

History of Maple Ridge

by James Wm. Sinclair

[Written in 1940 when the author was 82 years old]

As the first school teacher and municipal clerk of this district I would like to tell some of the happenings of the early days.

In the first place I must tell you how I happened to come here. It was in the year 1875. I had just arrived from attending an Eastern College, and after coming again to my old native Province I was induced to go before the Education Board of examiners and write for a teachers certificate to teach in the schools of B.C.

I did so and was successful. A week later I met Mr. W.F.Tolmie (father of the late premier, Simon F. Tolmie) and he told me the B.C. Board of Education wanted to see me. He said the Board was having a meeting that afternoon and to come with him as he was a member. I met the Board, which was presided over by the Superintendent (Mr. John Jessop) and "six fit and proper persons" elected by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

They were glad to meet me and informed me that they wanted me to take charge of the Maple Ridge school on the Mainland of B.C. ! consented and thanked them for their confidence in me and thus was the beginning of my teaching days in the Province.

I was only seventeen years of age

A couple of days before I left Victoria I called upon the Supt. at the Government office and on leaving him, he gave me a large map of the World for the school. It was on rollers and all ready to be hung up in the school-room.

The next day I started for New Westminster on the steamer "Enterprise". The following day took another boat -the "Royal City"-and landed at Maple Ridge about nine O'clock in the morning. There was no-one to greet me when I landed and as I came off the gang plank I thought of "Atlas", but he had nothing on me, for we read he had the World on his back, but I had the World on my back, besides a very large valise to carry.

As I looked around I noticed a large white church on the hill and I said "Thank God I am in a Christian settlement but this Christian feeling was shattered in a few moments, when the post-master (Mr. W. J. Howison) came down to get his mail bag, left by the boat. I went up to him and introduced myself as the school teacher. He said "Where did you come from?" "Victoria", I said. He said "A stinking Victorian, eh?" and left. A pretty cool reception I thought.

I found out afterwards the reason for this cool reception. It seems at that time there was great antipathy on the Mainland against any one coming from Vancouver Island, as the Capital was taken from New Westminster and Victoria was chosen instead for the Capital of BC. This rankled in the minds of the Mainlanders for a number of years after. I must say this in apology to Mr. Howison as, after he had become acquainted with me for a couple of weeks, he changed altogether and was one of my best friends all the time I was in Maple Ridge.

After meeting the post-master I climbed the bank and at the top I met an old gentleman. I made myself and my business known to him. He said his name was William Nelson - just the man I wanted to see for the minister of education had directed me to go to his house for board

and lodging. He looked at me and said he was a school trustee, but he had a question to ask me and if I answered correctly, I was O.K. with him regarding my job. I said "fire away" so he said "If Dick's son was Tom's father, what relation would Dick and Tom be?" I cannot remember what I told him, but he said he guessed it was alright for he did not know himself.

He told me to come in the house and have something to eat. I went in and entered a very large front room; the doors were all closed, and there was a huge smudge burning in the room for the mosquitos were very bad. I did not know which was the worst the smoke or the blood-suckers, for after being in the room a few minutes I began to choke and my eyes were streaming with tears. I made up my mind I could not endure all this punishment and I would go back to Victoria.

That right a stranger came in and asked Mr. Nelson if he could give him a bed for the night. After supper we all repaired to the front room. There were several other men there for they had just started to build the River Road. I there met Mr. John Hinch and a man by the name of Welch.

In the evening they began to talk about how bad the mosquitoes were. At this the stranger who had just arrived joined in. He said "You gentlemen don't know what mosquitoes are. When I was on a ship on the Pacific Ocean a swarm struck our ship and ate every bit of the canvas off the boat".

Mr. Nelson was taking this all in, as well as your humble servant, for he spoke up and said "Why those same mosquitoes struck our ship". At that the stranger said "Impossible, how can you prove that?" Nelson replied "I can prove the same mosquitoes struck our ship, for when they came aboard they all had canvas overalls on". I thought if these pests were as bad as that I would stay in Maple Ridge and so I remained.

The trustees decided not to open the school for two weeks on account of the mosquito plague.

I then took a walk in the eastern direction to see and get acquainted with the settlers. I went as far as Haney, which was then called the Wickwire estate. There was no-one living there. A little farther on was John Hinch and Peter Mayo's. I did not go to Sam Robertson or Peter Baker's for they lived about two miles farther east and James Thorne lived on the hill, east of Kanaka Creek.

On my return I crossed the river in a boat and saw the William Edge family. They lived on the old Derby Townsite. You will notice there were not many settlers in this district.

I traveled west and met the following families - Adam Irving - Henry Dawson - Tom Henderson - John McKenney and Wellington J. Harris. I was much taken up with these fine agreeable and refined people.

When I returned home, Mr. Nelson asked me if I saw John Hammond. I asked him where he lived and he said "a little beyond the John McIver farm." I knew where this was for Adam Irving had leased the same from Mr. McIver.

Nelson said, "You will see a little low house with a wide low chimney and a door beside the fireplace. When John is cooking his slap-jacks he throws them out the chimney and catches them on the outside before they reach the ground." Mr. Nelson said John did this to make the slap-jacks light and also to give him a little exercise.

I found the place but John was not doing any cooking that day.

I returned home tired and sore after traveling through the woods and as there were no roads I often took the wrong trails. Then I became nervous for whenever I heard a noise I expected to meet a bear or panther. On one occasion I lost my hat and never found it again as I was fleeing from some unseen man-eating animal after hearing a great crash among the trees.

When I opened the school I had sixteen pupils. Four Irvings, two Hendersons, three Dawsons, one Mayo, two Hinches and four from William Edges.

After looking around I noticed there were two families on the south side of the river who were unable to come to school as they had no boat and their people were unable to buy one.

I bought a nice little boat for twenty-five dollars and used to bring them to school every morning and take them back again in the afternoon. These were the three Muench children and four Jenkins. I did this for a whole year. It caused me a lot of extra work and especially when the river was high during the freshet. I however had the spirit of the old pioneers and was bent on building up the school. In this I was successful for in two years it rose to the proud distinction of being the second largest school on the mainland of BC.

I almost omitted to tell you there were three old-time settlers on the river bank, west of Hammond. They were John Bell, the Newton family and John Brough.

The years 1876-77 and 78 saw a great influx of settlers into the municipality. Among them were Tom Haney (who purchased the Wickwire estate and who gave the name to the fast growing townsite in 1882). Joseph Stephens, Alexander Stevenson, Tom Levy, A. Docksteader, George Howison, Dan and John Callaghan, T.F. Sinclair, John Carr, John Laity Sr., J H Laity, William Hampton, William Isaac, Mr. Trembach, Sam Edge Sr., Tom Morgan, Tom Scott, George and Robert Blackstock, and Mr. Hector Ferguson.

I often thought of these pioneers and the hardships they underwent which was applicable to Julius Caesar's dispatch to the Romans which said, "I came, I saw, I conquered". Yes, these pioneers came, they saw the great trees which they were about to tackle, but undismayed they went at their labors with indomitable courage and conquered.

If you go to some of the farms in this district you will see the results of their hard labors. Beautiful estates with large pastures and meadows, with great herds of cattle grazing upon them and yellow grain fields waving in the wind. They left a great example to all those coming after.

I started to teach High School work in 1878. I taught Euclid, Algebra, Mensuration, bookkeeping, and drawing.

Victoria had the first High School in 1876, New Westminster in 1884, Nanaimo 1886 and Vancouver 1890. You will therefore see I was doing High School work before any other place on the Mainland of BC.

The Great Slide

The great slide occurred on the 28th of February 1880 at 3:30 in the afternoon. Mrs. Thomas Haney who was on her back porch at Haney, half a mile east of the slide and your humble servant who was on Mr. Nelson's bank half a mile west, were the only persons on this side of the river to witness this great disaster.

Mr. William Edge, who was clearing land on the opposite side of the river with his son Hamilton, was killed. Hamilton ran away as soon as he heard the great noise coming, and thus escaped. Mr. Edge's body was found high up among the branches of a tree and he died two days after from his dreadful injuries from the falling trees and flying ice. That great bank 150 feet high came tumbling down without warning, carrying with it about twenty-seven acres of Mr. Justus Howison's land.

It was a dreadful sight and one which I will never forget. Big trees came down for half a mile, standing straight up and landing at the edge of the new-formed river. The river previous to this was only half a mile wide here and was the deepest place in its entire course. The largest sturgeon were caught here on account of its depth.

The slide caused a wave sixty feet high and a regular maelstrom was formed which swirled around back to Barnston Island. It sucked in huge trees and threw them up still standing perpendicular. This wave naturally swept with the greatest force opposite the slide. Here the trees on fifteen acres were mowed down as though they were ferns and great firs were stripped of their branches full twenty feet from their roots.

Messrs. Evans and Company's fishery was struck and succumbed as though it was a house of cards, leaving only a few boards on the ground to remind the owners they had a house there at one time. It next swept against the public wharf and the slip gave way. Onward it rushed and Mr. Muench's wharf came down with a crash. A scow belonging to Mr. Mayo was carried about a hundred yards and as the water receded it was left like Noah's ark high and dry on a hill about forty feet high. Bridges along the river bank were demolished and all boats on the river for nineteen miles were destroyed.

Great excitement prevailed here and those of the inhabitants living on the bank contemplated moving their houses further back. A scow used by the Indians, four miles above the slide, although supposed to be far above high water mark was carried away up the river.

The wave caused by the displacement appeared to be fully ten feet high, nine miles above the slide.

The cause of the slide was attributed to a stratum of quicksand which lay on a stratum of blue clay - the sand permitted the water to sink to the clay and the moisture thus formed detached the super-incumbent mass.

In 1878 the trustees decided to move the schoolhouse, which then stood on the bank of the river to a more convenient place, as the children had to go across fields and over fences to get to it. They placed skids under it and two teams of oxen hauled it and placed it on the road where the present school is situated opposite St. John's church.

In 1882 a new school house was built and the old one was converted into a municipal hall. That July I met Mr. Paul Murray and he asked me if I was going to keep the school. I answered him in the negative, and he said that the trustees had informed him that I was going to

remain with them at least another year. I asked him to come and we would see the trustees. We went and I explained to them the reason I wanted to leave them. On account of the amount of work I was doing I was on the brink of a serious breakdown, for I had come down to 125 pounds in weight.

I then handed them my resignation. They said they were sorry I was leaving and thanked me for the capable manner in which I had conducted the school during the seven years I was with them. Mr. Murray was then given the appointment as my successor.

The Supt. Of Education (Mr. C. C. McKenzie) then sent me to Yale. I remained there over night and came back on the boat in the morning, as I did not like the place.

When the boat landed at Fort Langley, I met two of the trustees on the shore. They asked me if I had left Maple Ridge. I said "Yes", and they said, "Come and take our school". I accepted the offer and taught at the Fort for four years. I built up their school so that they were compelled to erect a new schoolhouse.

While here I got married in 1882. After putting in four very happy years with the good people of Langley, I resigned. I left Langley because I had built a hotel at Hammond during the boom days. It was indeed a busy place, for it was made the fresh water terminus of the CPR and boats coming from Victoria and other places passed New Westminster and delivered their freight and passengers at Hammond.

I remained here for three years and during this time was elected as councillor for Hammond Ward and also school trustee for the same length of time. I then rented my hotel to Mr. T. Buck and bade goodbye to my old camp ground - Maple Ridge.

[Note: At this point in this tale, the author is 31 years old]

I still retain a kindly feeling towards the people of this municipality for they were all so good and kind to me whilst I was with them. Now I love to call on them occasionally to renew old memories and to see and hear my old schoolboys and girls, whose heads are now as white as my own.

I was born at Cowlitz, now in the State of Washington in July 1858 and have the unique distinction of being the only man living who can lay claim to the fact that he was born under the British flag in that State. My father was moved later to Victoria with his family.

My Grandfather was a Hudson's Bay Co. Factor and is a member of one of the oldest families on the Pacific coast, as his mother was born here in 1836. He traces his relationship with the Hon. John McLaughlin (his great grandfather) first Governor and first Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Co. in the west. He ruled over the territory from the Rocky Mts. to the Pacific Ocean and from Alaska to California.

I recall memorable associations with Sir James Douglas, the first Governor of BC. He gave me an autographed picture of himself which I have carried for the past sixty-nine years.