

# HISTORY of the Town of COMOX

Comox Marina



## KEY DATES:

- 1792 First Contact
- 1862 First Settlers
- 1874 Wharf Built
- 1876 Goose Spit Navy Training
- 1910 Road Access
- 1914 Railway
- 1920 Tourism
- 1942 RAF Airport
- 1967 Town Status

## Focal Point for Development

Early access to the Comox Valley by settlers was restricted to the sea. Comox was the early focal point of development in the Comox Valley because of its potential for settlement, agriculture, deep water access, and safe moorage in Comox Bay. Pioneer farming, fishing, logging & coal mining was the basis of the early development. The construction of a wharf at Comox facilitated the landing of freight and passengers and further development.



For more information visit

[www.brettcairns.com/comox-valley/](http://www.brettcairns.com/comox-valley/)

## **THE COMOX VALLEY and COMOX History**

Comox is a tranquil and beautiful seaside town located on the southern coast of the Comox Peninsula that juts out into the Georgia Strait on the Eastern side of mid Vancouver Island. The town is nestled against the protected waters of Comox Bay whose entrance is defined by the Comox Spit. The Comox Harbour and its four marinas provide the main commercial and recreational access to the ocean in the Comox Valley. The views across the bay to the Comox Glacier and surrounding area are captivating.

### **The Beginnings**

The Comox Valley has a rich history dating back more than 85,000 millennia. The Elasmosaurus, a marine reptile genus of plesiosaur, used four flippers to propel itself through water and roam the land roughly 80.5 million years ago. Substantial change occurred during the Earth shaping glacial ages between 650,000 years ago and the last "ice age" that gave way to warming about 20,000 years ago. The Comox Valley was buried in a sheet of ice a kilometer thick more than 10,000 years ago. The Comox Glacier remains as visible evidence of the tremendous Earth shaping era of the "Fraser Glaciation".

### **Early Habitation**

The human habitation of North America by Paleo-Indians followed the warming after the ice age. Evidence of First Nations settlements in British Columbia dates back about 9000 years and Comox Valley habitation dates back more than 4000 years.

Sir Francis Drake made reference to landing, in 1579, in "New Albion" which is argued to be the area we now call Comox in the Comox Valley. Captain James Cook circumnavigated Vancouver Island in 1778 and First contact by European visitors in this region with Coast Salish peoples occurred in 1792 when HMS Discovery of the Royal Navy anchored in the Comox Harbour.

The Comox First Nations (an anglicized version of K'omoks (originally Sa-thool-tuch)) lived in the area we now call Comox. The Puntledge (originally Pentlach) lived just to the north, and the Eucletaw (originally Lekwiltok) travelled to the area from the area we now call Campbell River. First Nations people referred to this area as "Koumox" which roughly translated meant "Land of Plenty" because of the resources provided by the nearby land and ocean. The area offered an excellent natural harbour, abundant fish, fertile

land, fresh water and endless forests. The natural environment supplied them with salmon, cod and halibut, crabs, clams and oysters from the ocean and deer and elk from the land along with many edible and medicinal plants.

## European Settlers

The Hudson Bay Company "Beaver" steamboat, built in 1835, searched the South and East Coast of Vancouver Island in 1837 for suitable locations for new trading posts.



In 1848, the Courtenay River was named after Capt. Courtenay of the HMCS Constance that used Augusta Bay and Goose Spit for gunnery practice. Governor James Douglas visited the Comox area in 1853 on the Beaver and saw the potential of the area for agriculture. The HMS Plumper surveyed the Baynes Sound area in 1860 and reported positively on the potential for a settlement and safe anchorage.

The Comox Valley real estate market had its origins in the 1861 when the Governor offered land for \$1 an acre to anyone who would relocate to the area. The first new inhabitants arrived in 1862. The first wave of settlers took title to the area on the shores above Augusta Bay (now known as Comox Bay) which became known as "The Landing" while the rest staked claims on the prairie along the Courtenay River. James Robb and his son took what was believed to be 260 acres of the heavily treed sloped land over open farming land because they thought that is would be the most likely place for a town to emerge and for a shipping hub.

## **Farming, Logging, Fishing and Coal**

Settlers moved to the area and began clearing the land for farms, fishing local salt and freshwater fisheries, and they began logging the extensive forests. The area was also rich in coal streams discovered in 1864 by the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition and Dr. Brown along the Puntledge, Courtenay and Browns rivers. These discoveries followed those by J.W. Mackay in 1852 and later prospectors of coal in the vicinity of Comox Lake.

## **Construction of a Wharf and BC Joins Canadian Confederation**

Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century many Royal Navy ships anchored in the Comox Bay. BC became the sixth province to join Canada on July 20, 1871 when the Canadian Government agreed to extend the Canadian Pacific Railway to British Columbia and to assume the Colony's debt.

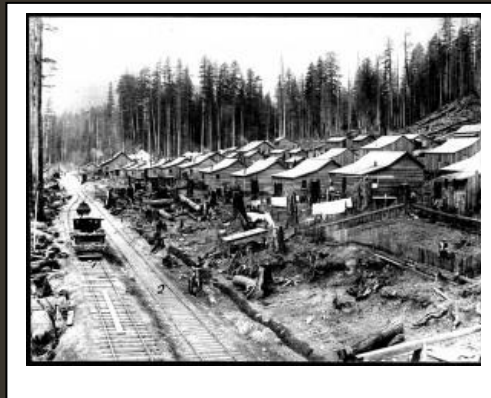
The Pidcock family built the Comox Sawmill on the Courtenay River in the 1870s. 1874 was a significant year for it was in this year that the first bridge over the Courtenay River was constructed along with a government wharf in the area of "The Landing" we now call Comox. The 1035 foot long and 12 foot wide wharf allows freight and passengers to be landed without the need for smaller boats for delivery to shore.



In 1874 Joseph Rodello bought lots on Wharf Road and built a store. Canoes, rafts and row boats delivered goods throughout the area and the Royston-Comox taxi delivered men to and from the Elk Hotel and later the Lorne Hotel for evenings.

## **A Royal Navy Establishment and Commercial Development**

A survey was completed in 1875 for a connecting road from Courtenay up over Comox hill to the wharf. In 1876, Goose Spit became a Royal Navy Training Base. The Wharf Hotel (later called the Elk Hotel) was built by Rodello in 1877. The first school was built on Anderton Road in 1877. It was a one room school for grades 1 through 8. The Lorne Hotel was built in 1877 named after the Marquis of Lorne. Robert Dunsmuir purchased mining claims in 1888 and later established a coal mine in the settlement of Union. The name of this settlement was changed to Cumberland in 1889 and it developed as a mining community. By 1891 considerable amounts of domestic coal were coming from the pits and being shipped to the coast to an area now known as Union Bay.



The lumber industry continued to develop to supply the coal mines in nearby areas and the growing communities of Comox and Courtenay. Courtenay's farmers also supplied the employees of Cumberland's coal mine employees with their produce. The first newspaper was started in Courtenay and it was called the Comox News by an American named Whitney. By 1893 the Union Coal Company was mining 700 to 1000 tons of coal per day and it employed 600 men. In 1898 J.B. Holmes built the Port Augusta Hotel which also operated as a store and occasionally as a church. Settlement was occurring in the Comox Peninsula by 1900 and the first telephones were brought to the area in 1905 by Joseph McPhee to his store on 5<sup>th</sup> Street in Courtenay.

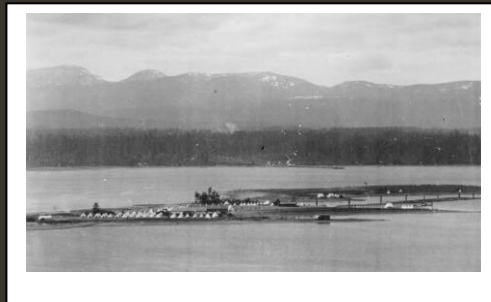
## **Greater Access**

While access to the area was by sea, this started to change in 1910 when a connecting road was built from the south and the first automobile owned by

Walter Scott came to Comox. At the time most of the roads were a hazard to navigate and most were primitive horse and buggy trails. The Comox Logging and Railroad Company was founded in 1910 and for a time it was the largest logging company in the British Empire. Four years later the E&N railway pushed up into the area connecting it to Victoria. In 1913, four sisters (Sister Majella, St. Edmond, Praxedes, and Claudia) came to Comox from Toronto and established St Joseph's Hospital as a four bed infirmary.

### **First World War - The 102<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion at Goose Spit**

The 102<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion was the Comox Valley's first battalion. It was sourced from northern BC and mobilized in 1915. At first the soldiers were housed in two locations at Courtenay and Comox but because living conditions were so deplorable they were moved to a camp at Goose Spit.



1916 was also the year that the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force left Comox for war service during the First World War.



## Valley Growth and Tourism

The enactment of the BC Prohibition Laws in 1916 brought trouble for the hotels. The Elk was already in legal difficulty and the Lorne fell into financial ruin. The Port Augusta made part of it a store and was able to survive. In 1916 James Robb passed away marking the end of the Robb control over the Comox Town site. That same year Robert Filberg arrived to take over management of the Comox Logging and Railway Company.

The Lorne and Elk Hotels were renovated and reopened in 1921 when Prohibition was repealed in BC. A new Comox school was built in 1927 to replace the one on Anderton Road, the Little River, and Knob Hill schools.



The new owner of the Elk Hotel, Sidney "Dusty" d'Esterre, had an idea that began tourism in the area. He put together a consortium of local businessmen to buy up the 283 acre Robb Estate and the Comox Golf Club Company was formed in 1922. He advertised Comox area Tennis Courts, Golf, Boating, Swimming, Hunting and Fishing as well as a new dining room and electric lights which had the effect of adding Comox as a holiday destination spot. Comox Bay became known as a Tye Salmon Fishing Spot which attracted visitors from all over the world. The Comox King Salmon Club was formed in 1932 and R. Filberg donated logs to the club for them to build docks for members to tie up their small row boats.



The Comox 9 hole Golf Course opened as a private course in 1928 and later as a public course in 1934.

### **Goose Spit Development and the Royal Canadian Navy**

In 1940 the Royal Canadian Navy built a training facility at Goose Spit called HMCS Naden III. It was later converted to a Cadet Training facility in 1954 and renamed HMCS Quadra in 1956.



### **An Airport, the Royal Canadian Air Force, and New Growth**

The current CFB Comox airport began as a Royal Air Force Base in 1942. A year later it was taken over by the Royal Canadian Air Force Station Comox.





The Town of Comox was subsequently incorporated as a village in 1946. That same year a 7.3 earthquake hit the Comox Valley. While some damage occurred it did not slow down development. The area continued to grow and develop. The annex part of Robb Road school was built in 1954 and the main part was constructed a year later.



RCAF Station Comox was closed to operations in 1946 and reopened in 1952 as an Air Defence Command establishment. The airfield was extended to 10,000 feet and an extensive modernization program began in 1954. A civilian terminal was added to the airbase in 1956 and was run by Transport Canada until 1996 when the management of the civilian terminal was assumed by the Comox Valley Airport Commission. The Air Force base began to have a significant economic impact on the surrounding area as it grew in size.



New municipal offices were opened in Comox in 1962. Brooklyn Elementary School (6 rooms) was opened in 1964 and a strip mall was built by the Ellis family on Comox Avenue in 1966. Comox was incorporated as a town in 1967. By this time the influx of military personnel had driven the population of the town to 2500. In 1968, a six room school, Village Park Elementary, was opened. In the 1970s the provincial government declared most of the valley to be Agricultural Land Reserve and this slowed development of the town to a crawl.

The Elk Hotel burned down in 1973 and shortly thereafter James Robb's 90 year old pier at the end of Wharf Road was demolished and landfill was used to create a seawall for fishing vessels and a marina for recreational vessels. at the Comox Harbour in 1977. That same year lumber giant Robert Filberg died and he bequeathed his lodge to the Vancouver Foundation. When it was discovered that the lodge was to be demolished and the grounds turned into a housing development, arrangements were made with town council to turn the lodge and grounds into a public park know today as the Filberg Heritage Lodge and Park. The first ski runs opened on Mount Washington in 1979.

The local economy suffered during the recession of the 1980s. The relocation of 409 Squadron away from CFB Comox in 1982 added to the downturn. At that time the number of homes sold annually dropped from about 420 to 150.

Yet another new breakwater and guarded walkway were built at the Comox dock in 1991. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century jobs were moving away from resource-based industries such as logging and fishing. The largest employers at the time were CFB Comox, the local school board, Mount Washington and St Joseph's Hospital. Daily commercial jet service help expand tourism and business opportunities in the town and the Comox population, which remained fairly stagnant since the 1970s increased after 2001. Many of the newcomers were retirees and the town median population increased in age

from 42.1 to 46.2 between 2001 and 2006. In 2011, the 133 year old Lorne Hotel was destroyed by fire. By 2011 the town's population had grown to 13,626 and the median age had risen to 49.1. The town's population had increased in numbers by 10% since 2006. 2016 Census numbers will be officially available in Feb 2017 and it is expected that the population of Comox will be approximately 15,000.