



Superintendent D.I. Walker

The family that built Jordan River

Duncan Irvine Walker came to develop a hydro-electric system

ELIDA PEERS / Mar. 12, 2014 6:00 a.m. / COMMUNITY

Mostly we ordinary folk don't get to shape a community, but Jordan River was different, it had a man called Duncan Irvine Walker, an engineer, and his wife Katherine Maynard, a daughter of the distinguished photographer Hannah Maynard. The young couple was married in Victoria in 1907.

Charged with responsibility for developing a hydro-electric system to supply power to Victoria, superintendent “D I” Walker arrived in Jordan River by coastal steamer in 1908. It was the vast watershed of the Jordan, encompassing Jordan Meadows and Bear Creek Valley that offered sufficient water resources to power the needs of south Vancouver Island.

The enterprise began as VI Power Company, a subsidiary of BC Electric. After 1,000 men were employed to build dams, a 3-ft gauge inclined cable car railway, a sawmill, a five and ¼ mile open wooden flume, and a 341 foot long powerhouse, the first electricity reached Victoria on September 10, 1911. The old powerhouse still stands among the alders a few hundred yards off Highway 14 as you reach Jordan River. Today, stripped of its turbines, its generators and transformers, it is a sad and lonely reminder of the glory days when the power plant lit up a city.

It took a woman of pioneering spirit to join her husband in the primitive circumstances. Katherine was the daughter of Hannah Maynard, a woman who created her own niche and gained an international reputation in a relatively new field – photography – and in a male-dominated society, at that. For Katherine Walker, raising her five children in a relatively inaccessible

pioneer community meant drawing on resources she would have come by naturally with her mother's example.

When dynamite blasting took place at the site and the Walker family was in tents on the beach, we're told she placed an enamel dishpan as protection over her baby son's head. Believing that happy families produced good employees, "D I" gave great leadership to the Company town. He encouraged facilities for sports, including basketball, tennis and badminton. By 1920 he'd even established an orchestra playing to Saturday night dance crowds, a little oasis of revelry at the end of a winding gravel road.

With the drama of the massive power operation, the range of fine homes that stood in the town during the 1920s to 1950s and the social events led by the town's leading couple, Jordan River attracted not only Canada's vice-regal pair, Lord and Lady Willingdon, but many other guests from afar. In 1935 "D I" built the Jordan River Hotel, a social centre until lost to fire in 1984.

This era, like others in an ever-changing economy, is seen no more.

Elida Peers,

Historian

Sooke Region Museum