

The Island Arts Club on its formation in 1909 faithfully reflected the upper crust of Victoria society, and it was subsequently led by a succession of presidents prominent in the social and professional life of Victoria. The scene changed somewhat in 1936 when this role was filled by one C.F. Barker, about whom we knew very little until we had the good fortune to be contacted by Nanaimo resident Brian Excell. As a small boy living in Richardson Street, Brian recalled a next door neighbour whom he described as “a reserved and distinguished white-haired gentleman of short medium height.”

This was Charles (Charlie) Frederick Barker, born in London, England in 1873, and who at the age of 13 immigrated with his family to Vancouver. Brian had actually produced a very creditable short biography of Barker, and was seeking further information to fill in some gaps on his subject. By chance we had just received another query from someone asking about some Barker paintings in his possession, which we were happy to refer to Brian.

Thanks to Brian, we now know that Charlie was an avid cyclist. In the 1890s he was on the executive of the Vancouver Cycling Club and peddled to victory in three provincial championships on the Canadian made “Red Bird” cycle. He had no trouble getting employment in a bewildering succession of positions – purchasing clerk, salesman, timekeeper – sometimes travelling abroad as far as Australia.



However, Barker’s true interests lay in art and painting, and in the late 1920s he took lessons from two artists well-known in western Canada, John Radford and John Clarke Innes. Around about 1930, the Barkers moved to Victoria and Charlie became manager of the Durable Mat Company where he showed talent as an inventor in designing new mats and being awarded a U.S. patent in 1935. He still diligently pursued his art career and in 1931 joined the prestigious Island Arts and Crafts Society, becoming a regular exhibitor in the Society’s annual shows from 1931 to 1938, and again in 1941. He served one year as Society President in 1936-'37, and his work was shown along with Emily Carr and others at an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1939. In 1941 he was listed in the publication “Who’s Who in Northwest Art.”

After 1946 Barker worked briefly as a clerk at the Yarrows shipbuilding site. During this time he enjoyed more time to paint and teach and these were his most productive years as an artist. Painting in the “realistic” tradition best suited his tastes, he had mastered composition and practiced a delicate, spare watercolour technique. His subject matter consisted largely of local seascapes and landscapes. Whilst watercolour was his preferred medium he was also proficient in oils.





It seems that Barker had long yearned to be regarded as a professional painter, and, interestingly, after his death in Victoria in 1953, his death registration lists his occupation as “art teacher,” stating that he had been practicing this for the past ten years.

*~ John Lover*