

A MYSTERY SOLVED

Occasionally the museum receives donations of objects that puzzle the volunteers. A pair of recently acquired pliers?, tongs?, grabbers? proved to be such a challenge. The object (photo) resembled fire or barbecue tongs but the blades were obviously manufactured to be sharp and cutting.

The mystery was solved when our Curator, Brenda Rairie, displayed the object at a recent TWIN luncheon. Luckily one guest was able to identify it immediately as a sugar cutter.

In the old days sugar was transported as “sugarloafs” (tall, hard cones wrapped in blue paper with a red wax seal). These blocks of sugar could be bought in different sizes, the smaller the cone the more refined and more expensive.



Sugar cutters (also sugar nips and sugar hammers)

would be used to cut small pieces off the main block for easier use. In those times sugar was so precious that it was kept in locked “sugar boxes” to prevent pilfering servants (or children!).

Sometimes called “white gold” sugar has had an interesting but brutal history. It fuelled the Atlantic slave trade: sugar (molasses) from the Caribbean was shipped to Europe where it was refined. The profits were then used to buy slaves from West Africa to take back to the New World to sell, It was called a “triangle route.”

In the Caribbean sugar cane plantations slaves provided the back-breaking labour of hacking down the sturdy canes and feeding them into crushing rollers, often hand-cranked by slave boys. They then had to cut wood and stoke the fires to boil the cane juice down to molasses for export.

At the refineries the molasses was boiled with egg white, lime, charcoal and oxblood (!) and poured into the cone-shaped “sugarloaf” molds. Each mold tapered down to a small hole at the bottom to drain the dark syrup (called “the bastard”). A slurry of clay was added to whiten the mixture before being dried in storage sheds, wrapped and shipped overseas.

Our mysterious “sugar cutter” is just one example of how objects from the past can speak volumes and reveal our history.

Peter Lock

Texada Island Heritage Society