

A SHORT HISTORY OF PARKSVILLE

Compiled by Marjorie Leffler

In it's infancy, Parksville was known as Englishman's River. Later it was shortened to "The River". It was not until 1890 that the area became known as Parksville.

The first settler to arrive was John Hirst, who paddled ashore in 1870. He pre-empted the area at the mouth of the river on July 9, 1873, where he built a system of canals and dikes to control the flooding of the river, and raised cattle. He died in 1882 at the age of 55. John's two sons, Albert and John built a house on the property and for ten years were the only white settlers. This house later became the first school.

The village was named after the first postmaster, Nelson Parks, who registered his claim in 1884. It is said that at a social event in his home, he remarked that it looked as though everyone around was present, so we should call this Parksville, and the young settlement was named. Nelson Parks had a small shack near the land that today makes up the Community Park. One interesting story about Parks is this. Coming for mail, a person might find the Parks cabin closed up with a sign on the door- "Out in the field. Go to such and such a fence and holler!"

At this time there were no real roads, although a trail had been blazed in the 1860's from Victoria to Comox. The main travel was by sea. Mail and supplies arrived by boat once every two weeks from Victoria. Early supply boats were the paddle steamer Robert Dunsmuir and sternwheelers Western Slope, Cariboo Fly and the Maude. The Princess Joan was the name of the steamer that brought groceries from Nanaimo.

In 1886 a road was built and in that same year a bridge was built across the Englishman River canyon, and the road proceeded towards the Alberni Valley, on what is now known as Allsbrook Road. A hostel known as Halfway House served as a stopping place for the horse-drawn stages which made regular trips between Nanaimo and Alberni. Joe McCarter owned and ran the Halfway House. He was one of the drivers of the four horse stage which stopped there once a day. Halfway House served the public until 1912 when the E. & N. Railway eliminated the stage coaches and freight wagons.

Before boats brought mail, an indian would carry mail on horseback from Nanaimo to Alberni. He would stop off at the Hirst Hotel over night, up from the Hirst farm at the mouth of the river. It was run by John and Annie Hirst and also served as a telegraph station. It burned down and was replaced by the Sea View Hotel in 1875, which also burned down. They then built the present Rod and Gun Hotel on the Alberni Highway which opened its doors for the first time in 1898. According to their son Tommy, supper, bed and breakfast cost \$1.50. The lumber

for the hotel came from Haslam's sawmill in Nanaimo and was landed on the beach where the community park is now. It was a social gathering place and a stopping place for horse-drawn stages between Nanaimo and Courtenay. Mrs. Hirst served as postmistress for several years in a small building on the hotel property. She was succeeded by her son John and when he went overseas during the first world war, his sister Leah took over until she retired to marry the Parksville station agent, Mr. Firth.

In 1888 a post office was established at French Creek. Mr. W.H. Lee was postmaster and was followed by Mr. Pillar. This office was closed in 1912 when the mail was collected at the Parksville post office.

James and Robert Craig arrived at Craig Bay in 1885 and in 1887 recorded their land claim. Besides sheep farming James was a busy teamster. He petitioned the provincial government to establish a wharf at Arbutus Point (now Madrona Point). It was completed in 1893 and known as Beaver Creek wharf. Coastal steamers came with supplies from Nanaimo and Victoria for the small settlement at Englishman's River. At one time there was also a hotel there but it burned down. The advent of the E. & N. Railway in 1910 curtailed the steamship travel up the coast. James Craig was very involved in the extension of the railway from Nanaimo. His property became a construction camp, complete with blacksmith shop, equipment sheds and the office-home of the project engineer. Eventually a crossing and railway siding were built and became known as Craig's Crossing. Jim Kingsley recalls working there as a very young man. James Craig was also a local postmaster and road foreman. He earned the nickname "Couger" because of his prowess as a cougar bounty hunter. He and his two sons Duncan and Fred had such reputations as cougar hunters that they received calls for assistance from all over the Island. His first car, bought in the 1920's was affectionately known as the cougar wagon. James' son Fred still lives on part of the old Craig property.

The first official school in Parksville was built on land donated by Henry Gaetjen at the corner of the Alberni and Island highways. It opened in October 1891 but closed in February 1892 due to lack of pupils. The first teacher, Miss Kate McKinnon was paid \$50 a month. The school reopened in 1893 with some ingenious ways to meet the number of pupils required. Four year old Isabelle McMillan and twenty three year old Joe Hirst were enrolled. Joe was said to have sat on the front steps and smoked his pipe. By 1913 this school, known as Park School was outgrown and a new school known as McMillan Street School was built on property donated by Mrs. Hirst. It was condemned as dangerous and closed permanently in 1977.

St. Anne's Church was built in 1894. Rev. C. E. Cooper had it built as a memorial to his beloved mother. The first wedding was that of G. W. Pansford to Mr. Pillar's eldest daughter. Rev. C. H. Wilson was the first vicar. His wife ran a nursing home nearby where Wembly Mall now stands. Mrs. Charlotte Hickey, wife of R. H. Hickey was organist for forty four years. The gates of St. Anne's were erected in 1934 by the Parksville Scout troop.

Large scale logging began in the area in 1904. When the first train came through from Nanaimo in 1910, the new station was named McBride Junction, after Richard McBride who was premier at the time. The name never stuck and reverted to Parksville.

In 1910 a Presbyterian church was built in Parksville. It stands in Craig Heritage Park now, much as it was then.

In 1912 there was an influx of settlers to Parksville, due not only to the completion of the E. & N. to Parksville, but also to the Vancouver Island Fruit Land Ltd., a company with offices in London as well as Vancouver, Alberni and Parksville. Carmichael & Muirhead operated a sales office for them at the corner of the Alberni and Comox highway. Next to them was Custance General Store. Across the street was Thwaites & Hickey Real Estate and the Bank of Commerce. Also nearby were Skinner's Blacksmith Shop and a bakery. Due to the upturn in business the Canadian Bank of Commerce opened for one day a week in 1913. As business grew it was given a resident manager, Mr. H. T. Hindmarch in 1915.

The Island Hall Hotel, still on its original site, opened its doors on March 31, 1917. Miss Winnifred Philpott and Miss Joan Foster interrupted a world tour to come here to establish an english country inn. There followed several more owners before Mrs. Mary Sutherland and Eileen Allwood bought the hotel in 1947 and proceeded to expand and modernize the premises, so that it was the centre of the business and social life of the community for many years. It still retains much of its original charm.

In 1923 Parksville Community Park was purchased by a group of interested local residents, to preserve the beach for the people of the district. It cost them \$4000 with a \$500 discount for paying it off in five years.

In 1920 a co-op for poultry and farm produce was started, in a building close to the Parksville railway junction. W. Stanhope was the manager and E. D. Thwaites served as secretary. About eighty percent of the farmers between Qualicum and Nanoose provided produce for the society.

No history of Parksville would be complete without the mention of three other names. Mr. & Mrs. H. K. Harrison arrived in 1911 and established Harrison's Resort on Parksville beach next to the Community Park.

Mr. George A. Tranfield was one of the colourful characters of Parksville. Until his death in 1989 he lived on the site of the old Halfway House. He spoke chinook and the native indian language. He was born in 1891 and travelled with his fathersurveying the road from Parksville to Alberni and to Courtenay. A "Jack of all trades" in the true sense of the word, Mr. Tranfield was also a naturalist and a forest ranger on Little Mountain when the forestry look-out tower was

built there.

Last, but not least, was another colourful character, William Rath, who settled here in 1886. He originally came to Canada from Ireland in search of gold. He and his brother participated in the 1849 California Gold Rush. On a holiday from Barkerville in 1858 William and his brother George landed a canoe south of the Englishman's River estuary and were impressed with the land. On a visit home to Ireland he married Elizabeth, his family's nineteen year old servant girl (he was fifty six). In 1888 their second daughter Mary was born, the first white child born in the area. All told there were five Rath children. In 1895 William purchased two parcels of land from the E. & N. Railroad at the present Rath Trevor Park site. He was Justice of the Peace for this area until he died in 1903 at the age of seventy two. Elizabeth was left to cope with a young family. The Rath farm developed slowly as a camp site with a 25 cent fee for picnics and 50 cents for a weekend camp. After Elizabeth's death her son George operated the camp, but on his death in 1968 Rath Trevor Campsite became Rath Trevor Provincial Park and B.C. Parks took over operation of the site.

The names of the early pioneers can now be found on street signs and recall the early days of this thriving city. Today, as then, the beaches and the mild weather bring people to Parksville. Instead of farmers we now have retirees who find the recreational area, as well as the warm climate to their liking.

* Marjorie Leffler came to Parksville in 1945 and has lived here ever since. She is one of the founding members of the District 69 Historical Society and served two terms as president. At the present time she is the administrator of the Craig Park Heritage Museum and a director of the society.