



Winter Issue

**AGM for 2017  
was held Feb 16-19, 2018**

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## The Merville fire of 1922

By John Parminter

The Vancouver Island community of Merville was founded by a group of war veterans who returned from France aboard the *Empress of Asia*. As the "Asia Land Settlement Committee," they met with provincial and federal representatives and by April 1919 had obtained the rights to establish a co-operative farming community on 5665 ha of private land which had been logged by the Comox Logging Company between 1910 and 1919. The population soon grew to over 200, not counting livestock.

Each home was built by the veterans and their families at a cost of about \$1800, following the usual task of clearing the land. The area was surveyed into 18- to 24-ha parcels with 4 ha of each destined for farmland or pasture. There were lots of snags, stumps, logs, slash, young trees and shrubs to remove. After the stumps were blown up the remnants were gathered together using a donkey engine and then covered with slash and other debris. The yarding operations left a 15-m high pile of woody debris at the location of each spar tree. After they were burned the ground was levelled by Cletrac bulldozers. It was arduous and dangerous work.

British Columbia's fire season of 1922 was the driest on record until

that time and the area burned totalled 634 784 ha, the second-highest amount recorded between 1912 and 2017, when 1922 was bumped down to third place. Hardly any precipitation fell in the Vancouver District between May 26 and August 9. From June 20 until the first week in August it seemed that dozens of fires started each day. The fire control force was taxed to the limit and beyond.

In late June 1922 a fire started on the International Timber Company's limits, burning mostly in an area that was logged around 1908, and spread to Comox Logging Company land along the Oyster River. By July 1 it reached a large patch of forest and fire fighters were brought in from the surrounding regions.

Merville was thought to be a safe distance away from the smouldering fire off to the north. Little concern was expressed about the fire at the start of July because, as usual, a pall of smoke had persisted for some time – since the third week of May. A rain of leaves, twigs and bark flakes occurred but, as they were not on fire, it was deemed harmless. But after burning for almost two weeks the fire suddenly swept through Comox Logging Company's Camp Three at Black Creek and then

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### New book for purchase.

With generous financial support from the FHABC, the Truck Loggers Association commissioned a new book in celebration of their 75th anniversary. Richly illustrated, the volume uses the TLA's 40 past Presidents as its focus. Each chapter provides a genealogy, biography, and political context summarizing post War forest policy debates.

Copies are available for sale directly from the TLA. They cost \$20 if picked up at the Vancouver TLA office, or \$32.60 if delivered to your home by Canada Post. More info available at <<http://www.tla.ca/timberforever>>

Thank you to FHABC past President Stan Chester for his work in creating this book collaboration.



Jim Girvan pitching "Timber Forever" at the TLA Convention & Trade Show; Victoria, Jan. 17-19, 2018.

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Merville.

In the words of Lester Hodgins the situation changed on July 6 - "By mid-afternoon, the black cloud was growing rapidly and billowing out over the countryside. We did not suspect it, but even then, the angel of death had already spread its great black wings from the western mountains to the eastern Straits of Georgia and the Seymour Narrows."

The winds picked up and moved cans and pails around people's yards as if they were leaves. Settlers gathered what they could and began a hasty retreat. A strong northwest wind sprang up at 6:00 pm and flying embers prompted further evacuations. The Hodgins family stayed home in the hope that a small clearing in the midst of their 75 ha property would provide refuge. The alternative, taking an old logging railway grade through slash and shrubs out to the main road, meant certain death.

Fire reached the settlement just after 7:00 pm, accompanied by a rain of burned leaves, glowing twigs and flaming branches. By 9:00 pm the Hodgins family took refuge in their house as the yard was in flames, especially the snags, stumps and fence posts. At 10:00 pm the Hodgins' cows, which had been uneasily wandering around in the yard, dashed into the flames and perished amid terrible cries of anguish. The horses found a small swamp and stood in it, surrounded by fire, until daylight arrived.

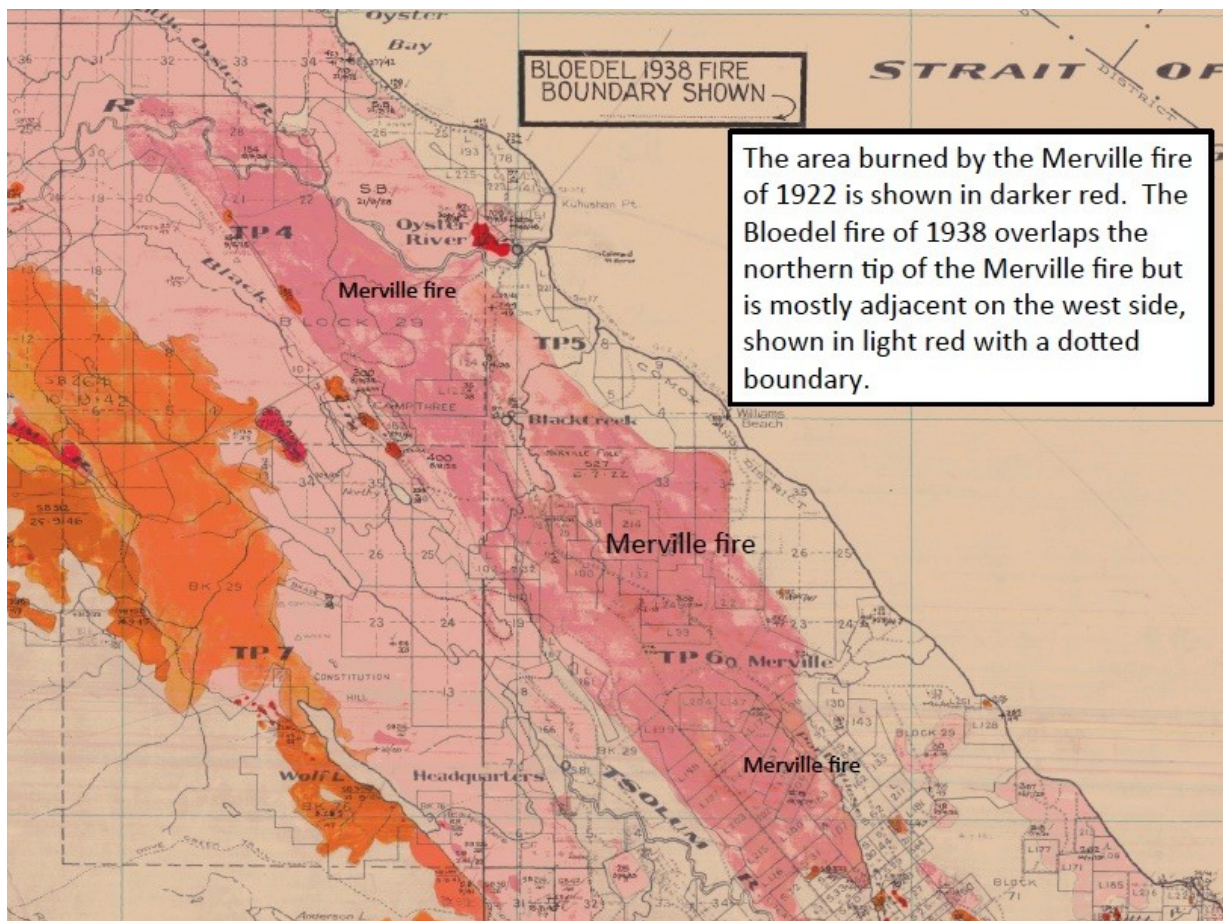
The barns burned quickly but this was barely noticed as everyone was focussed on obtaining water. The boys went down the well on a ladder to scoop up what little liquid remained. Wet sacks were used to beat out sparks that continued to land on the house.

The fire front passed by, heading south and east. The surrounding landscape now consisted of a sea of blackened stumps and logs, leafless trees and smouldering snags, some of which flared up from time to time. The remains of dead cows, deer, pheasants and grouse were

scattered about, producing a nauseating smell of burnt flesh, hair and feathers.

Rescuers were repeatedly driven back by the advancing flames and didn't reach the Hodgins family until dawn. They were the only ones who stayed on their property all through the long night. The rescue party recounted a terror-filled night with women and children fleeing, more than fifty houses destroyed plus more barns, at least one fatality, scores of others taken to hospital, cattle dead or dying and the police putting down those in the worst condition. Many men stayed behind to save their homes and possessions, eventually retreating to take refuge in creeks or wells.

The southern half of the town was destroyed by midnight. Fire control consisted of a rudimentary bucket brigade formed by the townspeople. The fire came within 5 km of Courtenay, which sent its fire brigade, along with hundreds of volunteers, to Merville.



Over the course of several days, the Merville fire destroyed 76 buildings (homes, barns, a store and the administration office), several bridges and caused one fatality. A 17-year-old boy, busy cutting a wire fence to let some cattle roam free, was overcome by flames and later died in St. Joseph's Hospital in Courtenay. Three men spent the night together in the waters of Black Creek. Two were under a bridge which later caught fire, as did their clothes, but all survived the inferno.

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## Membership: New or lapsed member?

\$15.00 annually, or three years for \$40.00

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Fifteen families at Comox Logging Company's Camp Three were loaded on flat cars and taken to safety by the logging railway. The trainmen wore wet towels on their heads and frequently doused themselves with water to counteract the heat. Two men left Camp Three by road and drove until the roof of their automobile ignited, then took refuge in a well. The wind changed direction at 1:00 am and a light rain fell, bringing some relief and saving a few of the buildings.

The Merville District Relief Committee of Courtenay and the Canadian Red Cross provided much-needed refuge and aid to the evacuees. Upon returning to Merville, a lucky minority found their homesteads untouched by fire. They dug up their valuables, including a prized piano, which had been hastily buried prior to evacuation.

Premier John Oliver visited Merville on July 9 and promised immediate assistance. He wanted the burned-over land to be replanted but, based on a survey, the Minister of Agriculture, E. Dodsley Barrow, concluded that most of the land was unfit for cultivation. The Merville fire and others nearby burned for the rest of July and August, forcing yet more families who had not already been burned out to seek safety in Courtenay.

The Comox Logging Company lost 94 400 cubic metres of timber. They sent Wallace Baikie and a co-worker out to survey the burned area and determine the source and path of the fire. In February 1924 the International Timber Company was found guilty of not having a spark arrestor on a logging engine. As a result of the survey and evidence gathered, the International Timber Company admitted responsibility, settled out of court and paid the Comox Logging Company \$750,000 (= \$10.75 million in 2017) for damages.

Many Merville settlers subsequently brought suit for a total of \$125,000 (= \$1.79 million in 2017) against the International Timber Company. The Comox Logging Company paid between \$400,000 and \$500,000 (= \$5.74 to \$7.17 million in 2017) to 55 settlers who lost their homes, in recognition of the company's role in causing the disaster. Most of the homes and other buildings were soon rebuilt but some who returned to a burned out home had to live in tents until the next year. The burned area

## FHA of BC Newsletter team:

**Editor:** Eric Andersen, Squamish

**Webmaster:** David Brownstein, Vancouver

**Layout:** Dave Florence, Powell River

**Other Reviewers:** other Board Members

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**Submissions?: email us at [info@fhabc.org](mailto:info@fhabc.org)**

was seeded with grass and clover and the Comox Logging Company rebuilt its Camp Three at a new location.

The Merville fire shares features with others spawned in slash and/or forest adjacent to, or near settlements (e.g. Farwell [Revelstoke] 1885, Vancouver 1886, Fernie 1908 and Lang Bay 1922): atmosphere hazy or smoky for weeks, slash or land clearing fires smouldering for weeks, extended hot and dry weather preceding a sudden wind that fans flames to life, inhabitants nonchalant and/or unprepared and, most importantly, inadequate numbers of trained crews and inadequate supplies of fire-fighting equipment.

The fire was notable for loss of human life and property, standing and felled timber and forest industry infrastructure; high fire suppression costs (\$50,000 or = \$717,033 in 2017 dollars – mostly borne by the industry; total B.C. Forest Branch suppression costs for 1922 were \$508,992 or = \$7,299,280 in 2017 dollars); large numbers of fire fighters employed and subsequent lawsuits which assigned blame and resulted in large financial awards. The fire was also in the spotlight because it affected a large group of valued war veterans taking part in an experiment in land settlement and their re-entry into society.

The impact of a fire season can be measured based on the number of fires, the area burned, the cost of fire suppression, the loss of forest cover or the monetary and other losses of industries and the general public. No single factor tells the whole story adequately and many personal impacts cannot be quantified in any meaningful way.

The Merville fire (8508 ha) remained a standout for the B.C. Forest Branch, coastal forest industry and public for 16 years until the Bloedel fire of 1938 (30 148 ha) eclipsed it in terms of location, size, fuel build-up, fire behaviour, environmental impact, social and economic costs, effects on communities, implications for forest harvesting methods, silvicultural practices and legal and financial obligations of the forest industry on private land.





Old Hastings Mill Store Museum



## 2018 AGM Report

by Newsletter Editor Eric Andersen

The 2017-18 Annual General Meeting of the FHABC was held on the Feb. 17 weekend at Point Grey in Vancouver, with the meeting at the UBC Forest Sciences Centre followed by a visit to **Rare Books and Special Collections**, and an evening spent at the **Hastings Mill Store Museum** not far away.

New directors joining the Board are:

**Katherine Spencer**, ex- Forest History Association of Alberta director now residing in the Shuswap country; **David Morgan** of Maple Ridge; and **Dave Florence**, who was among our hosts for the 2016 AGM event at Powell River.

Director David Brownstein arranged with Special Collections staff for an orientation and a viewing of selected archives, including records of the Hastings Mill going back to 1865 and a selection from the large collection donated by Western Forest Products in 2016 (See story in Issue #98, Nov. 2016).

<https://rbsc.library.ubc.ca/>

Following a dinner at the Cove pub, FHABC members and special guests were enthusiastically received at the Old Hastings Mill Store Museum by historian/ author **Lisa Anne Smith** of the **Native Daughters of Canada, Post #1**, owners and caretakers of the museum and its many treasures of early Vancouver and the local beginnings of our forest industry. <http://www.hastings-mill-museum.ca/>

**The 2018 Board officers:**  
President, Richard Dominy  
Vice Pres., Terry Simmons  
Secretary, Mike Meagher  
Treasurer, Art Walker

### **Directors at large:**

Katherine Spencer  
Gordon Weetman  
John Parminter  
David Morgan  
Eric Andersen, Newsletter Editor  
Dave Florence, Newsletter layout

### **Webmaster**

David Brownstein



UBC Rare Books and Special Collections



## Upcoming 2018 Events

**May 3-5:** [Interior Logging Association](#); Conference and Trade Show, Kamloops, B.C.

**May 24-27:** [BC Historical Federation](#) Annual Conference and AGM; Nakusp, B.C.

**Sep 18-20:** [Canadian Institute of Forestry](#); National Conference and AGM; Grand Prairie, Alberta.

**Sep 23-29:** [National Forest Week](#) (many local events)

**October:** [FHABC Annual General Meeting](#); location; exact date TBA.

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1. underlined text links you to extra online information on the [website version](#), and
2. the online version is in colour. (Costs to produce physical copies and send them out in the post are rising fast. Even if you still want to receive the B&W paper version, having your email address makes it easier to send out important announcements in between issues.)

So, please send us an email at [info@fhabc.org](mailto:info@fhabc.org). and state your preferences for newsletter delivery: Online in colour, or paper in B&W by mail.

