

# British Columbia



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## THE ANDERSON FAMILY AND THE ALBERNI VALLEY by Jan Peterson

Port Alberni may have a Spanish name but the establishment of the community is credited to the English. The original purchase of 12,000 acres of land in the Alberni Valley was to give the family firm of James Thompson and Co. of London, England a reliable source of timber and spars for their clipper ships.

In 1855 Capt. Edward Stamp from Alwick, Northumberland, England, arrived on the Pacific Coast to purchase lumber and spars on Puget Sound, where several mills were prospering from the California gold rush. After sailing the coast of Vancouver Island, Stamp was impressed by the great forests. He returned to London where he convinced two shipping companies, Thomas Bilbe & Company and James Thompson & Company, to back him in construction of a sawmill here.

The Thomas Bilbe Co. had built many of the clipper ships run by the Thompsons. The Thompson company was owned by James G.S. Anderson and his brother in partnership with their cousins. The Anderson Company would become one of the great shipping families of England, with major interest in the Pacific and Orient Steamship Company.



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The companies agreed partly because they also built ships and feared the impending civil war in the United States would cut off their supplies of southern pine.

In 1859 Stamp wrote to British Columbia Governor James Douglas expressing his desire to establish a first-class sawmill in the Colony of Vancouver Island. He also hinted that the prospects at Puget Sound looked favourable. Douglas was anxious to see such a promising industry established in the Colony, but he had no authority from London to take over the management of Colonial lands. In spite of this, he and Stamp managed to come to an agreement. Douglas' decision was probably helped by the fact that Stamp's backers were respected and wealthy merchants in England.

Douglas guaranteed that Stamp would not have to pay for his own improvements, if and when these lands were placed on the market, and that the sale price would not exceed one pound per acre. Stamp agreed to make "permanent improvements" to the property before the end of 1860.

The English company received land grants in the Alberni Valley of 1,750 acres for a townsite, 250 acres for farmland, and 15,000 acres of timber reserve.

The site chosen for the sawmill was described by Gilbert Malcolm Sproat in his book "Scenes and Studies of Savage Life:" "It was an encampment of the Tseshaht Indian band near a pretty point at one side of the bay where there was a beach shaded by young trees."

The following year, on June 29, 1860, the schooner **Meg Merrilies** landed nine workmen at the head of the Alberni Inlet. Next came the schooner **Woodpecker** with workmen and machinery for the new mill. Captain Stamp arrived on September 1st aboard the **Meg Merrilies** skippered by Tom Tamphlet and Jeremiah (Jerry) Rogers, a New Brunswick logger. Also accompanying them was Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, a representative for Thompson & Company in London, England. Sproat, from Scotland, was only 26 years old when he was sent to keep an eye on the shipbuilding company's interests.

The Anderson mill at Alberni had several advantages over similar mills in Puget Sound. One was its accessibility, being situated on the outside coast of the island, allowing navigators to avoid delays in journeying in and out of the Straits of Juan de Fuca and Admiralty Inlet, which sometimes took a week. Another big consideration was the remoteness; there would be little opportunity for men to desert their ship at Alberni. There was no road access to the east coast of the island. Also there were no port charges and it was a port of entry, allowing vessels to sail directly to the mill.

A small community with a population of approximately 200 was established surrounding the sawmill. To supply fresh vegetables Stamp put in a farm on the far side of the Somass River on the flatland at the river's mouth. This was named the Anderson Farm, and is now the Somass Dairy Farm. For a few years everything went well, the harbour was a busy place with schooners arriving to load cargo for the United States, England, China, Manila, Australia and other world ports.

By 1864 all the suitable trees on the timber reserve had been harvested. Lack of mechanization in the industry made all timber not adjacent to bodies of water inaccessible for commercial purposes. There was an attempt to get more logs from Sproat Lake by making a dam at the outlet of the lake, which enabled them to be floated down the river to the mill. Sproat suggested Stamp had made an error in choosing Alberni as the location instead of Puget Sound. Eventually the site was abandoned. The empty mill and other buildings stood derelict for a number of years. However, the land granted by Douglas for the settlement remained in the possession of the Andersons in England.

On September 4, 1879 news reached Victoria that the mill buildings had been destroyed by fire.

By mid-1883, settlers began arriving in the Alberni Valley. They came by canoe up the Alberni Inlet and on foot over the Horne Lake trail. Many came from Great Britain; others from eastern Canada, some even from Australia.

In 1886 the Anderson Company decided it was time to make an effort to develop the land it owned in the Alberni Valley. With this in mind, James George Anderson, representing Anderson Anderson & Co. and Capt. George Slader, who represented Bilbe's trustees, came to Alberni to see what could be done. It was decided to lay out a small townsite. This became what is commonly called the Old Townsite of Alberni.

From time to time lots were sold. Others were donated for churches, schools and other public buildings. When New Alberni began to grow, another townsite was developed to the south. It was never the intention of the company to develop two towns.

On the way home from a visit to Australia, Alan G. Anderson visited Alberni and found "...utter stagnation in the matter of settlement and demand for land in the Alberni District." He recommended that in order to simplify matters in connection with the sale or lease of lots, or making agreements, the various people who owned the property should form themselves into a limited company. This was done and registered in the name of the Alberni Land Company on May 12, 1905. Herbert Carmichael became the agent for the new company.

In 1907 the company concluded arrangements with the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway Co. (CPR) by which it would agree to extend the rail line to Alberni in consideration of receiving an allotment of one-fourth of the land (then consisting of about 2,500 acres) for railway development.

When Hugh Kerr Anderson visited in 1910, one-half of the property, including the railway portion, had been disposed of. By this time residents of New Alberni were becoming more vocal in their demands. They wanted more lots on the market, a bridge over Coal Creek, a lighting system, streets upgraded, a local post office and a hospital. Alberni too had its own demands - the same things, as well as the railway station, land set aside for recreational purposes and free land to encourage industries to locate there. Anderson tried to appease both sides but the decisions had to be made in London.

Sir Kenneth S. Anderson visited again in 1912. By this time the railway had arrived and land sales were booming. But when there was talk in both communities of becoming a municipality, Anderson tried to discourage it knowing full well the implications this would have on his company through taxation. The communities went ahead anyway. Port Alberni became a municipality in 1912, Alberni in 1913.

The Great War intervened and soured real estate development. While the community went through a major depression in 1915, the company felt the pinch at taxation time. Ultimately it was taxation that killed the Anderson Company's involvement here. Unable to meet the taxes on undeveloped land in both communities, it was forced into raising debentures to provide funds to prevent the land from being forfeited.

But the absence of purchasers for the land continued and the company had to reconcile itself to losing its title to the property. The Anderson Farm was eventually sold in 1925. The company wound up in 1930, leaving many of the selected lots abandoned.

In the end, speaking of his company's involvement in Alberni's history, Colin S. Anderson said "It is a sad, declining end to a long association, but what had started as an imaginative enterprise had with time become a real burden."

The Anderson Company may have no association with the community we know today but it will always have a place in our history. Land for West Coast General Hospital, several city halls, numerous churches and schools, Recreation Park, Roger Creek Park was all given freely to the community by the British company.

#### **Postscript**

In researching the history of the Anderson Company it is noted that its records were lost during the London blitz in the Second World War. This article is based on material from the Alberni District Historical Society Archives.

### ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP UPCOMING

On October 29th from 9:00 AM to 12:00 noon, the Forest History Society (based in North Carolina) and the Forest History Association of B.C. will be sponsoring an oral history workshop in the Penthouse of the Buchanan Building at UBC in Vancouver. FHABC member Dr. Peter Murphy, of the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry at the University of Alberta, is organizing and leading the workshop.

The workshop will focus on "how to do it" - how to prepare, how to select equipment, how to transcribe and how to preserve the finished product.

British Columbia has an especially rich forest heritage, much of it recorded only in the minds of those who created it. At best, memories are fragile and, once lost, cannot be recovered. Come to the workshop, learn the skills, and join a volunteer cadre of oral historians seeking to interview those with an important forest history story to tell.

To help with the planning of this workshop, if you will be attending please send the editor a note to that effect:

John Parminter  
# 1 - 949 Pemberton Road  
Victoria, B.C. V8S 3R5

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### REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

I am preparing a report on the history of the Research Branch of the British Columbia Forest Service. One of the most reliable information sources has been the in-service newsletters which were produced in two series. The first, which appeared under the banner of **Root and Branch** was produced in the 1920's. It provides a variety of information about the Forest Branch staff at that time. It was discontinued during the Depression.

The second series started in 1938 and continued with a few halts until 1960. The Ministry of Forests library has a complete set of this second series, but neither they nor the Provincial Archives have the full set of **Root and Branch**. So, this is an appeal to members to dust off their bookshelves to see if they have any issues of **Root and Branch**. Please contact me if you do - I promise to return any loaned copies after having made a photocopy.

Ralph Schmidt  
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phone: 727-2810

PORT MCNEILL FOREST DISTRICT REUNION

The Port McNeill Reunion, 1916 - 1991, celebrating 75 years of history will be held from October 11th to 13th.

The following events have been scheduled:

Friday, October 11th

Meet and Greet Wine and Cheese Party (no host bar)  
From 7:00 PM at the Port McNeill Curling Club

Saturday, October 12th

Open house at the Port McNeill Forest District Office from  
10:00 AM to 3:00 PM.  
Softball Tournament all afternoon.  
Dinner dance from 6:00 PM (no host bar) at the Lions Hall.

Sunday, October 13th

Pancake breakfast from 9:30 AM to 1:00 PM at the Royal  
Canadian Legion. Cost to be announced.

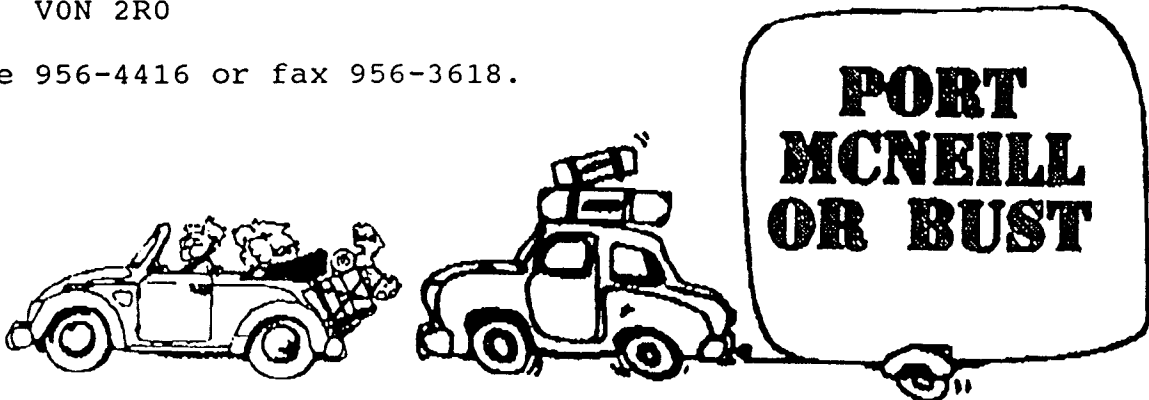
Golf tournament from 2:00 PM at the Seven Hills Golf Club.  
Green fees are \$25.00.

Registration fees are \$10.00 per adult (anyone who attends the dinner). Various children's events will be arranged, and a fee of \$1.00 per child will cover the cost of refreshments and prizes.

Please forward registration information and fees to:

Elaine Brown  
c/o Port McNeill Forest District  
Ministry of Forests  
P.O. Box 7000  
Port McNeill, B.C.  
V0N 2R0

Phone 956-4416 or fax 956-3618.



### MARINE REMINISCENCES

The November 1990 issue of this newsletter contained a request for photos of the **Cherry II**. In May of 1946, just after finishing my first year at UBC, I got the job of Assistant Ranger on Howe Sound. The man who had served there for several seasons prior to this was retiring and he handled my indoctrination, which took about ten days.

I can't recall his name, but he lived at Egmont, near Skookumchuck Rapids, in Sechelt Inlet. If anyone can remember his name I would appreciate hearing from them. He was a nice old fellow.

The first week we were on **The Alder**, an old Assistant Ranger boat which ran on a one-cylinder gas engine. We went to the Forest Service Maintenance Depot on the Fraser River and picked up the **Cherry II**. I guess I was her first skipper, and I spent that summer and the next one on her.

Once I ran aground on a sunken log during an extremely low tide. The tide was not quite all the way out so I ran a couple of lines to a swifter on a log boom. Otherwise the boat would have capsized. This was in Long Bay on the south end of Gambier Island. The tide finally came back in and floated her off with no damage to the hull.

The **Cherry II** had a three-cylinder Grey Marine (GMC) diesel motor. She was thirty-four feet long with a ten foot beam. I understand she was sold to a private buyer a few years ago at Mackenzie. She must have been in service on the Williston Lake reservoir.

Those two summers I was working under Bob Aylett, the Ranger stationed at Sechelt. Charlie Haddon was the District Forester in Vancouver at the time.

Bill Gilgan  
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Burns Lake, B.C.  
V0J 1E0

**Editor's note:** Mr. Gilgan provided three photos of the **Cherry II** in response to the request. A model boat builder is constructing a model of the boat.

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FHABC ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING A SUCCESS

On June 15th a capacity crowd enjoyed the hospitality of the Ministry of Forest's Cowichan Lake Research Station, a presentation on the history of the station and a walking tour.

The executive for 1991 - 1992 is as follows:

President: Pit Desjardins  
Past President: Bill Young  
Treasurer: Edo Nyland  
Newsletter Editor: John Parminter  
Directors: Bill Backman, George Brandak, Gerry Burch, Bob DeBoo,  
Don Grant, Terry Honer, Doug Little, John Murray,  
Clay Perry and Harry Smith.

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NEWS FROM THE MEMBERS

John McLean wrote to tell of the "Link and Pin Museum" at the Roberts Lake Resort, north of Campbell River. On display is a varied collection of northern Vancouver Island memorabilia including early chainsaws, logging equipment and maps showing the logging railroads which operated in the area.

Phil Gilbert sent along a copy of the June/July 1991 issue of Pioneer News, which is published by the Bank of British Columbia. In an article entitled "Logging Camps and Green Brides" author Betty Ingram tells of life in the Englewood area logging camps. The story is a delightful account of family life in remote logging camps some fifty years ago.

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This newsletter is the official organ of the Forest History Association of British Columbia. It is distributed at no charge to members of the Association, libraries, archives and museums. Items on forest history topics, descriptions of current projects, requests for information, book reviews, letters, comments and suggestions are welcomed. Please address all correspondence regarding the newsletter and changes of address to the editor: Mr. John Parminter, # 1 - 949 Pemberton Road, Victoria, B.C. V8S 3R5.

Membership in the Association is \$7.00 yearly, or \$30 for five years. Should you wish to join or obtain further information please write to the Treasurer: Mr. Edo Nyland, 8793 Forest Park Drive, Sidney, B.C. V8L 4E8. The President, Mr. Pit Desjardins, can be reached at 6252 McCleery Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6N 1G4.