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GENOA BAY, 1920 - 1925

by Tom Barnett

My recollections of Vancouver Island sawmilling begin with a move in 1920 from Victoria to the sawmill village of Genoa Bay, located on a small peninsula on the northerly side of Cowichan Bay. The sawmill was there not because it was surrounded by the vast forests, but because of the excellent little deep-water harbour that opened out into a sheltered bay for log boom storage. To the northwest stretched the inland seas between Vancouver Island and the mainland. From their shores came the seemingly endless supply of giant logs, which at times almost filled the bay.

The flat rafts were mostly of Douglas-fir, with only an occasional one of western redcedar. Most of the logs were lazy, hardly moveable by the weight of a boy, but some were so symmetrical as to be set spinning with ease -- a game all the more delightful because playing on the booms was "officially" forbidden.

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For ten hours a day, six days a week the heavy chain that hauled these logs up into the mill groaned and clattered. What came out at the other end ranged from great timbers to fine finish mouldings. Dry-kilned edgegrain flooring, 12" stepping and v-joint for paneling were major items of production. Lower grades of wood went into the kind of stuff that comes out of sawmills these days: shiplap, 2x4s and other dimension. Screeching shingle machines manned by Chinese workers, some with pieces of hands missing, turned western redcedar into shingles. Nearly all of these products were shipped out in railway cars that came on barges from Vancouver.

Timbers were the most impressive part of the output. These came out the end of the mill, down a long inclined set of rollers, gathering speed as they went. They were caught on the balance by two men with a two-wheeled cart and guided across the wharf, mostly driven by their momentum, to within reach of ship's tackle. If the momentum plus the puny pushing of the two men was not enough, the crew that did the stacking took over with peaveys. A team of horses with block and tackle helped out in a pinch.

Exciting were the days with a ship in port. Or sometimes two! The people on them came from faraway places. And some of the vessels were sailing ships, pressed back into service to fill the shortage created by the torpedoes of the Great War. They were towed to and from the Strait of Juan de Fuca by tugs so I never saw one under sail. One big five-masted ship, the *Bianca*, made two round trips from Genoa Bay to Australia, taking about six months for each. Some of the steamships belonged to the C.G.M.M. (Canadian Government Merchant Marine). These were fine, large, new-looking ships, well painted; quite a contrast to the beaten-up looking little Norwegian tramp freighters.

I learned about plimsoll lines from the talk about the modest deck load allowed on the Canadian freighters, and how high in the water they sat as they steamed out of the bay compared to the Norwegian tramps. On these the deck load was piled "until they were barely awash," said the local commentators.

It was astounding to see the steam winches on the ships pick up the timbers that had been so laboriously assembled near the edge of the wharf, especially the Japan Squares. These were either 3' by 3' or 4' by 4' by 40' long. Unlike other timbers, wane on the corners did not seem to matter; so all they were, really, were logs with four slabs sawn off so they would fit snugly on a ship and qualify as a "manufactured product." On other timbers, such as those for railway bridges, the grading rules were very strict. If they were long (i.e. more than 40') they were "special order" and sometimes the trailer carriage was brought into use to saw them. My memory says I saw a timber measuring 2' by 2' by 120.'

The nearest logging we heard about was at Lake Cowichan, from which a railway had recently been built to bring logs to the sea at Crofton. It seemed remote, and only occasional rumours about the "big camps" drifted our way. But I never heard that our logs came from them. Our mill had its own tug that every so often would disappear to bring back rafts of logs. Nearly all the long trips seemed to be to a mysterious place north of Nanaimo called Fanny Bay, which I longed to see but never could.

However, the tugboat captain was very good about taking me along on day trips. In the summer they were most often to Burgoyne Bay on Saltspring Island for a scow-load of water, which was needed to make steam when the local supply ran low. Two large scows were kept in use so that while water was being pumped to the boilers from one of them, the other could be moored at Burgoyne Bay and filled from a pipe that extended from the creek there. It was thrilling to go steaming out of Cowichan Bay into Sansum Narrows with a big scow in tow.

Fascinating as tugboat adventures were, they were a minor part of life compared to watching the maze of revolving saws, belts, pulleys, shafts and conveyors, which, with the aid of pygmy-like men, turned the logs into lumber. It was on the lower floor, a dank and gloomy place, echoing from end to end with myriad mysterious noises, that the real answers to what made the mill run were to be found.

At the heart of it all were two steam engines, each with twin horizontal cylinders. The headrig was fed 750 horsepower by a belt about two feet wide and built up with layers of leather, tensioned by a huge idler pulley. Another 500 horsepower drove the rest of the mill. Other belts broke and had to be repaired, but those two majestic ribbons of leather driven by the engines seemed to go on forever at their measured pace. Here was all the magic of steam, created by a fiery furnace fueled with sawdust and planer shavings. The third lovely toy of an engine generated lights for the mill and drove the conveyor system, which was left going each day after shutdown until all the accumulated debris had been transported to the burner.

The yard where shiplap and dimension lumber were piled for air-drying occupied most of the peninsula, except for a fringe of houses along the Cowichan Bay shore and a row along a central trail paved with sawdust. Kiln-dried finish lumber was stacked on end and stored in a long three-walled shed. Access to the yard was by way of elevated plank roads built up with blocking and timbers. To and fro along these roads traveled what were called jitneys, which hauled the balancing two-wheeled lumber carts by means of a winched cable that tightened the front end of a load to a swiveled bunk on the rear of the jitney. The jitney was a short vehicle with small hard rubber-tired wheels, powered by a Model T Ford engine, with chain drives to the rear wheels.

When a freight car barge arrived from Vancouver it was loaded from the wharf by a gang of Chinese workers who walked, each with load on shoulder, in an endless chain up and down a ramp of planks, the slope of which was adjusted from time to time by changing trestles with the tide. The only change in rhythm, apart from changing trestles, came when Sam, the yard foreman, bellowed at them. Things would then speed up for a little while.

In my youthful innocence I assumed the *status quo* of sawmill life would go on virtually forever. I went off to stay with cousins on Lulu Island while attending high school and got home only for holidays. What a shock it was to arrive home in the summer of 1924 to find the mill shut down indefinitely, with a "may open in the fall" prognosis. The place was quiet as the proverbial grave; but most of the families stayed. The office and store were open; but we had to rustle our own firewood. Quite a hardship for people usually surfeited with kiln-dried kindling and inside Douglas-fir blocks from timber trimmings!

Wood getting thus became a community effort, with my father driving the horses to roll logs up a makeshift ramp onto the wharf for easy cutting. I beachcombed logs with my rowboat and learned the art of using a crosscut saw.

As the summer wore on, orders were secured for some of the old yard stock, so all hands went to work. The office manager had been left in charge and, workers not being plentiful, he gave me a job unstacking from the top of the piles at 25 cents an hour instead of the usual 35 cents paid to a man. I thought I was in the big money! Much of what was shipped out was lower grade 2x6 and 2x8, which laid on the flat made the solid walls of grain elevators on the Prairies. In the fall when I went back to school there was still some hope that the mill would reopen; but it was not to be.

According to the writer of the book "Cowichan My Cowichan," the mill I knew was the third to be located on that little peninsula. The first, built in the 1870s, used timber towed across the bay from Cherry Point.

I had one last look at the old mill in the summer of 1925. On the way back to the mainland we had a tour through the newly opened mill in Chemainus, replacing their Genoa Bay-like mill that had been destroyed in a catastrophic fire. I was fascinated by all the latest gadgetry, which I now realize would also have had to have gone into the Genoa Bay mill if it were to survive. Best remembered are the "high speed" planers that could put through up to 600 lineal feet a minute. I saw my first planermill "pineapple."

Unlike many other forest industry settlements, the site of Genoa Bay did not revert to wilderness. But it was not until after World War II that the property became known as Genoa Bay Lodge. There must have been some terrific bonfires during the clean-up, for all that was left to show a sawmill had been there was the concrete platform on which the boilers had sat, and a large concrete ring on the far side of the millpond that had been the base of the burner.

The boarding house became the main lodge, with a swimming pool in front; while the community hall became a place for seaside dining. The old company houses were transformed into rustic cottages, slicked up with a new coat of paint. When I saw them my thought was that people would be paying more for a night than we had paid as monthly rent. Apparently the venture was not too much of a success for now Genoa Bay is a quiet residential suburb north of Duncan, with a marina where the mill used to be. Some of the old houses are still recognizable among the newer dwellings. The most fascinating to me is the one with our old school as part of its structure.

A footnote: when the sawmill's days finally ended, the office manager, Percy Strain, loaded his family into his Model T touring car and drove to Port Alberni. There he became the long-time office manager for the Alberni Pacific Lumber Company, which became H.R. MacMillan's first logging and sawmilling operation. Years later, after his retirement, Percy told me that he first met MacMillan when he and VanDusen, as export brokers, came to Genoa Bay to watch their first cargo being loaded for overseas. Thus began the business career of our erstwhile first Chief Forester.

NEW PUBLICATIONS

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Krawczyk, Betty Shiver. 1996. Clayoquot - the sound of my heart. Orca Book Publishers, Victoria, B.C. 213 p.

Peterson, Jan. 1996. Cathedral grove - MacMillan Park. Oolichan Books, Lantzville, B.C. 133 p.



MORE ON AXES

by Allan Klenman

In 1778 Captain James Cook became B.C.'s first logger when he had his crew cut trees at Nootka Sound for spars and masts for his ships. He noted that the trees were "admirably suited for the job." Since then, the world became aware of our superb timber and lumber of every dimension has been shipped to all parts of the globe.

If the arbitrary date of 1843 is taken as the start of serious day-by-day cutting (James Douglas established what became Victoria in that year) that means that loggers here have chopped trees with axes continually for well over a century. These men used axes made in England, Canada and the USA but mostly after the 1880s they chose Canadian axes.

The evolution of the Puget Sound Falling Axe (from circa 1868) was the obvious choice of fallers. This axe was double-bitted, with long, narrow blades of 13 to 15" from bit to bit. One bit was usually thin-ground and razor sharp. The other bit was a little "stumpier" but also sharp. The faller used the thick bit for branching and mounting his springboard, but reserved the thin bit for shaping the beautifully smooth undercuts, which governed the direction of the falling giant.

The axe handles were always of thin, white hickory, mostly 36" long. Some of the bigger men, with longer arms, and working on the largest trees, would use handles of 40 or 42" and even as long as 48" (this was common in California).

But when it came to choosing the axe head, only four of Canada's makers were popular. Number one was Sager -- the Sager Special Chemical Process Axe, beautifully made and always finished in gun steel blue. This axe was made by the Warren Axe and Tool Co. of

Warren, Pennsylvania. But the demand became so great that a new branch factory was built in St. Catharines in 1912. In 1928 they merged with the Thomas Pink Co. of Pembroke, Ontario and changed the name to Canadian Warren-Pink Co.

The second-largest supplier was the Walters Axe Company of Hull, Quebec. They called their best axe Black Diamond. It was wholesaled all over B.C. by Fleck Bros. of Vancouver, who had their name stamped on the back of the axe.

Welland Vale offered the Black Prince brand and for 50 cents more fallers could purchase it fully polished. So much so that you could see your face in it. The company was founded in 1869 in St. Catharines and was purchased by the True Temper Co. of Charleston, West Virginia in 1930.

And the last of the "Big Four" was the James Smart Co. of Brockville, Ontario. This too was an old line company and made excellent axes. The 444 brand was their top falling axe.

But with the end of World War II the engineering facilities of the world turned to perfecting the chainsaw. The benefits to the logging industry were so great that the poor axe was doomed. It was a struggle to keep the huge, expensive factories operating and one by one they were all forced to close due to the collapse of the axe market.

The last one to close was Walters, in 1967. By then commercial logging was almost 100% by chainsaw, which were so much improved that one man could now do the work of eight or ten axemen.

For those who used the falling axe, or remember those who did, it is a sad memory. Fallers and high riggers were a rare breed, swinging a four- or five-pound axe all day from dawn to dusk on 45° hillsides in every kind of weather. Tough men, with a fabulous talent, doing a difficult job well.

Remember the axe!



DAVID DOUGLAS AND THE FORT ST. JAMES CONNECTION

by Bill Young

It was in 1832 that David Douglas began to feel a compelling urge to return to his native Scotland. He had a dream. It was to return to Great Britain via Siberia where he would continue his tireless calling of observing, recording and collecting botanical specimens. This vision is best described in Douglas' words:

“What a glorious prospect. Thus not only the plants but a series of observations may be produced, the work of the same individual on both continents with the same instruments under similar circumstances and in corresponding latitudes.”

Douglas submitted his proposal to the Russians in Sitka and received a favourable reply from Baron Wrangel, Governor of the Russian Territories in America. Encouraged by this response, and in spite of some dire warnings from Hudson's Bay Company staff, Douglas began planning his incredible journey. In the spring of 1833 he left Fort Vancouver and traveled up the Columbia River to Fort Okanagan. There he joined a Hudson's Bay Company brigade heading northward to Fort St. James.

Making observations and collecting botanical specimens along the way, Douglas and the brigade traveled along the shores of Okanagan Lake and then across country to Fort Kamloops, where they planned to lay over for a few days to rest their horses. That done, the brigade headed northward again through the Cariboo country to Fort Alexandria. Here they transferred their freight to boats in order to continue northward up the Fraser River. Douglas continued on horseback, collecting and observing, to the junction of the Quesnel and Fraser rivers where he rejoined the brigade.

Continuing north up the Fraser River to Fort George and up the Nechako and Stuart rivers, the brigade finally reached the capital of New Caledonia - Fort St. James - on June 6, 1833.

Now Douglas began to plan the next step of his journey -- westward across the northern wilderness to Sitka in Russian America. He found that a small HBC exploratory party was about to leave Fort St. James in an attempt to reach the Pacific Ocean via Simpson's River (now known as the Skeena).

Concern now began to haunt Douglas. The exploratory party had doubts that they would ever reach the Pacific Ocean. Further, Douglas began to realize that no HBC post existed in the wild country between Fort St. James and Sitka. Disillusioned, he decided to return to Fort Vancouver -- dashing his Siberian dream. Borrowing a small canoe he, with one companion and his dog Billy, proceeded down the Stuart and Nechako rivers to Fort George on the Fraser River.

Now comes an incredible tale: some twenty miles down the Fraser River from Fort George is the treacherous Fort George canyon. Douglas had seen this awesome cauldron when he accompanied the brigade upstream a few days earlier.

Further, he had access to the diary of Alexander Mackenzie who wisely portaged the canyon during his cross-Canada journey of 1793. Admittedly, Simon Fraser had shot the rapids in 1808 but that party had larger and sturdier canoes.

Perhaps he was still in a depressed state of mind from seeing his Siberian vision crushed, but Douglas and his companion decided to run the canyon in their small canoe. Scarcely had they entered the canyon when the canoe was “smashed to atoms.” All were thrown into the seething rapids and Douglas later recorded that he was dragged downstream for one hour and forty minutes before he finally managed to reach shore. Dazed, he wandered back upstream where he found his companion and dog Billy, half-dead but alive.

Douglas had clung to his instruments during the whole time that he was in the water. Tragically, however, he lost a collection of over 400 specimens and his diary containing all the records of his second trip to western North America.

Chagrined, he returned upstream to Fort George where he obtained another canoe. Carefully portaging the Fort George canyon, he continued overland to Fort Kamloops, thence southward along Okanagan Lake to Fort Okanagan. He secured another canoe there and journeyed down the Columbia River to eventually reach Fort Vancouver in August of 1833.

David Douglas was now worn out in body and broken in spirit. In a letter he wrote: “This disastrous occurrence has broken my strength and spirit.” Douglas never regained his old vigor. Less than one year later he was dead – killed in Hawaii. Whether his death was by accident or murder remains a mystery to this day.



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