



DIANA NETHERCOTT

# UNCOVERING VICTORIA'S SECRETS

*UVic student researchers help bring Victoria's history to life on the Internet*

by Debbie Willis

When John Lutz is asked why he teaches web design skills in his history classes, he points to the cardboard boxes stacked in the corners of his office and under the desk.

"Students write papers, and all that original work ends up in boxes like this," says the University of Victoria professor. "I thought, what a waste."

Because Lutz wanted the work of his students to be accessible to others, rather than confined to essays, he started Victoria's Victoria, a website about B.C.'s capital during the Victorian era.

The website contains maps of Chinatown and other locations, a history of Victoria's "red light" district in the 1890s, pictures of old Victoria, and much more information about the capital city. "It's about Victoria, for Victoria, and ultimately by Victorians," says Lutz.

The website was constructed in partnership with Malaspina University College, but consists mostly of student work done for Lutz's classes on local history. Instead of listening to lectures, students do micro-

history projects, meaning they study local events to understand the broader currents of the era. They research topics of their choice in local archives, then present their findings on the web.

"I think one of the things we don't do as well as we could at university is make our teaching active," says Lutz. "I want students to do historical detective work, rather than tell them what other people have found."

Lutz has been guiding his student sleuths since 2002, when he redesigned his local history class to focus on web and research skills.

"The website is an example of how teaching and research are intrinsically connected," he says. "In putting it together, the students and I learn, it's a showcase for new and engaging student research, and it's a growing resource for other researchers."

Victoria's Victoria is being officially relaunched this month to celebrate the addition of more student work, as well as a 1,000-page index to the *British Colonist* newspaper (a predecessor of today's *Times Colonist*) from 1858 to 1919.

The website will include links to other online

books and resources on Victoria's history, a list of the city's mayors, information on cornerstones and time capsules in many of the city's prominent buildings, and a historical timeline. "Researchers, or the just plain curious," says Lutz, "can search the site by decade, theme, person or images."

Lutz is careful to give his students the historical context for their micro-history projects, and doesn't feel that his students learn less than they would in a more traditional class. In fact, he's found that students generally put more effort into the research for their Victoria's Victoria projects than into traditional essays or exams, because their projects will be available to a wider audience.

"The course has really changed my approach to academia," says Laura Ishiguro, a fourth-year honours student in history. "Much of academia seems inwardly focused. This course encourages students to look outwards."

And it's not just the students who appreciate the course. Lutz loves to teach it. "History for me is about detective work, solving mysteries," he says. "It should be fun."

Lutz

## EDGEwise

To find out more about Victoria's colourful past, visit Victoria's Victoria at [www.victoriasvictoria.ca](http://www.victoriasvictoria.ca).

Think Canadian history is dull? Think again. Get in touch with your inner sleuth and visit the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History website at [www.canadianmysteries.ca](http://www.canadianmysteries.ca). The project was created by UVic's John Lutz and Ruth Sandwell, in partnership with Université de Sherbrooke and the University of Toronto.

John Lutz studies the history of the Pacific Northwest, the history of aboriginal and non-aboriginal relations, European colonialism in the Pacific, and the history of race and racialization. He's the winner of UVic's 2006 Craigdarroch Award for Research Communication for his enthusiastic efforts to make historical research accessible and fun for everyone.

University of Victoria researchers were awarded more than \$60 million in external research grants and contracts in 2004/05, nearly doubling over the past five years.

This article was written by Debbie Willis, an English and writing student, and a participant in the UVic SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge).

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