

Judge Crease and Denman Island

By John Millen

Why a prominent citizen of Victoria, Judge Henry Crease, would take an extensive interest in Denman Island in the early years of settlement is puzzling. In Winnifred Isbister's *'My Ain Folk'* we read that the Judge bought two valuable farm properties near the wharf during the late 1800's and also donated the land for the Anglican Church. His farm was leased to others for many years. He also tried to build a hotel, but apparently the community would not allow that.

In 1885, when he bought the Denman property, the Judge was a pillar of society in Victoria. He and his wife Sarah, with their four daughters and two sons lived in the grand home (Pentrelew) built for them in 1875 on Fort Street. That area became the hub of Victoria society as even larger homes were subsequently built there for Robert Dunsmuir (Craigdarroch Castle) and for a prominent banker A.A. Green (Gyppeswyck – now the Art Gallery for Victoria). Judge Crease would continue to serve on the Supreme Court of BC until 1896.

The Crease land purchase on Denman Island in 1885 could have been just a speculation. Judge Crease had formerly owned two large blocks on Lulu Island in the Fraser River delta; now Richmond. He had done well out of that investment. But he got more involved in his farm on Denman Island.

In the early 1880's Robert Dunsmuir was quietly buying up the shares of the three failed coal mines along Baynes Sound and at Comox Lake and in 1884 he got his outrageous land grant of coastal Vancouver Island as compensation for building the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Rail line. But interest in farm land on Denman was at a low ebb in 1885 after the failures of the Baynes Sound mine beside the Tsable River and the Perseverance mine at Union Bay.

The main speculative purchase of land on Denman didn't take place until 1888 when Dunsmuir's Cumberland Mines started producing coal. That year partners A.R. Johnstone and T.W. Glaholm between them obtained Crown Grants of about one third of the area of Denman Island. These two Nanaimo traders, veteran land speculators, were especially interested in Gulf Island properties. In that year also Joseph McPhee, recognised as the founder of Courtenay, subdivided and started selling town lots on his land adjacent to the Fifth Street Bridge where downtown Courtenay grew up. So the Judge was well ahead of the pack with his Denman purchase.

Crease was well aware of the potential for coal mining. Writing in December 1888 to Hawthorn, Thwaite Planter & Co. about offering his land for sale he concluded: "Perhaps you don't know, as I do that there's rich coal under it, and not deep. A few lots together there would mean money. I wonder no one else has thought of it."

Judge Crease insisted that his Denman land be properly farmed. Writing to his local agent Guiseppe Rodello in July 1885 he wrote that the agreement with his tenant should include terms requiring "breaking new ground" and "proper manuring and cultivation". And much later in April 1899 his tenant wrote tersely: "... I am planting potatoes and getting in some peas. Weather fine for last 2 weeks All Well --- James Graham."

As financial gain is not entirely satisfactory in explaining the extent of the Judge's interest in Denman Island we can consider some family connections. The Crease family was well connected with the Denmans, yes those Denmans! Rear Admiral the Hon. Joseph Denman was the featured guest at a grand party given by Governor Seymour in New Westminster on November 8, 1864. At that date Henry Crease was Attorney General for the Colony of British Columbia, and resident in New Westminster. Although I have not found evidence that Crease was among the 200 guests, I cannot imagine that he and his wife missed it. Crease would have had many other opportunities to meet the Admiral during the two years of Denman's appointment as Commander of the Pacific Fleet.

Henry Crease had a much more substantial connection with Joseph's younger brother George Denman. Crease and George Denman had followed almost identical careers through Cambridge University and both went on to qualify as lawyers to be admitted to the Bar in London. George was ahead by three years. Later those two families exchanged visits and supported each other's children. At Christmas 1877 we find George Denman writing to Crease describing the visit of his son, 10 year-old Lindley Crease who had been sent to attend school in England. Lindley's "exemplary fortitude" on the occasion of being introduced to the large Denman family circle was commended. George also thanked Henry Crease for 'all your kindness and hospitality' though when and where the hospitality was extended is not apparent.

In April 1887 Crease wrote to the Honorable J.A. Chapleau in Ottawa asking for his active influence in support of the application of Francis Denman (son of George Denman) to be appointed Subaltern in the Canadian Artillery Regiment.

George and Henry maintained a correspondence throughout their lives. Both men ended their careers as distinguished judges of their respective Supreme Courts. Crease was knighted after his retirement in 1896.

Researcher's Note: the above is the result of a skim through a small portion of the substantial Crease Archive at the Royal BC Museum. Such collections are measured as if all the paper were piled in a stack. The stack of Crease archives is 10.8 meters high.