



History Washing Away

by John Millen

Coastal erosion has been quite noticeable around the Island these past few winters. One site I have been watching is on the northern-most coast of the Island. It is located at the base of the spit leading to Longbeak Point across the neck of land at the northwest end of Henry Bay. Here successive storms have been eating away at a midden. This ancient pile of debris, mostly clam shells, was deposited by generations of First Nations people living here. This particular deposit, now exposed, measures up to ten feet thick. At other places around that shore a relatively thin layer of black soil laced with white shells is also being eroded.

In his Journal, Captain G.H. Richards recorded the scene in Henry Bay in April 1860 when his ship H.M.S. Plumper was anchored there in the course of surveying the coasts of Denman and Vancouver Island.

“April 16, Monday ...The Indians from the Various Villages are collecting at this point – and bringing the moveable parts of the Villages with them. We have had an accession of about 40 today and now number about 80 here. They appear to shift from one village to another according to the season. In Summer they generally encamp at the sheltered head of some bay – for convenience of gathering berries where they remain till Spring. Then as at this time they shift to the Island bays and sea coast for fish and clams.”

“April 19, Thursday. Cold SE wind - unable to move today as I had intended; the bad weather of yesterday preventing our completing some soundings and getting satisfactory observations for lat and time. Landed this morning for them. Succeeded but partially. At 9 am a canoe was seen approaching from the Southd. with 3 flaunting banners of bright yellow. The natives recognised them as the priests and on a volley being fired from the Canoe a commotion ensued at the Village now numbering from 100 to 150 Indians. They have almost ousted me from my observation spot by erecting their houses right over it. The holy fathers landed on the beach at 9.30 the greater part of the Indians being ready to receive

them. ... They harangued the multitude for a few minutes and then the yellow banners were removed to a convenient spot on shore where the natives immediately commenced a house of planks and mats either for a church or temporal residence for the shepherds. I was glad to see the tabernacle erected some 300 yards from me for the sake of my observations. ...The Village has increased wonderfully, now nearly 300 people with 61 considerable large canoes and the point covered with their houses. Got star latitudes this evening.”

In the 1860s, and for countless generations before that, intensive use was being made of Henry Bay and the adjacent spit by both Pentlatch and Comox people. The archaeological evidence of long and continuous use of that area was described by C. E. Borden in 1956 as shell middens originally covering an area of 10 hectares, running parallel to the shore for nearly a mile and up to 15 feet deep. The midden comprised mainly clam shells with bones of deer, seals and whales also present. Borden concluded from the midden's size that it must have been a village site although “evidence of habitation was no longer discernable”. By the time of his visit much of the midden had been destroyed by a commercial shell extraction operation that had operated there for the North West Clamshell Plant of New Westminster beginning in 1945 and winding up in the early 1950's. In 1949 a total of 3000 tons of shell was shipped.

An archaeological survey of Denman Island in 1975 identified 33 sites around the Island judged to be worth recording.

Further reading: The Private Journal of Captain G.H. Richards – The Vancouver Island Survey (1860 – 1862) Ronsdale Press 2011