

CULLITON BROS – PACIFIC NORTHWEST RAILWAY TRESTLE BUILDERS

By Eric Andersen, November 2020

All around the Pacific Northwest between the 1880s and 1920s impressive timber trestle and bridge structures were built for railways – especially logging railways.

With few exceptions these timber structures are long gone. Some have been replaced with steel. As we contemplate the photographic record of these feats of engineering skill and extraordinary labour, we might ask, “Who built these structures?”

It seems that mountain railway timber trestles and bridges were often built by specialized contracting firms, whose names have been largely forgotten.

Pacific Northwest forest industry history writing generally does not discuss who these builders were.

For the writing of his B.C. coast logging history, *Working in the Woods*, historian Ken Drushka interviewed former Merrill & Ring Lumber Co. Squamish Division employee Ed Aldridge in 1991 about his late 1920s photographs of some impressive railway logging bridges crossing deep river canyons. 1



*Mashiter Creek bridge construction, Merrill & Ring Lumber Co., Squamish B.C., 1927
(Ed Aldridge photo; Squamish Public Library)*

Drushka’s book records the information from Aldridge that these Merrill & Ring bridges were built by Sam and Bill Culliton – a very rare mention.

North of Squamish is a Culliton Creek, where there was once a timber trestle bridge on the Pacific Great Eastern line. A dozen years before the contract to build several bridges for Merrill & Ring, the Cullitons had worked for railway contractors Foley, Stewart & Welch on PGE construction.



*Pacific Great Eastern
Railway trestle,
Cheakamus Canyon,
in 1925 photo.
(City of Vancouver
Archives A16135)*

Who were the Cullitons?

With some diverse, scattered clues and sources available, largely from period newspapers, some picture can be put together of the Cullitons and their unique Pacific Northwest railway logging era enterprise.

Six Culliton brothers, all born in Huron and Bruce counties in Ontario to parents originally from Quebec, were engaged in railway trestle and bridge construction careers:

- John G., b. 1863
- James Douglas, b. 1864
- Charles C., b. 1869
- Thomas William, b. 1870
- Samuel T., b. 1875
- William (Bill) Franklin, b. 1877 2

Little information is available on the early background, training and work experience of the brothers prior to their move to the west. They were settled in Spokane, Washington by the early 1900s.

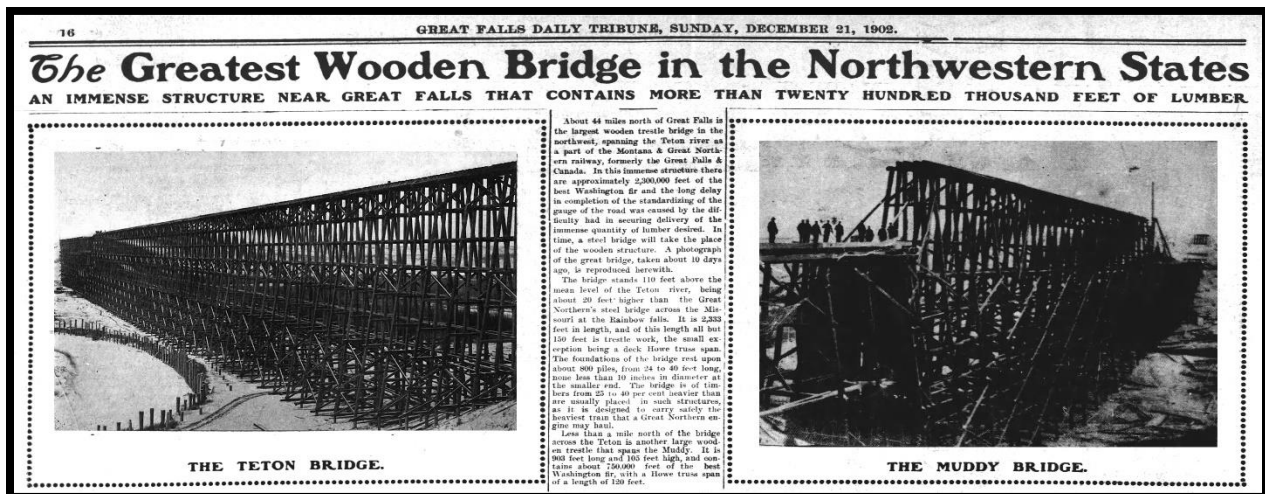
Charles, who had worked for the Chicago Great Western Ry in Iowa 3, seems to have obtained the highest level of formal training. None of the brothers were qualified civil engineers.



Otherwise, upon arrival they came to hold senior supervisory or skilled tradesman positions in various large railway and bridge construction projects for Great Northern and other lines in Eastern Washington, Idaho and Montana.

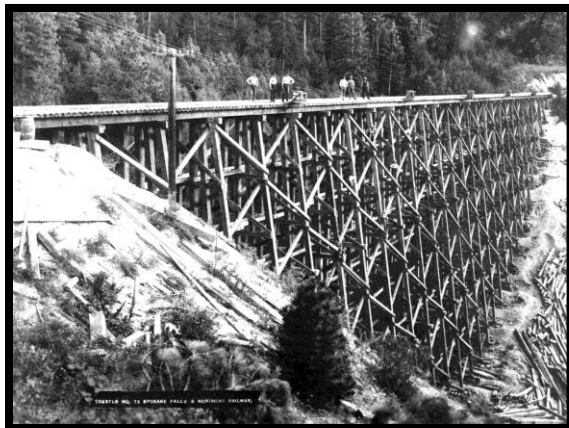
The timing was good for the Cullitons' arrival from the east – busy years for railway construction, mining and timber industries throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Railway trestle bridge construction work could be dangerous, however. In 1902, middle brother Thomas W. Culliton died in an accident during construction of one of the large wooden trestle bridges on the Great Falls & Canada Ry line in Montana, when a temporary working trestle section collapsed under his hoisting engine. 4



The Great Falls & Canada Ry trestles were of impressive scale. Thomas W. Culliton was killed in a work accident in 1902 during construction of another large trestle bridge along this line.

At this time, four of the Culliton brothers were working out of Spokane for the Spokane Falls & Northern and the Great Northern lines. During 1906-07, Charles Culliton would be building trestle bridges for the Spokane International Railway through Idaho to the Canadian border. 5



*Trestle bridge No.72 of the Spokane Falls & Northern Ry, for which four of the Culliton brothers were working in the early 1900s.
(BC Archives c-02630)*



*Sand Creek trestle along the line of the Spokane International Railway, on which Charles Culliton worked during 1906-07.
(1980s photograph by Jerry Quinn)*

The brothers launched the Culliton Brothers Contracting Company sometime before 1910, and they would soon be joined by eldest brother John G. from back east.

The company would continue to have headquarters in Spokane over the next four decades. The brothers themselves would mostly reside either in the Spokane area or in Seattle. However, Charles and later Bill Culliton would each be Vancouver B.C. residents for a number of years. It is not clear if they kept Canadian citizenship. Over the lifetime of their company, however, a very substantial amount of their business came in projects on the Canadian side of the border.

During 1910-11, the Cullitons worked on the Port Alberni subdivision of the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway on Vancouver Island. A 25,000 bd.ft. per day sawmill was built at Loon Lake, on the summit between Cameron Lake and Port Alberni, to supply timbers for trestle and bridge construction. 6

In 1912, Culliton Bros. received a contract for a portion of the Comox extension of the E&N Ry – for 15 miles of rail line northward from the McBride Junction (Parksville). The Cullitons subcontracted out most of the work, keeping the trestle work for themselves. 7

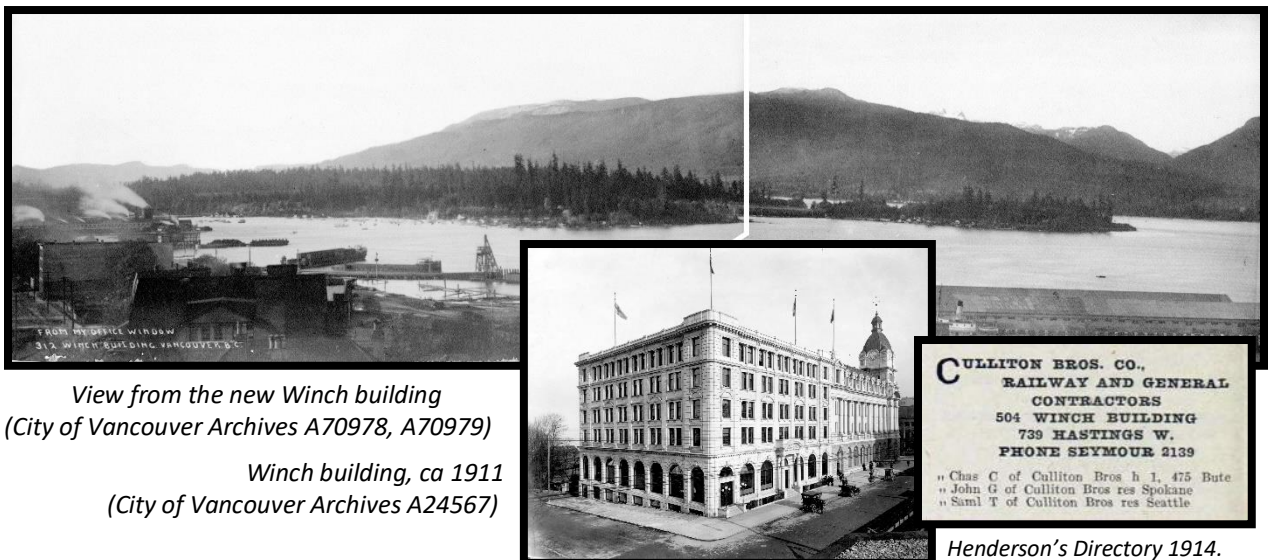
During the same 1910-13 period, the “well known” Culliton firm was building bridges (both wood and steel trestle) for the Alberta Central Railway, as well as in the Spokane area. 8

The brothers were doing well and were being frequently mentioned in Spokane newspaper society columns. In August 1912 it was reported that Charles Culliton had purchased a new deluxe E-M-F ‘Model 30’ touring car. 9



Example of a 1912 E-M-F Model 30 Touring Car purchased by Charles Culliton in Spokane, Washington

In 1914 the company set up a Vancouver B.C. office – in the Winch building on West Hastings St., one of the most prestigious locations of the day, with a top floor view over Coal Harbour and Stanley Park.

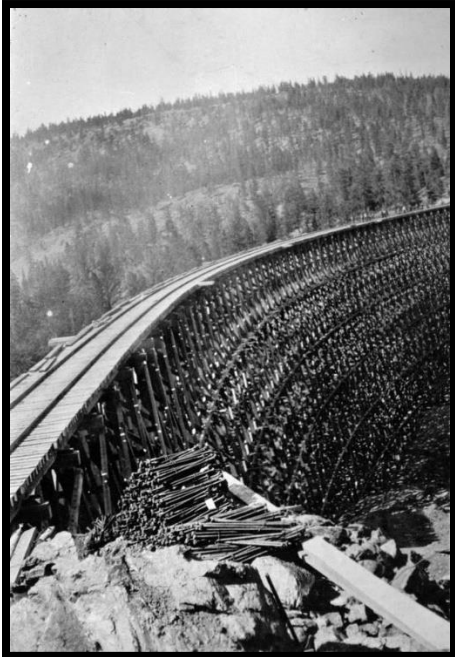


*View from the new Winch building
(City of Vancouver Archives A70978, A70979)*

*Winch building, ca 1911
(City of Vancouver Archives A24567)*

*Henderson's Directory 1914.
P.760*

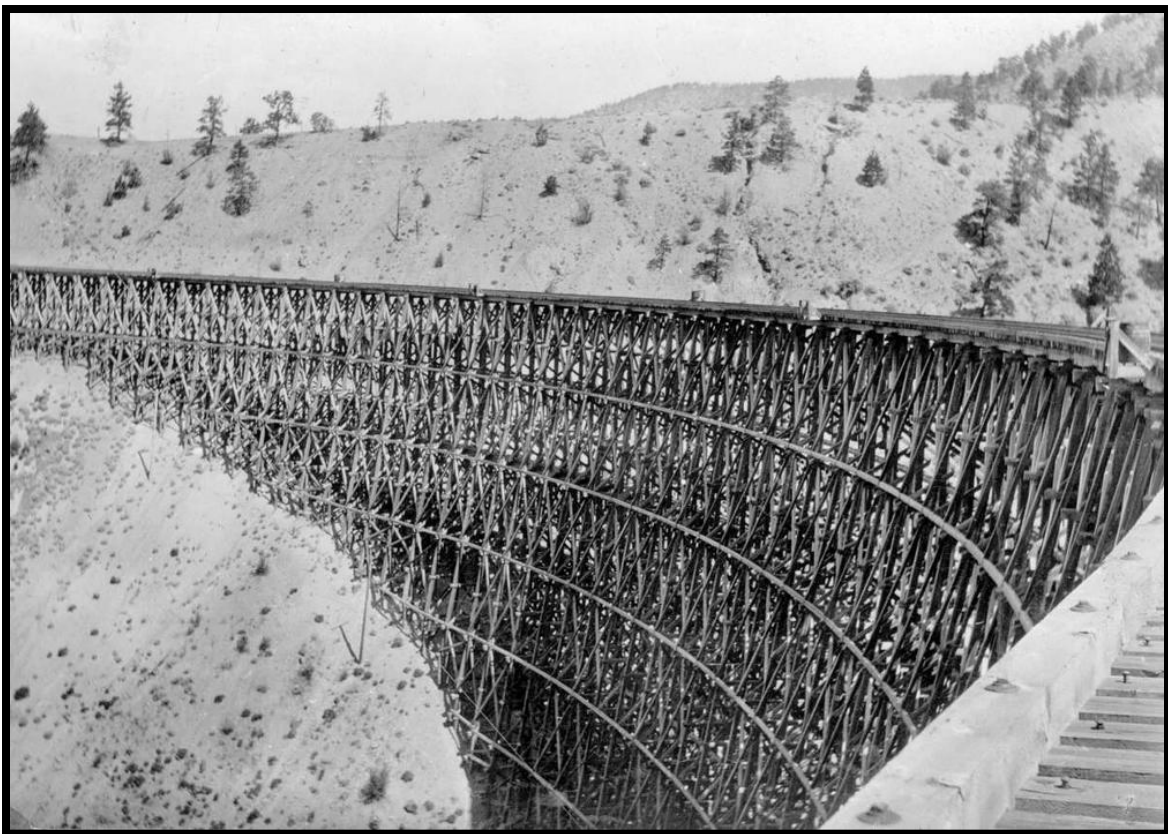
During 1914-15 the company was employed building trestle bridges for the Pacific Great Eastern Railway line between the Cheakamus Canyon and Clinton, including the spectacular Sallus Creek trestle bridge at Mile 13.7 north of Lillooet. These Culliton timber structure projects for the PGE consumed a total of 16,000,000 ft. of sawn timber. 10



Sallus Creek trestle bridge construction for Pacific Great Eastern Ry, at Mile 13.7 north of Lillooet (BC Archives c-09857)



Sallus Creek trestle bridge (BC Archives e-00370)



Sallus Creek trestle bridge (BC Archives d-00064)

In 1916 Culliton Bros. began a long association with the Merrill & Ring company, with a contract for trestle bridge construction in its Pysht River valley railway logging operation on Olympic Peninsula, west of Port Angeles. 11



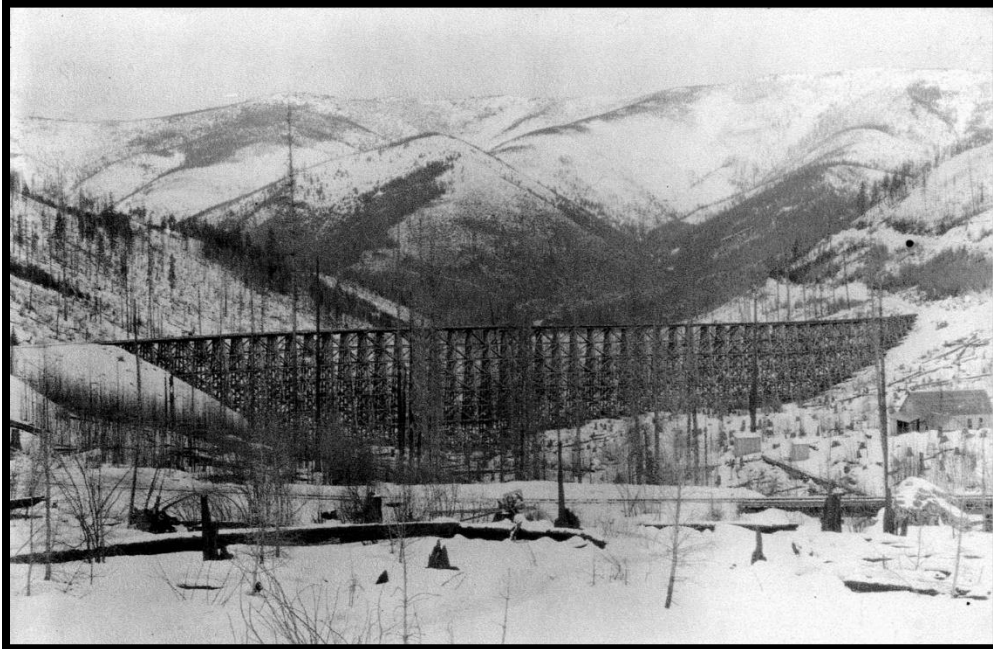
*Merrill & Ring trestle construction by Culliton Brothers Contracting Co., near Pysht WA, 1916
(Bert Kellogg Photograph Collection, Port Angeles Public Library)*

A Select Committee of the B.C. Legislature appointed in 1917 to investigate PGE construction found problematic business relationships and contracts involving the PGE and its main contractor but found no issues relating to performance or practices of Culliton Brothers Contracting. When a forest fire destroyed the Cheakamus Canyon bridge in September 1919, the company was called upon to quickly build a replacement. 12

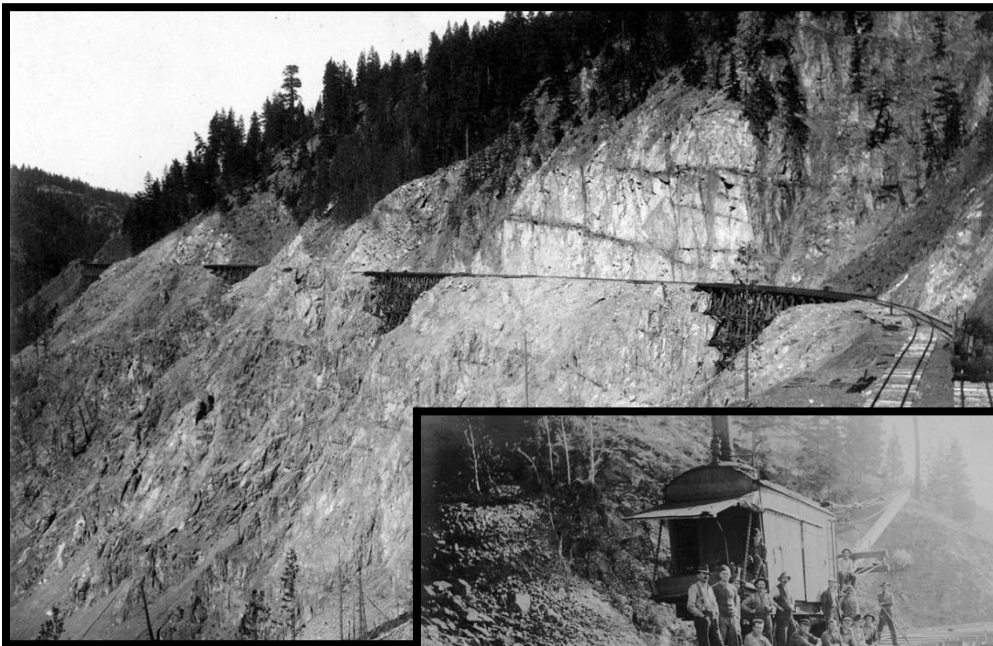


Culliton Bros. construction of replacement Cheakamus Canyon bridge, completed in November 1919. (Dept. of Railways Report for 1919)

Construction of the Copper Mountain spur of the Kettle Valley Railway during 1919-20 was another substantial contract. Company crews built 18 trestles on this line. 13



*Camp #8 trestle,
Copper Mountain
spur, Kettle Valley
Railway, 1919.
(Princeton Museum
& Archives)*



*Four trestle bridges
at Mile 13, Copper
Mountain spur,
Kettle Valley
Railway, 1919.
(Princeton Museum
& Archives)*

*Culliton Brothers Contracting crew
at Mile 12, Copper Mountain
spur construction, 1919.
(Princeton Museum & Archives)*



From the information available, it appears that the major construction contracts for Culliton Bros. during the 1920s were on the B.C. coast. Certainly, the 1920s were a boom time for railway logging activity in this region.

They were back at work again on the Vancouver Island's E&N Ry in 1923-24, being hired to replace two trestle bridges in the Arrowsmith section of the Port Alberni line. ¹⁴ (Whether this might have included the Cameron Lake railway trestle, still intact today and visible across the lake from the highway, is not clear from information available.)

During 1923-24 they also constructed six miles of Merrill & Ring's Theodosia River valley railway lines, north of Powell River. ¹⁵ This was followed by trestle and bridge work for Merrill & Ring's Squamish operation in 1927-28. ¹⁶



Mamquam River bridge, Merrill & Ring Lumber Co., Squamish B.C., 1927. (Ed Aldridge photo; Squamish Public Library)

An August 1, 1929 *Courtenay Free Press* story on a 'last spike' ceremony for the Campbell River Timber Company's completed railway related that, *"To Samuel T. Culliton goes the honor of having constructed all the bridges on the twenty-five mile line that will carry some of the finest timber in the province to tidewater within the next few weeks."* ¹⁷

Following the passing of Charles Culliton in 1939, the company was led by the two youngest brothers, Sam and Bill, for several more years of contracting work. ¹⁸

Sam died in at his Pierce County WA home in 1951. ¹⁹ Bill was 80, when he passed on at his Vancouver B.C. home in 1957. ²⁰

The story of the Culliton brothers, railway trestle and bridge builders, is an interesting cross-border chapter in the history of the railway, mining and forest industries of the Pacific Northwest deserving further attention.

Notes:

1. Drushka, Ken. 1992. *Working in the Woods: A History of Logging on the West Coast*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing. P.155.
2. Ancestry.ca (Parents: John G Culliton & Ann Lamont)
3. *Evening Times Republican*, Marshalltown, Iowa. Jan. 12, 1900. "The City in Brief". P.6.
4. *Spokane Chronicle*, Spokane, Washington. October 17, 1902. "Trestle Fell Down Carrying T.W. Culliton to His Death". P.12.
5. *Spokesman-Review*, Spokane, Washington. October 18, 1902. "Falls to Death With Engine". P.7.
6. *The Hosmer Times*, Hosmer BC. March 31, 1910; McKnight, George A. 1995. *Sawlogs on Steel Rails*. Port Alberni BC. Port Alberni Seniors' History Committee. P.4-5; Turner, Robert D. *Vancouver Island Railroads*. San Marino, CA. Golden West Books. P.55.
7. *Daily Consular and Trade Reports*. Washington DC. November 4, 1912. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Department of Commerce and Labor. "Railway and Building on Vancouver Island"; *Victoria Daily Times*. May 20, 1912. "New Contract on Courtenay Line"; *Vancouver Sun*. May 24, 1912. "To Immediately Commence Work on Courtenay Line"; *Spokane Chronicle*. November 11, 1912. "Spokane Man to Construct Bridges" P.1.
8. *The Province*, Vancouver BC. October 9, 1911. "Railway Development in Red Deer". P.24; *Spokane Press*. February 26, 1909. "Spokane Firm Gets It".
9. *Spokane Chronicle*, Spokane, Washington. August 22, 1911.
10. British Columbia. Legislative Assembly. 1917. *Province of British Columbia Proceedings and Evidence in re Pacific Great Eastern Railway Company Taken Before a Select Committee of the Legislature Appointed March 14th, 1917*. PP.151, 165, 174, 175, 320, 327, 334, 465; *Victoria Daily Times*. March 23, 1917. "Prices paid Welch on Great Eastern". P.11.
11. *Vestkusten* [Swedish American newspaper], San Francisco and Oakland CA. Number 23, June 8, 1916. "Krossad till döds" [Culliton Pysht project employee fatal accident notice] P.5.
12. British Columbia. Legislative Assembly. 1920. *Province of British Columbia Annual Report of the Department of Railways for the Year Ending December 31st 1919*. P.13: "To clear the wreckage of the destroyed bridge and to build a complete new structure in an awkward and confined position such as the canyon of the Cheakamus in the short space of six weeks in a bad time of the year reflects great credit on all employed in the reconstruction. This result would not have been obtained had it not been for the prompt arrival from all points of the necessary bridge material, and the fact that there was excellent team-work on the part of the railway company and the construction forces."
13. *Mining and Engineering Record*. Vol. 24. 1919. PP.273-274 "Mining News – Similkameen"
14. *Victoria Daily Times*. April 9, 1924. "Betterment Work on E. and N. Line"
15. *The Cumberland Islander*, Cumberland BC. May 19, 1923.
16. *History of Squamish: 1900s - 1930s*. Vol.1: Ed Aldridge interviewed by Marion Beaulieu August 21, 1985 (transcribed and typed by Susan Cheema). Squamish Public Library, Squamish BC. 1985.
17. *Courtenay Free Press*. August 1, 1929. "Percy Williams Drives Last Spike" P.1.
18. *Vancouver Sun*, Vancouver BC. July 25, 1939. "Charles C. Culliton"
19. *Vancouver News-Herald*, Vancouver BC. September 28, 1951. "Railroad Builder Dies in Seattle".
20. *Vancouver Sun*, Vancouver BC. February 21, 1957. "Culliton" [William T. Culliton obituary notice]

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