

This Place

A Hotel on Denman Island?
(the Crease story continued from the May Flagstone)

by John Millen

In 1886 Judge Crease was assessed for taxes on 285 acres of Denman Island. The farm was valued at \$1800 and taxes due were \$9 with a discount to \$6 for early payment. He had bought the land from Guiseppe (Joe) Rodello the previous year. Crease's land was beside Baynes Sound starting at the creek that flows in the gully across Denman Road from the Anglican Church and extended northward about a mile measured along the shore. It therefore included all the present downtown area of Denman Island.

Crease wanted his land to be farmed and developed. He leased some of the land to Charles Dubois Mason for 12 years, the yearly rental for the first two years being 'a peppercorn (if demanded)' and for subsequent years \$75. During the lease Mason was to erect a store or shop and hotel with Crease providing the lumber and other necessary materials. Mason was bound by the lease to "not sell or supply ...on any part of the premises any spirits, beer or other intoxicating liquors except for the purpose of supplying spirits, wine and beer to bonafide guests of such hotel ... to be drunk with or in connection with their meals..."

Crease had a drawing made (and approved by surveyor George Drabble of Comox) of the proposed hotel. The plans and elevations showed a two story structure with six upstairs bedrooms and a 'Store', 'Sitting room' and hallway on the main floor. There was a lean-to kitchen at the back. The whole building was 35 feet square with the two story part 20 feet x 35, no bigger than a modest family residence would be these days.

As well, he was required to cultivate and manure all the cleared land and maintain fences.

On 28 October 1886 the rough lumber for the hotel arrived at the Denman Wharf on the SS Dunsmuir. On 4 November Mason wrote to Crease: "I find I shall have considerable difficulty getting a licence. I told Swan, in answer to his inquiries, the nature of the licence to be sought & I have since heard from two independent sources that the 'two thirds majority' will not object to a licence being obtained if it is a full one but they object to the terms of the Lease & are resolved that if they are not allowed to procure liquor in moderation themselves neither shall any visitor...."

Mason was disappointed with the farm from the outset. He found the cleared land only about 10 acres when he had been led to believe it was near 20. The barn was so poorly built it was falling down. Nevertheless he pressed on with construction, ordering hardware and materials he needed, on credit. During the winter the question of the liquor licence was not resolved and, though the 'hotel' building was completed to lock-up, by April '87 Crease was looking for a new tenant. Mason had moved to Enderby and maintained correspondence with Crease to try to resolve the outstanding bills incurred during construction.

Abraham Pickles wrote offering to lease the farm for three years in exchange for doing the following: split 200 rails and fence in the gap in the upper enclosure; clear off the logs and bushes from the hay field; build a new barn 30 feet long by 25 feet wide and 14 feet high, including splitting shakes for the roof and hewing out the frame. Abraham Pickles, brother of Dave who had the Swale Farm, already had 160 acres out by Henderson Lake (now known as Chickadee Lake). His offer was not accepted.

The first Denman Wharf had been built in 1886, close to where the present boat-launch ramp is located at Denman West, it was on the shore in front of Crease's property. Later that year a petition was sent to the Hon. W. Smithe (Premier of BC 1883 – 1887) requesting the provision of a landing stage shoreward of the wharf to make loading and unloading ships easier. All the settlers of that era signed the petition. They also asked for construction of a 'Public Highway' across the Island along the alignment of the present Denman Road. George Drabble's comment to Judge Crease on the petition was "The Denman Island Settlers must think themselves a very important community."

A hint that Judge Crease might have been aspiring to create an estate reminiscent of his family's land in England comes from his naming the property "Clahayer" which is a name associated with Cornwall. In his early career the Judge had been Manager of a Cornish mine, though that had not turned out well for him.