

The Mill at Boot Cove

By John Money

There was no machinery left in the original mill buildings at the end of Mill Road on Boot Cove when we purchased our property in 1945. My Dad and Uncle Bill talked Dominion Sawmill Company into selling them a Number 2 Mill on payments. They set the new mill up beside the old mill, which stood in the toe of Boot Cove on the land previously owned by Ralph Steeves, and presently owned by Nick Kaiser. Dad and Uncle Bill started cutting alder for Hammond Furniture in Vancouver and railroad ties for a railroad tie company in Vancouver.

Hammond Furniture turned out to be a good and fair customer receiving their barge load of alder and paying promptly, but the railroad tie company stiffed our family by culling out a high percentage of the ties after they got to Vancouver. When my Dad asked for his culled ties back, the purchaser said he didn't know where they were among all the other ties in his yard. Since there were no marks on any of the ties, he had my Dad and Uncle over a barrel. This was a hard lesson and railroad ties were always sold at our mill rather than after delivery from that day on.

The mill business was hard as delivery prices were extremely high coming from Saturna Island and the loggers who could afford to pay higher wages scooped up all the good labourers.

My Dad and uncle horse logged alder and fir. Most of the alder came from Lyall Valley and the fir was from the Boot Cove area. Dad broke his ankle horse-logging alder and was taken to Saltspring Island by boat, which had the only medical facility in the Gulf Islands. The doctor who set his ankle did a poor job and set it crooked. Dad's ankle always had a huge lump on it, which bothered him continuously after that.

I loved playing around the mill area. There was always some action going on and there were logs to walk on in the water. At one point during the early 1950s there was quite a recession going on which affected the log market severely. The loggers kept logging hoping for better times. Boot Cove was literally full of log booms from one end to the other. Someone brought a small stolen boom into Boot Cove and hid it amongst the other booms. The Provincial Police later found it but they never found out who did it. Eventually the logs sold at depressed prices as the market began picking up.

During this time of recession, in the fifties, there were many beautiful stands of timber that were felled in the Gulf Islands but the timber was never removed because there was no market to sell it to. It was sad to see these beautiful logs just lying on the ground. The market was so depressed that there was not even enough money to remove the logs. On Saturna Island trees were felled on the north slope of Mt. Elford, parts of Lyall Valley, Narvaez Bay areas and Payne Point, now called Old Point Farm. Most of these logs have rotted away but in some sites they are still visible.

Meanwhile, the old mill building in Boot Cove fell into disuse. Boards and beams were recycled into the foundations of newer construction that began taking place on Saturna Island.

During the winter of 1949-50, which was a very raw winter, Boot Cove froze over. We were all very excited and happy with this turn of events and we had great fun skating and sliding on the ice. At night, it was the adults' turn to skate and fool around on the ice. I was supposed to be asleep, but peeking out of the upstairs windows could see a big 50 gal. drum out on the ice with a fire burning in it where the adults could warm up. Art Slater, the schoolteacher's husband, made his rowboat into an iceboat and would sail it on the ice.

When the weather changed, a big southeastern storm blew in bringing with it lots of rain hastening the thaw. The ice started breaking up, but was still all around the pilings of the old sawmill. The surge from the storm crashed the ice floes back and forth against the pilings. During the night, the pilings shattered and broke up. That winter saw the last of the old mill building and piers at Boot Cove.

All that is now left of the original old mill buildings are the two big cement steam engine beds and the remains of the wood stave pipes that brought water from the spring at the big rock on Payne Road to the steam engines at the Mill all those years ago.