

Sechelt's Pioneer Waterfront



Left: The whaling steamer *St. Lawrence* off Sechelt (in Trail Bay) in April, 1919. Note the cannon on the bow and the whale carcass alongside the ship. Our Lady of Lourdes church is visible in the background.

Next page: A view of part of Herbert Whitaker's resort on the Trail Bay waterfront at Sechelt. Dining room/pavilion at left, the three totem poles commissioned by the Union Steamship Co., general store at right. Shadow of wharf on beach. 1930s. Photo by Helen McCall

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Like much of the Sunshine Coast, Sechelt — the “land between two waters” — was once most easily accessible by boat. The growth of the community has long been tied to the waterfront.

According to Helen Dawe's *Sechelt*, the pioneer residents of Sechelt considered the wharf built in 1904 at Trail Bay to be at “the front.” “The back” was in reference to the wharf at Porpoise Bay, built in 1902 at the head of Sechelt Inlet. Dotted with few public buildings and businesses, the Trail Bay waterfront was home to several hundred residents in the early 1900s. Vacationers and workmen alike travelled on various vessels to the waterfront, usually staying at Herbert Whitaker's hotel. Workmen from T.R. Nicholson's granite quarry also stayed there; paving stones they created were shipped to

Vancouver for their streets. The wharf was serviced by early steamships such as the *Comox I* and later the *Comox II*, which also made trips to worksites – logging camps, mines, ranches — and to various small coastal communities. The *Comox I* was the first steel vessel built in B.C. at Vancouver in 1891. Before the advent of the Trail Bay wharf, tourists' luggage as well as mail and freight were transported by rowboat from the steamships and loaded onto a horse-drawn cart on the beach.

The first Whitaker Hotel was built in 1899 but was destroyed by fire in 1914. Bert's first general store was converted into the next hotel which unfortunately burnt down in the 1930s. The third hotel was originally known as the Beach House, and had been originally built in 1906 as Whitaker's family home. The building, along with much of Whitaker's estate, was purchased by Union Estates of the Union Steamship Company in the mid-1920s and became the Sechelt Inn until 1963 when it, too, caught on fire. Besides the hotel, Bert had also

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arranged for the construction of several cottages along the waterfront that he rented to vacationers, one of which is still standing.

Other features of the Whitaker estate were the general store and first school. As its name suggests, the general store offered generally everything from local fish and game to textiles, lumber, personal hygiene products, and toys. Based on the photo above, the building to the left of Whitaker's third store was the first school, originally Whitaker's second store. Sechelt's first teacher was 19-year-old Grace Kent who arrived in 1912. However, a year later the students and teacher were forced to relocate to Porpoise Bay when the telegraph station offered Whitaker \$7 a month for rent.

Other features of the waterfront in the early 1900s were St. Augustine's Residential School and the Catholic Church. St. Augustine was built on reserve land in 1904 and paid for by the Sechelt Band members. It burnt down in 1917 and the second St. Augustine's was demolished in the 1970s. The first Roman Catholic chapel was built in 1868 and, over time, a succession of four other chapels or churches were built in roughly the same area in 1890, 1899, 1907 and 1973. The first Our Lady of Lourdes church (1907-1970) was such a large part of the skyline that it could be seen from Nanaimo. Fires destroyed the third and fourth churches.

Trail Bay was once a prime destination for whaling. The steamer *St. Lawrence* (photo on preceding page) from Kyoquot broke the 1908 world whaling record with a count of 318 whales. Whales were brought back to Vancouver, and the steamers often made a stop at the Paisley Island flensing station.

Visitors to Trail Bay were often from Vancouver, staying to enjoy the beaches, scenery, dances and picnic grounds of the village, which extended from the corner of Wharf and Cowrie to the current Legion building. In the 1920s, up to 200 party-goers were known to participate in the dances at either Selma Park or Trail Bay, and Vancouver musicians often performed. The Union Dance Pavilion was built in 1926 and later housed the Totem Tea Room, named after the three totem poles erected in 1928 which were carved by Rivers Inlet artist Paul Weenah and members of the Sechelt Band. The Hall was sold in 1954 and later housed a theatre and men's wear store. The totem poles were removed and transported to Bowen Island in 1955. The surrounding area of the pavilion once included a coffee shop, ice cream parlour, orchard, tennis court and change rooms. The building survived until 1971 when it burnt down.

Over time, visitors began staying longer than the summer, buying homes and becoming permanent residents. Reliance on the sea for transportation waned when the highway from Gibsons to Sechelt was paved in 1952. **CL**