



This Place

Denman Cedar

by John Millen

Daily Colonist, Victoria 6 September 1874

COMOX.—The Maude had a very pleasant trip to Comox last week. At Nanaimo she took in tow two large rafts of fine cedar, cut on Denman Island by Mr. Wilson, contractor for the Courtney River bridge. The wharf is progressing very fast. All the timber is on the ground. The Lieutenant-Governor and party were enjoying themselves at the settlement and intended to remain there till the return of the Maude. The farmers are nearly through with the harvest. Comox is peopled by a fine set of men and the settlement is about the most prosperous on the Island.

John Wilson, together with Joseph McPhee had contracted, at the end of July 1874, to build a wooden bridge over the Courtenay River right where the 5th Street bridge now stands. The pair were, in September 1874, also well along with the construction of the Comox wharf as noted above by the Colonist.

John Wilson was among the first settlers in the Comox Valley. In September 1862 he, together with J W Lawrence had applied for preemption of 300 acres in the area where Vanier Secondary School is now. This was land described in 1860 by one of the early British visitors, Richard Mayne, as: “a large prairie stretching East and West 4 or 5 miles, covered with long grass or fern...” Clearly that land had been maintained in that state by the Pentlatch people.

By 1871, when he and Joseph McPhee met, Wilson had leased out his farm and was working as the purser on the coastal steamer SS Otter.

Joseph McPhee had gained some experience in heavy timber construction as he worked, as a labourer for the Union Pacific Railway, building snow sheds in the Rocky Mountains east of San Francisco.

To supply cedar pilings for the wharf the contractors had scoured all the local shorelines and near-shore areas for their timber. Construction of the wharf was a major project. It was required, according to the Royal Navy survey, to extend 90 Fathoms (540 feet) from the low water mark to provide 14 feet deep water. There was also to be sufficient space on the deck at the outer end to turn around an Ox team. Sawn lumber needed for the construction was brought in from Sayward’s Mill at Mill Bay (Shawinigan Lake).

I have a problem with the Daily Colonist’s story that the rafts of cedar from Denman Island were ‘taken in tow at Nanaimo’. That tow would have added an extra day to the Maude’s voyage and geographically made no sense. Clearly the tow to Comox was just from Denman Island, probably Henry Bay, and possibly another location as well, accounting for the ‘two rafts’.

Cedar was specified by George Drabble, Comox Valley Superintendent of Roads, to be used for the pilings and Douglas fir for the superstructure, the same for the wharf as for the bridge. Clearly, by this time the settlers understood cedar’s valuable resistance to decay as well as the strength and toughness of fir.

Denman Island was said to be favoured by the First Nations people for obtaining cedar for carving out canoes. That would mean cedar trees having good growing sites (wet), sheltered from strong winds and handy to the shore. Or at least with a good slope down to the beach for sliding the rough shaped canoe to water. Then that rough canoe body could be paddled to the canoe carver’s winter home location for finishing.

The new bridge over the Courtenay River was opened on Dominion Day (July 1st) 1875. The opening was attended by dignitaries from Victoria. The superstructure of the bridge had been festooned with greenery and the deck smoothed for dancing. Refreshments were served and the festivities and dancing continued into the wee hours.

In the late 1880’s Joseph McPhee acquired the 80 acres immediately west of the Bridge and proceeded to lay out for sale the subdivision that became the City of Courtenay.

1874 is also the first year that settlement on Denman Island is recorded. That year Alexander McMillan settled on the land around Village (Denman) Point as described in This Place, Flagstone, July 2023.