

This Place

What is: A Humdergen

by John Millen

In *My Ain Folk* Winnifred Isbister describes a 'Humdergen Railroad' used for logging on Denman Island in the 1920's (page 166). As she describes it the 'rails' were actually two lines of wood poles spaced 12 feet apart and the wheels that ran on the 'rails' had concave rims. A caterpillar tractor provided the motive power.

At various places around Denman Island one can still find 'Railway Grades' built to accommodate a standard gauge railway, but a grade for the 12 foot guage Humdergen railway has proved elusive. Some potential wide-guage earthworks have been found in the vicinity of the Squamish Logging operations that occurred in the Pickles Road/Central Road area. This operation of the 1920's and 30's was supported by a standard guage railway that delivered logs to Denman (Village) Point in Baynes Sound. However those particular 'wide-guage' earthworks did not maintain a uniform guage width and therefore would not support the Humdergen railway described by Isbister.

In Wallace Baikie's *Rolling with the Times* (1985) we find more logging equipment termed a 'Humdergon'. In 1934 Wallace and his brothers Harper and Jack used this machine to work out a shinglebolt claim on the Bloedel, Stewart & Welsh property at Union Bay. They then were contracted to log the fir timber in that area. Their Humdergon consisted of a heavy timber frame mounted on two sets of boxcar wheels driven by a Fordson engine through a chain and sprocket system. Running on a standard guage railway the Humdergon and its one trailer delivered logs to the log dump at Union Bay.

Wallace notes that by taking on this depression era contract that required them to borrow money to buy equipment – the Humdergon and a jury-rigged winching system – the brothers were launched on a 30 year successful career as logging contractors.



The Ladysmith Humdergin

More widely known was the humdirgen that was used by Comox Logging at the Royston log dump for unloading logs off the railway flat cars into the waters of the booming ground. The first such machine was built at the Comox Logging Machine Shop at Headquarters in the Comox Valley. It was made from a wood-fired donkey engine grafted onto the chassis of an old locomotive and it served at Royston until 1928. Its replacement, by a similar machine, had an oil-fired engine.

The Royston humdirgen ran on a track parallel to the line of flat cars and with its long arm reaching over the loaded flat cars its winch, line and swamp hook tumbled the logs down into the booming ground. This log dump was established in about 1911 and a photo (c.1914) shows the humdirgen in action there. In construction of the log booms that were towed to distant mills, perhaps on the Fraser River, the humdirgen also had a role. After the tugs working the waters of the boom grounds had assembled and filled the enclosure of boom logs, the humdirgen was used to pull the swifter logs across the top of the boom.

When Comox Logging set up an operation at Ladysmith in 1945 they needed a machine to dump logs from the flat cars into Ladysmith Harbour. They built another Humdurgin (sic). This machine was built on the chassis of a retired Shay steam engine that had served on the coast since 1910, and it was powered by an 8 cylinder gas engine. It was reputed to be able to dump the logs from a 30 car train in 15 minutes. This Humdurgin served until 1984 when rail logging ceased in that area. It is now at the former Comox Logging & Railway shops at Ladysmith.

Note: unwilling to arbitrate I have adopted the various spellings of Humd-rg-n of my sources (every one was different!).

Reference: *Island Timber* by Richard Somerset Mackie, Sono Nis Press, 2000