

THE COWICHAN PUBLIC SCHOOL



Introduction

Within the Cowichan Valley there are very few buildings that are over a century old. One that qualifies can be found at Fairbridge and is still being used for a variety of functions. Originally built as the Cowichan Public School, in 1885, and located on one of the first homesteads in the Cowichan Station area—that of James Mearns Sr.—it was also used for a number of years as a farm residence. The one room school house is reputed to be the oldest framed building north of the Malahat on Vancouver Island.

The Early Years

The initial 100 settlers that arrived aboard the *H.M.S. Hecate* at Cowichan Bay on August 18th, 1862 had more immediate and pressing concerns such as building a shelter, clearing the land which was covered by huge first growth trees and planting crops rather than constructing schools. This luxury would come later.

It would be another eight years, before the first school, the original “Kokasilah” school was built by the area settlers. James Fleming whose land straddled both a portion of Koksilah River and Kelvin Creek donated a one-acre parcel of land beside the north bank of the creek. This small hand-squared log structure was the only school for all children living south of the Cowichan River which stretched to the Shawnigan Land District. The first teacher, W.H. Lomas, who lived beside Somenos Lake, walked from there to both this school and to Bench School built in 1870. He went to the schools on alternate days. In the first year eleven students aged 4 to 15 attended the Kokasilah School.

Evidently, shortly after James Fleming died the new owner Joseph Tarlton found that the land had been improperly deeded and did not want the school on what was eventually determined was situated on his property. As a result James and Mary Mearns, who according to the 1881 census had 8 children, 5 boys and 3 girls ranging in age from 3 to 17 years of age decided to donate another small parcel of land for the school. Mearns had come with the original settlers and acquired the west half of both Section 6 and 7 Range 7, Quamichan Land District which was located just south of Tarlton farm. It was within this section of land that Mearns donated the half acre site adjacent Old Koksilah Road for the new school named the Cowichan Public School.

The small building was constructed by W.J. McMillan in 1885 and cost a grand sum of \$475. This included the teacherage that was attached to the building. In the first year costs for supplies were astonishingly high—37 1/2 cents for a broom and another 37 1/2 cents for a pail! E.J. Campbell was the teacher and received a princely salary of \$600 for his year's work. In 1887 there were 18 students attending classes. It should be mentioned that the school did not operate from January 1891 to June 1893—likely because they could not get a teacher.

Just eleven years later, in 1896, this one-room school house was finally closed in favour of a larger building that could accommodate around fifty students at Cowichan Station which was about 2.5 kilometres to the south along Koksilah Road. This small, agricultural community was established in 1885 was originally called McPherson's when the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway arrived and became one of the principal settlements serving the large agricultural area south of the Cowichan River.

When the school closed the land reverted to the original homestead and eventually bought by Water Ford who also purchased the building for \$25.

James Mearns as Secretary and a trustee for the local school tried to hire a female teacher to take up the duties at the school by running a number of advertisements in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* in 1887 after Mr. E.J. Campbell departed with regrets by the trustees, and parents present at the June year end ceremonies. It is not known if he was successful getting a female teacher for 1887-88 school year but the June 30, 1889 *Daily Colonist* mentioned; Miss Johnson, teacher of the Cobble Hill school and Miss Sylvester, teacher at the Koksilah school arrived down on the train yesterday for mid summer holidays", so they at least had a "female" teacher for the 1888-89 school year.

James Mearns eventually sold his property in 1888 and moved to Koksilah Station, about 2 kilometres to the north-east and adjacent the E&N Railway where he and his second wife, Emma, operated a general store.



School House when used as a farm residence up to the mid 1970's

Pemberlea

Walter Ford evidently sold the property a year later in 1897 to F.B. Pemberton of Victoria, and the school house became the farm manager's home. Eventually Mr. Jack (Jock) Brown became the farm manager now called "Pemberlea" in 1920 until the property once again changed hands on January 1st, 1935. By this time the original Mearns farm had grown with the acquisition of adjacent farm and timber lands by Pemberton until it was now about 416 hectares in size and had a large flock of sheep with over 200 ewes and as many lambs, seven Ayrshire cattle, 10 registered Clydesdale horses and 15 Yorkshire swine.

Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School

Unfortunately with the onset of the 1930's depression F.B. Pemberton, who owned the major real estate agency in the Victoria area was in financial trouble and by late 1934 agreed to sell the large farm to the Child Emigration Society of Great Britain so they could establish their first Canadian Fairbridge Farm School. The Society operated one other farm school located at Pinjarra, Western Australia that was founded in 1912.



Interior repairs in 1982 after School House moved to the heritage site

Mr. Brown remained as farm manager, who also with his wife occupied the former school building. Once the Principal's home was constructed in 1936 they moved into the larger farm home on the west side of Old Koksilah Road and for the next fourteen years the little building became the residence for the farm school herdsman. Mr. Don Morton and his wife Gwen were the occupants from January 1937 to August 1940 and again from 1945 to 1947 as did Mr. A Macfarlane from 1940 to May 1944 when he assumed the same position. Macfarlane, who had a large family that included six children, came from the Fintry Farm Training School near Vernon, which was also operated by the farm school society. One of his children who visited the former farm school in the early 2000's just could not believe they had all lived in such a small house.

As the farm school began to gradually close (1949-51) the Canadian Pacific Railway's Department of Immigration and Colonization came to the rescue by assisting to manage the farm, including the home site or village area for the Fairbridge Society. The Department established the Canadian Colonization Association and under its auspicious, and with assistance of the Fairbridge Farm Schools, began bringing British farm families to Fairbridge with the first arriving in the spring of 1950. The idea was for them to live at the farm, gaining employment on other farms within the immediate area and eventually establish their own farming operation. Among those who resided in the old school building were Dave and Agnes Crossfield. Mr. Crossfield eventually became the District Agriculturist for the Cowichan Valley. Later it was the home of Guy and Elsie Anttila for a number of years.

Fairbridge Village Sold

On January 1st, 1975, with the Cowichan Public School by now 90 years old, the Fairbridge Farm School Society began selling their large land holdings. This included the 30 hectare home site along with the school house and 26 other buildings. Original plans called for the site to be subdivided into 120 lots with some of the original cottages refurbished and sold. However, many feared the old one-room school house would be demolished.

Both the Cowichan Historical Society and Prevost Native Sons of B.C. wrote the provincial government asking that the historic building be protected. By the summer, just before Bellamy Properties presented their initial proposal to the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD), provincial secretary, L.J. Wallace, indicated that the British Columbia government would not allow the structure to be demolished and wanted it declared an historic site.

The CVRD also wanted to save other buildings at Fairbridge such as the large day school, the Kenilworth Dining Hall and most of all the beautiful Chapel. It was decided after many meetings with the developers that the one-room school house would be moved from its original location (lot 1 on the new plan of subdivision) near the present south entrance to Fairbridge village to an area beside the Chapel. By August 1977 the CVRD acquired a small parcel of land that included both buildings.

Bellamy Properties agreed to put it on a cement foundation, built a new porch and made other structural improvements. They were also able to purchase new wood siding that exactly matched the original material. Evidently the Dogwood Lumber Company of Sahtlam had purchased the old saws and planers from the Hillcrest Lumber Co. when the firm ceased operations at Mesachie Lake in 1968. Incidentally, Hillcrest's first mill was located on the hill near Doupe Road above Kelvin Creek just north of Fairbridge and had cut the original siding for the building when it was upgraded sometime after the mill was set up likely between 1913 and 1916—thus the perfect match. Unfortunately, the teacherage portion of the building, last used as a small kitchen and storage shed on the east side of the school could not be moved.



Removing old shingles in 1989 re-roofing project



Rear of School House prior to second shingling in 2007

Heritage Designation

On May 27th, 1981 both the Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School Chapel and the Cowichan Public School were finally designated an historic site under the BC Heritage Conservation Act and now included in the regional and provincial registry of heritage sites.

A year later the CVRD was provided federal assistance to improve the interior of the school house so it could be used for various local community functions. Unfortunately, during the mid 1980's the local

government was only allocating around \$500 per year to maintain the buildings and grounds relying on summer students to do the odd repair, gardening and cutting the grass. This proved not nearly enough money to properly maintain the historic site and soon the large Chapel was condemned and closed to the public. By 1987 a number of the Fairbridge residents proposed that the historic site, including the two buildings could be better managed by a society and the following year the CVRD turned the property over to the Fairbridge Chapel Heritage Society which has been maintaining the site ever since.

One of the first repairs made was to re-roof both buildings. This was done in 1989 and again in 2007. This work, and other needed repairs could not have been undertaken without the generous assistance from the provincial government. Since then there have been few improvements made to the exterior of the school house however a new hardwood floor was installed in 2012 and a large meeting table and chairs were donated by a local family which made the interior of the building more appealing to users, young and old.

In the future the Society is hoping to initiate an elementary school programme with the assistance of the Cowichan Valley Museum. There are also plans to make some display cabinets and install a divider between the kitchen area and the rest of the building. Once this has been accomplished then it is hoped to construct school desks similar to those that would have been used in the late 1800's. All this will be undertaken as funds become available.



Board Director Ron Price putting new fascia boards on school (2007) and installing new flooring (2012)

The Fairbridge Chapel Heritage Society

Our society was founded in 1987, and its prime mandate and responsibility is the restoration, preservation, on-going maintenance and upgrading of this important Cowichan Valley historic site. In recent years we have also established fairbridgechapel.com, our web site, to provide additional information about our organization as well as publish historic notes on the Fairbridge Farm School, the historic site and other historic events.

During the past 30 years there have been about 200 weddings held in the Fairbridge Chapel along with dozens of other events such as book readings, lectures, special tours, concerts and the much anticipated and appreciated Fairbridge Carols afternoon held each year just prior to Christmas. In May 2017 a movie shoot took place at the historic site and for many years has hosted the Fairbridge Canada Association chapel service during their reunion and tea hosted by the residence of the Fairbridge Strata. The school house is used for small group meetings and in the future it will be used to display many of the historic artefacts associated with the Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School and the history of this farming area of the Cowichan Valley.

Revised, July 1, 2017 by Ron Smith

