



Colonial Settlement Patterns

by John Millen

The Denman Museum recently acquired a map of Denman Island showing the names and dates of those who acquired, from the Crown, title to each parcel of land. The earliest date on the map is 1877, though the first settlers were here by 1874 according to *My Ain Folk*. In fact there is a record of George Drabble arranging to ship lumber to Denman Island in the fall of 1873.

Most of the earlier dates on the map seem to be the date of recording a pre-emption. While the details of the rules for pre-emption changed over time, basically it was staking a claim to a parcel of Crown land. Having staked and recorded a claim, the settler had the exclusive right to use that land as long as he continued to occupy it. After 2 years occupation of the land the settler was entitled to a Crown Grant for that land by purchase at a price of \$1 per acre. In those days a skilled worker could earn \$2 per day.

The first settlers generally chose coastal land for its easy access, and almost all their claims were on the Baynes Sound shores. A few chose inland areas where there were large seasonal (or drainable) wetlands because of the potential there for an immediate harvest of a hay crop. Shores previously occupied by the First Nations were also prized because the big trees were gone and the rich soil of the middens could produce a bountiful early harvest. The McFarlane brothers were the only settlers in 1877 – 78 to choose the eastern shores of the island.

Claiming Denman Island land with farming potential by settlers continued for the next 10 years. However by 1888 a huge change in the progress of colonization had occurred in the Comox Valley region. Robert Dunsmuir had acquired the coal mine in Cumberland (at that time called the Union Mine) and commenced its expansion. He also had the development of a coal port at Union Bay well underway. From his deal to build the E & N Railway,

he owned coal and land rights all along the Eastern shoreline of Southern Vancouver Island. This situation precipitated the great Denman Island land rush of 1888.

On April 30 and May 1, 1888 a consortium of four land speculators from Nanaimo and Victoria obtained Crown Grants of 4119 acres of Denman Island. That was virtually all the land not previously claimed, a third of the island's area. This assemblage of land became the property of a succession of forestry companies, ending under the ownership of gippo-logger Mike Jenks by his company 4064 Investments Ltd. Jenks logged most of this land between 1997 and 2001.

Evidence of settler activities can still be found on some parts of Denman Island. My own lot is part of the land that was first pre-empted by Walter Piercy, youngest son of Matthew and Agnes Piercy who brought their family to the Comox area from New Brunswick in 1875. Walt (as he was generally known) was 17 when he pre-empted the lot on the south side of Denman Road from the Baynes Sound waterfront to the Lacon corner. While he is said to have occupied the lot, his activities included logging with his brother Sam at Union Bay and he later married, abandoned his Denman pre-emption and farmed without notable success in the Comox Valley. In 1882 Joe Rodello, a Comox man of many parts, obtained a Crown Grant of Walter's land.

On my lot there is a surprising amount of evidence remaining from the activities of those early settlers. There are many stumps of cedar trees felled with axes by men standing on springboards; the boulders moved to the edges of the pasture; the remains of split rail fences and rather mysteriously the underground drains. These drains, some still working after a fashion, are ditches filled with small boulders and topped with turf. I presume they are designed to provide drainage without risking having the house cow stumble into an open ditch, or perhaps to smooth the passage of the hay mower. The border with Denman Road seems to have been planted with an English hedgerow comprising hawthorn and crabapple. John Kirk remembers, as a teenager, helping to make hay on this land. Then for something like 40 years it lay unused except by the deer, colonized by broom and invading hawthorn.