

BEFORE FAIRBRIDGE

By
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The land know locally as "Fairbridge Farm", on Koksilah Road, and is now a cornfield, once a large swamp, adjacent to Kelvin Creek, was know to be the Cowichan Indian people for centuries as a source for cedar, used to build their lodges and canoes. This changed when in 1861 the colony's legislature declared that the lands in the Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys would be opened to settlement. The following year saw the coming of European settlers onto Valley lands.

James Mearns, a native of Montrose, Scotland, was one of the 78 prospective settlers who came into Cowichan Bay on August 18th, 1862 accompanied by the gunboat, H.M.S. Hecate, with the Governor James Douglas aboard. Lots were drawn or homesteads, with half the applicants going north of the Cowichan River and half to the south.

As the district had been laid out in 100-acre sections, Mearns applied for Section 5, Range 7, Quamichan Land District, as well as parts of Section 6 and 7. The land comprised of the southern part of the swamp and the flat bench lands to the south. Mearns built his log cabin on the bench overlooking the swamp. He married a native woman from the Quamichan reservation, and raised his five sons and three daughters at this home. As well as farming he engaged in fishing, catching and salting salmon and herring, a trade in which he was well versed.

About a month after Mearns arrived, an Englishman, James Fleming, took up the 100 acre Section 8, Range 7, to the north of Mearns' holdings. This included the northern part of the swamp. Transportation of goods was done by canoe, from Cowichan Bay. Up the Koksilah River and Kelvin Creek.

By 1868 the Victoria-Nanaimo trunk road had been completed. It passed the Mearns and Fleming homesteads, crossing the swamp on a corduroy (log) road. In 1872 there were enough children to warrant the erection of a school, so a 20 by 24 foot schoolhouse, of square-hewn logs, was built on an acre of land donated by Fleming, on a small flat by Kelvin Creek, and as the old records state "fifty yards from the Victoria-Nanaimo trunk road." It was called "Kokasailah Public School."

Mearns was one of the three trustees, serving as secretary-treasurer. Judging by his written reports and letters, Mearns had been well educated, probably at the Montrose Academy.

When Fleming died in 1881 his property was sold to Joseph Tarlton, an Englishman, who was 42 years of age married a 19-year old German domestic, in Victoria. It was found that Fleming's gift of land for a school site had never been properly registered. Tarlton objected to the noise and antics of the pupils, so in 1885 James Mearns donated a half acre of land for a new school site and teacherage. The new building was completed in April, 1885 and stood by (what is now) the main entrance to Fairbridge Village. After the completion of the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway in 1886 there was a shift of population to the rail centre, so it was decided that a new school, should be built at McPherson Station, which name was changed to Cowichan Station in 1896. That year, the new school was built, and the old school at the Mearns site, was used as a dwelling until moved in 1976.

More recently, when Bellamy enterprises acquired the Fairbridge Village property, the intention was to raise the old school house, as had been done to the large 4-room Fairbridge School building. This writer belonged at that time to the Heritage Committee an advisory board of the Cowichan Valley Regional District, and thought that the school building should be saved. Insisting thus, Bellamy had no choice but to move the building about 300 yards, to a site beside the present chapel and is now used as a community centre for Fairbridge residents.

Mearns sold his farm to Walter Ford in 1888 and moved to Koksilah; there he and his second wife, Emma, operated a store.

About 1905 or '06, Frederick B. Pemberton, eldest son of Joseph Despard Pemberton, an Irishman who came to work for the Hudson Bay Company in 1851, and became the Colony of Vancouver Island's first surveyor-general, decided to acquire some choice land for the formation of a model farm. Pemberton was head of a very prosperous real estate and financial firm, with vast Island holdings. He bought Ford's farm and lands from the Doupe, Vey, McKinley and Carvell homesteads, as well as government lands, then later purchased the Tarlton farm from Dr. Powell, creating a total of 1028 acres.

Calling his farm "Pemberlea", Pemberton did indeed, build a model farm, a beautiful area with fine horses, a registered dairy heard, sheep, and poultry. Milk was shipped daily form Cowichan Station to a Victoria dairy by train, then later by Island Freight trucks. Cream was taken to the Cowichan Creamery butter plant in Duncan. Turkeys and chickens were shipped to Victoria and to local merchants. Pemberlea Farm became a "showcase", with many prominent people from other countries visiting the farm.

The farm was also the site of one of the district's first truck-logging operations, then 1927-28. Pemberlea and the adjoining Bishop farm were logged by William Slater and Sons. Yarding by steam-donkey, the logs were trucked to Corfield's slough, an estuary of the Koksilah River laying along the Island Highway (now Cowichan Bay Road). Scott and Pedon had the contract to haul the logs, and used hard rubber tired trucks, such as Layland, Republic, Garford, Kelly-Springfield, Gotfredson—names never heard of now. They would slowly wind their way up the steep hills out of the Koksilah River Valley.

For the logs from the stately Douglas fir, Slater received \$14.00 per thousand board feet. Today they would bring \$900.00 to \$1,000.00 per thousand board feet from plywood mills.

With the stock market crash of October 1929 radical changes were in the wind for Fred Pemberton. The worldwide depression that followed the crash devastated his vast real estate holdings and his financial business almost vanished. He was in danger of losing his last love, Pemberlea, when a "White Knight", in the form of the British Fairbridge Foundation, in their search for suitable property to duplicate the type of farm school they had successfully operated in Pinjarra, Australia, purchased the 1,028 acre farm in 1934 and the land transferred on January 1, 1935 for a very favourable sum.

So ended the early story of the farm that became the Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School, home to hundreds of boys and girls from the British Isles, during its years of operation. However, that's another of the many stories.

Note: Jack Fleetwood died in January 1998 shortly before this story appeared in the Fairbridge Gazette

