

Synthetic drugs more popular than opiates today

Continued from page 5

“civvie street.” “My nose looked like some of the hockey players’ [noses] when I left the force.”

WHILE ABUSE OF OPIUM-DERIVED drugs was common in the pre-war years, the use of cocaine was markedly diminishing, according to a 1938 Royal Commission on Penitentiaries that focused on drug abuse. Cocaine had been in general use since the 1880s, but its popularity waned in the 1930s after the introduction of over-the-counter sales of amphetamines, which were legal and produced a similar high. (Cocaine use later picked up after amphetamines became more tightly controlled in the mid-1960s.)

The Royal Commission report did, however, warn against the use of *Cannabis sativa*, or “marihuana,” which it said was a particular menace to younger people because the price for “cigarettes” was not as prohibitive as for other drugs.

With a hint of *Reefer Madness*-era hysteria, the report’s authors wrote, “Some authorities claim that the continued use of this drug produces insanity.”

Marijuana had been added to the Opium and Narcotic Drug Act in 1923, but by 1938, there had been only four prosecutions for trafficking in the drug in Canada.

By the late 1960s, however, marijuana and hashish, its derivative, had become hugely popular. In 1969, Vancouver Police made a major drug bust at Vancouver airport, seizing 23 pounds of hashish with a street value of \$70,000. That year, arrests for possession and trafficking in “soft drugs” were nearly twice those for heroin—549 arrests for the former, compared to 330 for the latter.

Heroin use, however, continued to rise. By 1972, Vancouver Police Chief



First drug squad detectives Donald Sinclair (left) and Joseph Ricci (right) in an opium den they've just raided in Chinatown in 1921.

photo courtesy Vancouver Police Centennial Museum

J.R. Fisk called the drug problem an “epidemic.” In the previous five years, the number of heroin traffickers charged annually had ballooned from 16 to 222, while charges for trafficking in soft drugs rose sharply from 31 to 348.

Today, synthetic drugs have eclipsed those derived from the poppy or cocoa leaf.

While marijuana is the number-one illicit drug globally, said RCMP Corp. Scott Rintoul, citing a United Nations study, “amphetamine-type stimulants” like crystal meth, Ecstasy and MDA are a

close second. Cocaine and heroin rank third and fourth.

“We’re seeing an increasing number of chemical labs, and I think that’s a trend that’s going to get worse,” said Rintoul. As an example of the boom in synthetic drug manufacture, he points to Washington State. In 1994, police in that state uncovered 54 methamphetamine labs. Last year, the number had climbed to 1,400.

In B.C., an average of 30 to 40 methamphetamine labs are uncovered each year.

“We have a real problem with the synthetic drugs,” said Rintoul. “And it’s getting worse. Today raves are dying, but there’s more Ecstasy and meth on the street than ever before. Ecstasy is a social drug. It’s now part of the social scene—a house party drug.”

Carter, who wound up commanding the RCMP drug squad, said he’s glad he’s not a police officer working the drug beat today. “I wouldn’t want to be in it at all today. It’s gotten right out of hand.”

He added that, while drugs were typically used only by the “criminal element” in his day, today the population at large is experimenting with them.

“Drug addicts in those days were criminals first and drug addicts next. Not like today where everybody’s sucked in by [drugs].”

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The exhibit *Opium: The Heavenly Demon* is currently on display at Vancouver Museum. It’s co-curated by local author Barbara Hodgson, author of *Opium: A Portrait of the Heavenly Demon*. The exhibit runs until March. The Vancouver Historical Society is also sponsoring a talk Jan. 22 on the history of drug use in Vancouver. The free talk by historian Catherine Carstairs starts at 7:30 p.m. at the Vancouver Museum, 1100 Chestnut St.