

GILLIES BAY DISTRICT SCHOOL

While exploring near her property last month Rondi Opko discovered a remnant of the rich history of the area – the rusty iron frame of an old school desk (photo) – a reminder of the schoolhouse that once stood on that site.

The “School Road” street sign is today situated amongst the diverse terrain of hay fields, small farms, wooded patches and pipeline rights-of-way that we know collectively as “the High Road”.

Over 100 years ago pioneering families such as the McElroys, Staafs, Wesslens, Palms, Copps were among the many who pre-empted farmland in the area that came to be known as “the settlement” or colloquially as “Snoose Valley”.

Soon this agricultural community saw the need for a schoolhouse which would also serve as a social meeting place for the scattered families. A corner of McElroy’s farm was donated and community labour built the one-room log structure – the “Gillies Bay District School”.

Lack of electricity or running water did not prevent its opening in 1910 with a Miss Barnard as the first teacher. Most teachers were young city women fresh out of Normal School and life in a remote log cabin was no doubt a challenge.

Although the school was built in a central location most pupils had quite a distance to walk or ride from the surrounding farms. Nan Johnson recalled transport to school via horse and sleigh when winter snows were deep.

School Road, completed in 1912, allowed easy access to Gillies Bay for field trips. A 1922 photo shows teacher Miss Fee and her class viewing a 40-ton humpback whale beached in the bay.

As the minimum enrollment needed to establish a school was 7 the Staaf family signed up little Elmer, age 4. When Nan Johnson and Effie Wells finished grade 8 in 1928 the school closed.

In the 1930’s it burned down and only a large rock that served as part of the footing can be seen today.

That rock, a few photos, the recorded memories of the pioneer pupils and the rusty desk frame are all that remain of the Gillies Bay District School.

Thanks to Rondi Opko for the donation to Texada’s museum.

Peter Lock

Texada Island Heritage Society

