inviting everyone to join in laughter, enjoy the jokes, sing along, and delight in the onstage mishaps that made the group so special. As Dot put it, “We welcomed every flub and forgotten line, because that’s where the real comedy happened!” Their first shows, bursting with improvisation and playful energy, were based on nursery rhymes and staged each spring, from March to May. These productions had three acts and always ended with lively refreshments and plenty of chuckles. The first director, Phyllis Asay, was a retired drama teacher who fostered not only creativity but also a sense of joyful mischief in Eagle Bay. All programs were handcrafted, and the props—mostly made from cardboard—were as charming as the performers themselves.



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The first Hamsters show, “The Smugglers,” was presented in March 1990 as a comic operetta, with 14+ performers before sold-out crowds at Eagle Bay Hall. Most members had little or no theatre experience, yet their excitement was evident. As one local newspaper noted, “From a nucleus of four people with musical talent, the group of twenty or so now includes many people with little or no musical or theatrical experience. What the Hamsters lack in experience, they more than made up for in obvious enjoyment.” The program listed names such as Sharbinin, Asay, Mackenzie, Miller, Salter, Pemberton, Summers, Malcolm, Sabulka, Williams, Aparvary, Hurst and Puddifant.

In 1991, the Hamsters staged “A Night at the Cabaret” on May 10 and 11. They filled the night with songs, skits, a fashion show, “Miss Eagle Bay,” and a grand finale. Dot called the fashion show one of her fondest memories. Men strutted down the runway in women’s bathing suits, lingerie, evening gowns, and sports outfits, drawing cheers and laughter as the runway ran down the middle of the Hall. Murdo MacKenzie claimed the crown as Miss Eagle Bay, and the judge had to fetch a ladder just to reach his head—he was that tall! The women later joked they couldn’t wear their outfits after the show; they just didn’t feel right. The night ended with lunch, \$1.65 beer, and \$1.50 wine. That year, Borrowman and Malinowski joined the fun as new members.

Among the songs, the Hamsters performed an acrostic they wrote about themselves, and it was a hit with the audience.

H is for the happy times together.
A is for another show for you.
M is all the months of memorizing.
S is all the sewing that we do.
T is for the tunes we sing and dance to
E is for the eagerness we show.
R is all the reading and the writing.
S is for the smiles that come our way.
Put them together, and they spell Hamsters.

In 1992, the Hall became the Eagle Bay Saloon, which featured “The Tortoise and the Hare Hit the Road,” a sing-along with Pat Payne and Helen McKenzie, and an old-fashioned melodrama, “Not Fit for Man nor Beast!”, complete with the Eagle Bay Dancers! The program announced that “Shootin’ started at 8 pm,” setting the evening’s tone.

In 1993, The Hamster Productions included an Assistant Director, Pete Sharbinin; a Music Director, Pat Payne; a Stage Manager, Cindy Maggiore; a set construction crew; a costume designer; a make-up team; and kitchen staff. The production featured three scenes. 1. “One Spring Morning,” featuring songs from musicals such as Oklahoma!, Bye Bye Birdie, Annie Get Your Gun, and Kismet (Stranger in Paradise).



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2. A Comedy Satire: “Three Penny Opera,” a behind-the-scenes look at talent casting. 3. “The Elevator,” a CBC Radio Playhouse adaptation of a 1974 radio drama, staged for the stage. Dot recounted that it was a difficult play to perform because of costume demands and extensive use of props.



During each production, the Hamsters made intermission part of the fun. The program cheerfully announced, “Ah yess! Time out for libation, a smoke, or a quick run to the biffy! Hurry back because the action resumes in 15 minutes.” This wasn’t a rustic outhouse—the Hall featured modern indoor plumbing, much to everyone’s delight.

In 1994, three-act performances continued with “Snow White and Friends,” a fairy-tale spoof; “Fortune is a Cowboy”; and “Hoboes,” featuring songs such as “King of the Road” and “Springtime in the Rockies.” Throughout these years, the Hamsters radiated a fun-loving spirit—always ready with a joke, a silly wig, or a spontaneous dance. Many of the same names recur across the programs, revealing a “well-oiled machine” theatre troupe on a contagious mission to have fun and spread joy!

In 1995, the Hamsters performed “Jack, the Beanstalk and Chicken,” “Radio Jumble,” and “Neglected Husband’s Sewing Club.” New members that year were Duff, Gratton, Hill, Payne, and Woolsey. During the finale, the Hamsters wrote and sang another hit song: “We’re the Hamsters from Eagle Bay. Show us a stage, and we’ll put on a play. We won’t do Shakespeare or even Neil Simon. But we’ll ham it up and do bad rhyming.” It was a Dr. Seuss story brought to life.





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There were no shows in 1996 or 1998. The reasons aren't clear, but performers sometimes need a break. Even so, the Hamsters' story continued in the years that followed.

In 1997, the group performed "The Ledge" and "Cinderella." In 1999, they staged "Housekeeper Wanted," "The Gift," and "Someday Perhaps." Programs from these years weren't available, so details are limited. Any missing information is unintentional, as these memories come from former performers and the programs that were found.

It's impressive that a small lakeside community like Eagle Bay hosted so many lively, entertaining productions. The secret ingredient? A fun-loving spirit that ran through every rehearsal, every costume change, and every off-key note. Each show showcased the dedication and enthusiasm of everyone involved, from writing scripts and songs to building props, making costumes, applying makeup, preparing meals, learning lines, and managing the stage. Taken together, these efforts celebrated community and creativity—with laughter and light-heartedness at the heart of it all. Audiences always left with smiles and stories to share.

We owe a heartfelt thank you to Dot Salter, who carefully preserved these memories in her organized folders—each brimming with notes about the shows. At 97, she continues to impress us with her remarkable memory. We also celebrate all the participants who turned the Hamsters into an annual event everyone looked forward to, whether you still live in Eagle Bay, have moved away, or have passed on. You built a legacy that will always live on in our stories and our hearts.

MOMENT OF THE MONTH

Dot Salter celebrates her 97th birthday.

At 97, Dot Salter shines as our beloved Honourary Citizen of the Year. This joyful occasion was celebrated with her treasured friends from the Quilt and Craft Club—a vibrant, close-knit circle that brings laughter, creativity, and heartfelt connection every Monday. These wonderful ladies are always there for one another, turning each meeting into a celebration of friendship and plenty of giggles! If you're looking for a welcoming place to belong, there's always room for you to join in the fun on Mondays! Thanks, Inez, for the pictures.

