

An Early Boom and Bust

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“The Great Stone Quarry” that Doras Kirk wrote about in the *Comox District Green Sheet* in 1962 began operation on the 22 acre property adjacent to Denman Road near the intersection of Pickles Road in 1908. The property, now behind the Graffiti Fence, had been acquired for \$50,000 by Sam Dumaesq and Al Tait, who, one source referred to as ‘the genial president’ of the Denman Island Stone Company which turned out to be a vigorous contributor to economic growth and prosperity for a community that had been largely dependent on farming and logging.

The daily operation of the quarry employed as many as 30 workers and, for a number of years, supplied sandstone for the construction of numerous noteworthy buildings in both Vancouver and Victoria as well as provided the cornerstone for Saint Saviour’s Anglican Church at the top of the ferry hill. Its operation had a great impact on the community of Denman Island when it began shipping sandstone to Vancouver in 1908. An influx of workers and their families pushed school enrolment to a record-setting 54 in 1912, a number that was not exceeded for many years, and also provided some of the motivation for the opening of the general store, an enterprise that has been close to the heart of the community ever since.

Then, sometime in April or May of 1913, when property taxes for 1912 remained unpaid, the local owners, Sam and Al, sold the quarry for \$100,000 to a syndicate of non-residents with great expectations as well as influence in high places. A spokesman for the syndicate, T. F. Paterson, a nephew of Thomas Wilson Paterson, Lieutenant-Governor of the Province, subsequently contributed a lengthy and ebullient plea for investors to support the construction of a wharf in Victoria to accommodate the shipping of sandstone from Denman Island to that city in May of 1913. In his exuberance he claimed that reports of “our experts” indicate that “there is material enough in sight at the present time to last for the next four thousand years”.

Mr. Paterson, however, neglected to mention that the Denman Island Stone Company had still not paid its land taxes for the preceding year. This did not become common knowledge until September 2, 1913 when the Deputy Assessor for Comox Assessment District, John Baird, announced that if taxes of \$57.50 due December 31, 1912 remained unpaid by the Denman Island Stone Company on October 11, 1913 the lands would be sold by public auction.

It’s not clear if the provincial government was aware of this when, at the direction of Premier McBride, — perhaps with the support of Thomas Wilson Paterson, Lieutenant-Governor of the Province — it offered the company a helping hand by requiring that the contractor engaged in constructing the new Provincial Normal School in Victoria substitute Denman Island sandstone for the terra cotta required in the approved

architectural plans. This substitution would result in a cost increase of \$27,000 but would, it was hoped, create local employment on Denman Island.

It seems, however that the scepticism of investors proved justified by the passage of time as it was discovered that the sandstone was found to deteriorate rapidly when exposed to the weather and, in 1917, it was reported that the Denman Island Stone Company Limited, was in hands of a liquidator.

100 years after it was in the hands of a liquidator the old quarry property is now Crown Land and, on November 20, 2017, it attracted the attention of a rock climber who, in an inter-net post titled "Confidence to Go Farther", invited other climbers to visit, what he referred to as, "Deadman's Quarry" on Denman Island.

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Sources: Too numerous to list though they will be attached to the piece when it appears on the Denman Island Archives pages.