

## PORT ALBERNI POOL BOYS?

I once had a neighbor in Cowichan who refused to believe that logging companies could lock the gates at will. He was convinced that they were in the wrong and would suffer some serious consequences if people complained. I explained that for much of The Island the companies owned the land and could care less about public access. “That’s crazy” he said and ranted on .



Locked gates are everywhere on Vancouver Island private land logging roads

I wish it were so. A huge swath of The Island was handed over to the Dunsmuir family to construct the E and N railroad back in the 1880's. Some two million acres and 750,000 dollars were doled out to their company. The swath is twenty miles wide and runs from Goldstream to the 50<sup>th</sup> parallel near Campbell River. I guess the plan was to jump start the Island economy and that happened as coal mining began in a big way. Dunsmuir was even more interested in the land value and began selling off parcels not suitable for mining as soon he could. The CPR bought the railroad and other lands and forest companies purchased large blocks.

Dunsmuir reaped a fortune and built himself castles – Craigdarroch and Hatley Park – along with saving some prime land for himself such as a lovely block on the

Upper Cowichan River in what would become Lake Cowichan. On this place he had his Chinese servants wrestle big boulders into the river to provide fishing platforms where you didn't need to get your feet wet.



### The E&N Land Grant

The companies started logging early in the twentieth century. It was slow at first when it might take all day to fall one large tree hauled off with oxen or horses. But it soon picked up with steam donkeys and railroads then power saws and trucks. The timber supply must have once seemed endless. I often imagine being with an explorer standing on an Island mountain like Heather where one could look east down the Cowichan Valley, then west down the Nitinat. I would try to tell him that almost all that timber would be cut in less than 100 years and the hills would be laced with roads. There had been camps the size of small towns and the woods had roared with noise: snorts, whistles engines and the crash of falling trees. Streams had been trashed and side hills washed to sea in the wild

rage to cut down what was often considered the greatest softwood forest on earth



A Conservation Officer examines a small stream that logs were dragged through

I am certain my explorer friend would not believe my tale -. But it's true. Yes, a form of the forest is still there and logging methods have improved dramatically since the "Glory Days", especially on public forest land. The companies made billions and left the people of southeast Vancouver Island with a few scraps of old growth and an endless legacy of locked gates on private land.

There was a time not so long ago when the gates were open for a decade or more. It is interesting how it happened. Outdoors people had become very frustrated in the 1960's. Led by the Nanaimo and Victoria Fish and Game Clubs, they arranged a meeting between the clubs, the companies and the forest

minister – Ray Williston. The year was 1962. I don't think the companies were sweating it much. Williston was a member of W. A. C. Bennett's Social Credit government – a government that was friendly to industry. In those days, the Forest Service was a different animal than today - much more industry friendly. Some would say an almost de facto employee of the forest industry - a branch plant of MacMillan Bloedel.

So when Williston challenged the clubs to show him some evidence that they were being locked out, they produced a letter from a company official that stated we are sorry but there is just enough fish and game in our claim for our employees so you guys are out of luck. Williston hit the roof and said that's the end of this nonsense, you guys work out a solution or the government will pass an access or industrial roads act that will end it for you.

It wasn't long before the gates were open. The deal was that they would be closed if logging crews were working somewhere behind them or there were hazards like fire or flood. Some companies even created small parks and campsites and had people man the main gates and collect information on use. Who can forget Lawrence Houghton at Nanaimo Lakes and Al Dyer at Nanaimo River Camp? Things were good. But it did not last. As the 1980's dawned, things started to go backward. It wasn't that noticeable at first. Roads got dug up here and there but companies were deactivating and putting roads to bed on a fairly large scale then which was a good thing. Then came more dug out trenches then locked gates. The companies cited garbage dumping, theft, and bush parties etc. as reasons. There is truth in these assertions and I would like to strangle the boneheads that gave the companies excuses to close their fiefdoms to legitimate users but the era would have ended sooner or later any way because a new factor was returning to the woods – big time greed.

The price of land was rocketing upward at a torrid pace and the companies recognized an opportunity to convert some of their private forest resource lands into real estate. TimberWest (once BC Forest Products) owns 804,000 acres of fee simple lands and have even created a real estate company to flog them. It won't take much flogging. Imagine having a place on Cowichan Lake or Nanaimo River?

How much would you pay? A West Vancouver developer told me he could easily make one hundred million dollars if he could get hold of the Cowichan Lake land between Honey moon Bay and the Caycuse Log sort and could get it rezoned to five acre lots. The Cowichan Valley Regional District has been holding the minimum lot size to 80 acres for a long time despite some hard charges by developers and their lawyers

So my own worst nightmares are coming true: housing tracts covering resource lands and preventing access to some of my favourite angling water. Far fetched?

A few weeks ago, some friends and I headed for Money's Pool where the Ash River comes into the Stamp near Port Alberni. I hadn't been since 1972 but this pool is very well known having been popularized by the writing of Roderick Haig – Brown who fished it with his friend General Noel Money. Money was a decorated military man and owned the Qualicum Beach Hotel. Sure enough, the trail was blocked by a big house with spike fencing. This area was supposed to be protected by a Recreational Fishing Corridor but when I checked with the Ministry of Environment, I was told they did not feel comfortable trying to apply the corridor to private land. My take is they were told to forget it by the government of the day.

TimberWest is trying to sell some superb resource land at Shaw Creek. High fish and forest values and an elk herd that has hung on for decades and may have supplied most of the elk that have re-populated large areas of the south. In the early 1970's, a survey revealed only ONE bull elk on the south end of the Island south of the Parksville – Alberni Highway (Highway 4). Through careful management and luck the herd has grown quite large but elk are not too compatible with suburbia

I guess I'm not either but maybe I will have to be as the companies become real estate developers. But my days are waning and I have had the best of what this spectacular province has to offer. What about the youth and theirs? How about the loggers, some of the hardest workers I know. Are they to be pool boys and lawn cutters? What about the mill workers and the mechanics, truck drivers and tree planters?

And what about the natives? Their land was taken away so someone from far away could build castles in Victoria and fill gold bathtubs with gin? How must they feel?

The fair thing would be to give the land back to the government so it could give reasonable amounts back to the natives. The rest would be retained as working forest, parks and lake and stream corridors. I doubt that will happen but what could occur is a return of the Forest Land Reserve. A program similar to the ALR where the high value forest lands cannot be sold for real estate.

It is beyond my comprehension that the Great Island Forest so productive and forgiving after all the years of abuse could be finally doomed by exploding suburbia and the loggers of Lake Cowichan and Port Alberni will be working as pool boys or firewood providers. The railroad is long gone so give the land back and take away the damn gates