



MAPLE RIDGE  
MUSEUM

& COMMUNITY ARCHIVES

**H**

**istory  
Analysis**

**Sinclair Memoir**

# LESSON PLAN: SUBJECT

Author: Maple Ridge Museum

Subject (socials etc) and Grade Level: History  
Grades 7 - 12, best for Grade 10 local history

Objectives: To learn about the daily life and experiences of people in the past in our community. To relate those experiences to our lives today.

## Materials:

This document,  
pen/pencil or  
computer

## Other resources:

Maple Ridge Museum  
website for background  
information

## Additional Notes:

Additional background  
information can be  
found on our website

## REQUIRED PRIOR KNOWLEDGE:

Some knowledge of the layout of the neighborhoods of Maple Ridge BC is helpful. An understanding that Maple Ridge was first settled in the 1870's and the historic areas of town are still there but quite changed from how they look today.

## PROCEDURE/STEPS:

First you will read the memoir below then answer the questions after. Questions 1- 6 ask you to consider the text, its meaning, importance, and use it as a comparison tool with an historic map.

You will then expand your mind with question 7, which is a thought experiment. There is no right answer, you simply need to consider history in the context of what is past and our own time which will one day be...history. When you think about looking back on our time as history, consider how life, culture, the environment, society will be different. You can write as much as you would like for this question but you must write at least a page.

There are photos at the end of the PDF for visual learners to picture life when the memoirs are taking place.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The museum has collections of memoirs, or oral histories, from time periods stretching back to the mid 1800's, this memoir is one collected by the museum for a first hand account of what life and the area was like in its earliest years.

This memoir was written by James Sinclair, he was the first school teacher for Maple Ridge. It was written in 1940 at the age of 82.

## Early Days in 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. I 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 mosquitoes 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 night 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. Dockstader, George Howison, Dan and John Callaghan, T.F. Sinclair, John Carr, John Laity Sr., J H Laity, William Hampton, William Isaac, Mr. Trembath, 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.

# Questions:

1. What is meant by the reference to “Atlas”?
2. How old was Maple Ridge when James Sinclair arrived?
3. Why do you think the postmaster would refer to James as “astinking Victorian”?
4. Can you answer William Nelson’s question about Tom and Dick?
5. While the stories about the mosquitoes are clearly “tall tales” why do you think they are not nearly so bad today?
6. James Thorne gave his name to which local landmark?
7. What is another name for “slap-jacks”?
8. Can you write a tall tale like the slap-jack story?
9. How do we commonly refer to the animal he calls “panther”?
10. What are the high school subjects “Euclid” and “Mensuration”?

# Thought Experiment:

What do you think every day high school life was like for James Sinclair's students in 1878?





James Sinclair at 17 when he began his teaching career.



James Sinclair and his wife, 1900.



Steamboat passengers disembarking at Nelson's landing, where James Sinclair landed in Maple Ridge and founded the first school. 1906



Maple Ridge School, the first in the area, built in 1882, photo taken in 1942.