

Museum Musings – July 2012

Turtle Lake - Sounds of the Past

A quiet stroll along the moss-covered lakeside pathway under sheltering firs. A breeze rustles the trees, ripples the water. A solitary loon cries. It's easy to forget that other sounds once dominated Emily (Turtle) Lake a century ago when this tranquil pond was the epicentre of Van Anda's prosperity.

The sound of men shouting, of hammers and drills, of blasting. It was 1898 when Olive Treat discovered a copper and gold-bearing rock at the south end of the lake. The Cornell Mine was born.

Accelerated by gravity alone, a rumbling train of ore carts rolls slowly on tracks toward the Van Anda dock. Horses' hooves, donkeys' brays and mule-driving sounds might be heard as the beasts drag the empty carts back uphill to the mine.

Shouts - many in Chinese - as the ore sorters and wood cutters laboured daily. Two Chinese work camps (about 50 people each) were located at the lake as well (one near the mine and the other near the north end). It was even rumoured that a "house of ill repute" enlivened evenings at one time.

Other sounds - laughter, bright voices, home-made music one can imagine - travel across the water from the handsome lakeside log cabin built by Harry and Olive Treat (probably at the southeast end). Violet Seaman reports that it was the location of "gay parties" involving the "Van Anda 400 Club" - the "would-be elite" of the mining community. An early mention of it appears in Victoria pioneer doctor J.S. Helmcken's letters after a trip to Texada in 1899. He was fabulously entertained by the Treats and fell under the spell of the lake as evidenced by his flowery descriptions of the visit.

Excited squeals - children splashing in the water, diving from the rocks. Family picnics (often sponsored by the Treats) saw miners outfitted in their gentleman finery - tailored suits, vests, starched collars. Their ladies dressed in the latest fashions (matching parasol and hat) perhaps inspired by Olive Treat's most recent New York designs. A pair of swans was requested from Victoria in 1900 to add to the ambience. No one knows if they ever arrived.

Today the tramline pathway remains and one can still see abandoned pits, hand-built embankments and impressions of the old rail ties. And, in the midst of the silence, one can stop to ponder the soundscape that might have greeted us here a century ago.

Peter Lock

