



Central Park- the Back Story

by John Millen

How is it possible that 150 acres of good land in a prominent location on the main road across the island could become a conservation area with no more development than a few trails?

By 1888, when development of the Cumberland coal mines brought this general area to the attention of land speculators, most of the land around the shore of Denman Island had already been taken up by settlers. Land with good farming prospects in the interior of the island had also been pre-empted, but not the Central Park block. In May of that year four speculators from Victoria and Nanaimo bought all the remaining crown land amounting to about one third of the Island's area. This land was sold first to the Dunsmuir interests who owned the coal mines and eventually those land holdings (3,875 acres) were transferred to Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd. in 1915.

The Canadian Collieries land was managed and harvested as a working forest by Weldwood from 1966 until 1995 when it was sold to John Hancock Insurance Company. The new ownership started the series of events described previously in Flagstone issues of September and October 2017 culminating in the logging of all the remaining marketable timber on the land by 4064 Investments Ltd. Central Park forests were logged, first in patches by Hancock (including by horse-logging) and later completely by 4064.

By the summer of 2005, with logging finished and law suits settled, it was understood on the Island that a developer had bought all of 4064's land. Nevertheless Denise MacKean has a vivid memory of seeing a diminutive 'For Sale' sign on the Central Park land as she drove by. Denise immediately felt strongly that this land would be an excellent purchase for Denman Conservancy Association (DCA), and that time was of the essence in securing the land.

It is not clear why the Central Park parcel of land was not included in the sale to the developer. Possibly it was

not sought by them because, with its forestry zoning, it only permitted one residence for the whole 150 acres. (Island rumours suggested that the developer/purchaser was late with its payments and 4064 was putting pressure on for the completion of the sale.)

A rapid purchase by DCA would entail some difficulties. Its land acquisition reserve fund was substantial at the time, largely as a result of fundraising for the failed attempt to purchase the Chickadee Lake parcel. The offer to 4064 for that parcel had been refused. Nevertheless DCA's fund was less than half the asking price for the Central Park land. Further, such a purchase would have to be approved by a Special General Meeting of DCA members which would take a month to arrange. Finally banks are not usually willing to lend money with bare land as security.

The solution found was the purchase of the land by a friend of DCA who subsequently sold it to DCA. The special meeting of DCA members approved this plan and DCA undertook to raise the funds owing within five years.

In launching its campaign to raise funds for the purchase, DCA published its 'Central Park Vision' explaining the name as a reference to Manhattan's 800 acre Central Park, and projecting the ambition to secure for conservation 800 acres of undeveloped land between Denman Road and Chickadee Lake. A substantial start on this ambition had already been made with the purchase many years earlier of the Inner Island Nature Reserve and the more recent acquisition of the Settlement Lands.

Denise played a major role in creating the management plan for Central Park, choosing to develop an extensive network of trails throughout the property for recreational use. Later, Mountain Equipment Co-op provided funds towards the construction of the Boardwalk, an attractive addition to the network of trails.

In 2010, the DCA membership passed a resolution to donate one hectare of Central Park to Denman Island Memorial Society for use as a natural burial ground. The gift was conditional on the establishment of a conservation covenant designed to protect the conservation values of the land which has resulted in the attractive cemetery we have today.