

Camping on Denman Island

by Graham Brazier

Camping and summer go together like, dare I say, corn and butter. And camping on Denman Island has a long and pleasing history, creating memories that bring smiles to the faces of many families that perpetuate the tradition to this day. Camping, though, didn't become formalized here until 1954, when George Beadnell sold his estate at Filongley to the province for \$1. The actual dollar bill is preserved, and, to this day, you can visit it at the Denman Museum.

Ninety years earlier, however, Robert Brown, 22-year-old “botanical collector” trained at the University of Edinburgh, along with nine members of the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition spent the night of August 19, 1864, at Village Point — now called Denman Point. Their mission, at a time when little was known about the interior of Vancouver Island, was vaguely understood to be scientific in nature — that is, botanical, zoological and geological — but discreetly tucked away in the back of many of their minds was the word: “gold.”

They were a diverse group with a wide range of skills and talents and were described by their leader as “wondrously motley.” Among them was One-armed Tomo. He was born Thomas Ouamtany in 1824 but also known as Tomo Antoine as well as “the notorious Iroquois” and was the designated guide and hunter for the expedition. That's right — a one-armed hunter. He was also a linguist, cartographer and story-teller and one who was alleged to be “obstreperous in his cups.” In addition, he had spent a month or so in jail the previous year, before being released due to insufficient evidence to convict him of murdering his wife, Jane.

Nevertheless, when the expedition concluded, Brown summed up his contribution with the words: “During all our long connection none of us had ever reason to regret the day when he joined our party, and to this hour, One-armed Tomo, the swarthy vagabond of the western forests, is only remembered as a hearty fellow — prince of all hunters and doctor of all woodcraft — whose single arm was worth more than most men's two, and without whose help the map of Vancouver [Island] would have been but a sorry blank yet. [1868]”

Frederick Whymper, aged 42, on the other hand, was the son of a well-known London engraver and was an accomplished painter who had exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art. His task was to record visually the geography travelled by the expedition, and his sketches and paintings, many of which are reproduced in a variety of art publications, provide a record of the group's campsites.

Unfortunately, Village Point is not among them. He did, however, leave a mark on Denman Island. He reported that on the 19th of August, 1864, he left a cross on which he “painted V.I. Ex. Expn. Camped at Village Point, Denman Island — Here there is a deserted village with the

remains of large lodges — figure heads on posts &c. and all that there is to show it once was inhabited by the living is a box or two in the trees of dead Siwash.” It’s hard to imagine that he didn’t paint what he described so vividly. Perhaps he did, and it has been misplaced, and some fortunate researcher will one day stumble upon it.

We do, however, have Robert Brown’s words, which leave us with a wonderfully colourful description of the camp site on that day in August of 1864. He wrote:

“Judging that we could not make Comous [sic] before dark, we camped on village point of Denman Island, on the deserted Village of the Comous. It still retained traces of its former grandeur — pickets, carved images, &c, & massive hewn cedar frames. These carvings are all much of the same nature, some of them very obscene, their women and children being represented *in part* *Naturalibes*. Others of their figures refer to their Mythology & the figure of the owl occurs frequently, the bird of Athens among the Indians as among the Greeks being a bird of superstition....The Village where we camped must once have been very extensive but is now quite deserted & nothing but the frames stand.”

He then noted a challenge, all too familiar to campers, when he wrote: “After a long search [we] found water in a wood where none but an Indian could have found it.”

The following morning, before the expedition left Denman Island and set out for Port Augusta (Comox), Brown noted: “Up at 6 a.m. — cold and chilly with heavy dew on the ground.” He then added something that many of us have come to know: “The heavy dews commence about this time.”

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For further reading see: John Hayman, ed. “Robert Brown and the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition,” UBC Press, 1989.