

MEMORIES OF EARLY SECHELT, CIRCA 1900-1901, by Mrs. "Ben" Sweeney, nee Isabel Bell-Irving.
Taped July 1973.

You have asked me to give you memories of early Sechelt. It must have been about the turn of the century; I can't give you the actual date. But these few things I do remember.

There was no wharf whatever; I think only access by water. I have no memory of a road to Gibsons, towards Gibsons. And we used to wonder why it was named Sechelt because there seemed to be no shelter at all. A long, straight, windy road¹ (i.e. coast).

Quite a few of the youngsters of those days were up there, probably only for a few, perhaps a couple of weeks or so at a time when our poor mothers were trying to get a bit of rest and it was one of the earliest places for summering, for children going for summer.

The name of the owner of the hotel I remember well was Whitaker² and I remember we liked him very much indeed. It wasn't a very big hotel, but I can remember, I can remember some of the boys out on a little gallery that there was up above the first floor, where the boys with fishing rods, and I don't know what they would have on the line, but they were fishing for bats and I remember being horrified at the thought of it.

We sat on the beach, which was very, very steep and round, smooth pebbles, but I remember particularly the steepness of the beach.

I think I said there was no wharf and the ship, whatever ship it was, I doubt if it would be, I don't know what, whether it would be CPR, probably. Anyway it was a ship⁹ about the size of the Union Steamship ones that run now (i.e. ran lately), and it would come in and stand off, generally in quite a sea, I remember. It would stand off and the boats would bring people to and fro and the post and all that, and I always remember the luggage because there was a horse³ which went down with a kind of a wooden sleigh, down this very steep beach, and the sleigh was at the edge of the water and the

suitcases, luggage and stuff, was put on this sleigh and I can see him now. I suppose it only happened once but it is still in my memory, and that was that the horse took quite a time to get this heavy, horrid thing moving up the beach, and when it did go it went with a jerk and all the luggage flew in all directions. I remember we were most tickled with that.

I remember sitting on that beach, a whole lot of us, trying to decide what to find for a birthday present for a very sweet girl who was there among us, Ursula Gardner-Johnson, and I can remember Bimbo Sweeny saying that he had got some blue ribbon for her hair. But these are very small and little things.

I do remember that I was lent a pony to ride. I have always been fond of riding, and I was lent a pony to ride. And I used to ride through the Indian village toward some trails that were, what would it be, east of Sechelt. But sometimes going through the village I didn't like at all because there were some geese, and the old gander would come at the pony and the pony didn't like that at all. But one day the gander, the geese, were not there and I was very anxious to find out what it was in barrels beside the cottages, the Indian cottages.

Between the cottages there was a barrel covered over with sacking and there were strange noises coming from these barrels. And this particular time when the geese were not around I dismounted and led the pony up towards, between two of the cottages and was just lifting the sacking off the barrel when the door opened and an Indian woman came and and I thought "O, what have I done now? what am I going to get now?" But she was very nice to me and do you know what was in the barrels; baby seagulls, little darling baby seagulls with just little furry coats with little black dots all over them. And there were seagull rocks⁴ out down the coast towards Gibsons on which the seagulls nested and the Indians just used to go and take, take all the little baby ones and bring them in and dump them into barrels between the houses and they would eat them when they wanted them.

But, however, the ultimate of that little effort is that the Indian woman gave me three seagulls and I had them there for the rest of our stay, at, that summer, I remember in an apple box out at the back of the hotel, and everybody was quite kind and helped me. We took them to town and, do you know, I had them for a long, long time. They grew up to be full great big grey seagulls and i think I have a photograph somewhere of me feeding them with smelts. They took a lot of fish. Just hold a smelt by the tail and the great, big, wide-open mouth would swallow it down. There is lots more to tell of that sort of thing, but not too much more of Sechelt.

I do remember that the place we called Mud Bay, which was Porpoise Bay. I can remember there wasn't — you speak of a good road — sort of a wide road now. It was a little, narrow logging road with the logs still across — bumpety, bumpety, bump — and it was through quite a thick forest. There was no feeling of width to it at all.

I wonder how this is going whether it's recording. [Long, noisy pause]

I don't know whether this will record. I have tried before and what with noises to atop for and other things it is quite a job getting this thing onto the tape. [What follows is a recasting of earlier material, but only for a minute. Then Mrs. Sweeny continues with fresh anecdotes.]

You've asked me to give you what I can remember of the early days of Sechelt. We were up there as children for maybe two or three weeks once or twice about the turn of the century. It might have been just after 19—, perhaps 1901, I'm not sure, but not later than that because we went to England for schooling in 1903.

I can remember that there was no wharf whatever, I think only access by water. No, no memory of a road towards Gibsons. And we wondered why it was called Sechelt. There seemed to be no shelter at all. Just a long, straight, windy¹ coast.

There were quite a lot, quite a lot of people, youngsters, of those days that used to be up there, but I can't remember too many of them. I remember sitting on the beach and a long line of us trying to plan what we would do for Ursula Gardner Johnson's birthday which was happening, and Bimbo Sweeny said that he had managed to get some blue ribbon at the store⁵ for her. I don't remember too much about that. But I think you have better than I the list of the various people that were there.

I would remember some of the Hammersleys⁶, possibly some of the Townleys. I don't know that, but I do know that Ursula Johnson was there, and Bims and Ben [i.e. Bimbo and Ben Sweeny]⁷, And I know Connie Hamersley painted, like that little painting⁸ I gave you, She was up, I think the Hammersleys were there quite often.

Now I must see whether this thing has worked, [Pause] I think I can try and add a little bit onto that now.

I wanted to tell you about some friends, the MacKinnons. They didn't live at Sechelt proper; they lived a little bit further up the coast.¹⁰ And I remember very well that the two girls, Jean and Dorothy, they used to swim right a long way down the coast to us to join us down at where we sat on the beach. And they came, whether, how they carried it in some kind of a contraption, they brought their mail down and picked up their mail, and they swam there and back. That is a funny [kind of a] memory and it sounds a little bit unclear, as it is to me.

Mr. McKinnon was a quiet, quiet soul. His wife was huge and big and strong and I think we called her some very, very rude name, but it — something like The Dreadnaught. I can't really remember the real thing but it was something very like The Dreadnaught. She was very powerful. Let me see.

* Mud Bay is on the Fraser River. H.D.

Oh, did I speak about the road to Porpoise Bay, which we called Mud Bay* in those days. And I remember it was not a decent road at all; it was just a logging road, and through forest, not wide open at all.

Oh, I imagine the changes up there now must be terrific because I know lots of people who have their summer places just beyond Sechelt up in that lovely country in the Sechelt Inlet. Must be beautiful country.

I must stop because I think you've got all I know about it. Let's see.

NOTES by Helen I. Dawe, October 1973

- ¹ "A long, straight, windy road" corrected to "coast" instead of "road" by Mrs. Sweeny later on the tape. (See page 3.
- ² Herbert (Bert) Whitaker was proprietor of the hotel, owner of the store, postmaster, and owner of vessel New Era.
- ³ Wooden sly used on beach was operated by Pete Le Vesque. See photos of cart with two wooden wheels on Beach.
- ⁴ Seagull rocks may refer to White Islet off Mission Point,
- ⁵ Store was located immediately east of the hotel and there is a painting of it dated 1902. It later housed the first school and first telegraph office. (Painting by De Forest).
- ⁶ The children of Alfred St. George Hamersley & his wife Isabella Maud St. G. Hamersley included: Hugh, A.H. (Tommy), Harold, Constance & Maude (Tiny). They returned to England to live at Hycote Park, Oxfordshire in 1906.
- ⁷ Bims (or Bimbo) and Ben Sweeny were sons of Campbell Sweeny, who was manager of Bank of Montreal for all B.C. The family lived above the bank premises in Vancouver on Granville St. Isabel Bell-Irving married S.F.G. (Ben) Sweeny and they had four children: Sedley, Roger, Moira and Verity.
- ⁸ Painting by Connie Hamersley of Mud Bay (or Porpoise Bay) was given by Mrs. Sweeny to Helen Dawe in 1973. Paintings by Miss Constance Hamersley and by her mother (Isabella) are in the collection of the Vancouver City Archives. The picture given by Constance Hamersley to Isabel Bell-Irving and then by Mrs. Sweeny to Helen Dawe dates from earlier than 1906 and probably earlier than 1903.
- ⁹ Ship on which the Bell-Irving children travelled was probably the Union Steamship Co's COMOX, but there is an outside possibility that it may have been Bert Whitaker's NEW ERA, but the latter dates 1904 and Bell-Irving children went to Britain in 1903.
- ¹⁰ The MacKinnons (spelling uncertain) stayed at Rock Cottage, which is situated immediately behind the rock bluff at the Southwest corner of District Lot 303. Bert Whitaker owned "Rock Cottage" until it was purchased by the Burley family. Rock Cottage was moved back from the beach to protect it from winter storms and is still standing in 1973, now occupied by Mrs. W.J. (Mary) Henderson, whose mother (Helen) was a Burley. The distance from the McKinnon's cottage to the Post Office in the store was quite short, probably less than one-quarter mile.

Isabel Bell-Irving was born August 1889- In August 1898 Bert Whitaker had two ponies, Nellie and Joey, kept at Porpoise Bay.

Seagulls

(from back of original transcription page 2)

Isabel Bell-Irving took her 3 seagulls back home to Seton St. (now West Hastings St.) in Vancouver, near Coal Harbour and Stanley Park.

The children taught the gulls to fly by tossing them into the air and perhaps one was thus injured because it died.

Two seagulls survived and were very tame. Isabel refused the suggestion that their wings be clipped, so they often absented themselves for a day or two, but returned, bringing the wild gulls with them to be fed.

Once the gulls were absent for several days and the children heard that there were two tame gulls in Stanley Park. They know the gamekeeper in the park and found the gulls walking about there. The gamekeeper said the gulls were brought to him by a fisherman who found them (obviously tame) seeking food on his boat. So gulls were left in Stanley Park and in 1903 five Bell-Irving youngsters went to England to school.