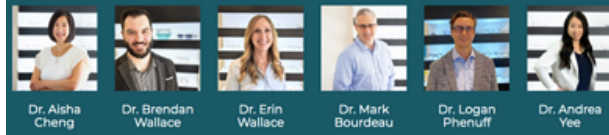


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The Jordan River townsite as it was in 1950.

Jordan River Dam worry revisited

Elida Peers writes about the history of the Sooke region

ELIDA PEERS / Jan. 14, 2015 6:00 a.m. / COMMUNITY

Recent headlines about the potential danger that Jordan River residents would experience should Hydro's Diversion Dam collapse, seem startling news to readers today. For Jordan River oldtimers like Dick Poirier, though, it's déjà vu.



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As a young fellow at Jordan River during World War II, Dick became accustomed to Air Raid drills carried out by the authorities in order to prepare residents for emergency response in case the dam was breached through sabotage or enemy attack.

Dick Poirier and others who grew up at the River in the war years recall that they were instructed to pack a case with their valuable papers, ready to be snatched up at a moment's notice. Each household was to be on the alert so that if the dam's piercing alarm whistle went off, they would be able to leave immediately and head for the emergency shelters set up on higher ground.

Our reminiscing folk recalled that they were told they might have 20 minutes before the rampaging torrent inundated the town. They recalled that emergency supplies were kept stocked in the shelters, especially at the top of the hill to the east, which was substantially stocked and equipped, while the shelter on the west side of the river, which fewer residents would access, was more rudimentary.

When you look at the accompanying aerial photo, dated 1950/51, which was supplied to us by Randy Michelsen, you can recognize that hundreds of residents were living in the still thriving town right after the war. Randy himself grew up at the teacherage shown by Jordan River School (A) where his mother Eleanor taught. Eleanor Hartman had married logger Paul Michelsen, and similarly, teacher Doreen Beecher married woodsman Dick Poirier, but that couple's home was on higher ground at the top of the hill.

(B) shows the office and warehouse structures for Canadian Puget Sound Lumber & Timber Company (CPS). We placed our symbol (C) halfway between the CPS cookhouse and the repair shop. Behind the shop one can see the duplexes supplied by the Company for the married couples, while the men's bunkhouses are located between A and C.

A roadway seems to intersect the village next to the school, with the upper portion land being used by the power company. Initially known as VI Power, it was BC Electric at the time of this photo. We're told by our knowledgeable folk that during the war an army camp was located amongst the trees, charged with guarding the town. Beyond the clump of trees, on the right, supplying Victoria's electricity, stands the original powerhouse, showing the tailrace, and fronted by the ball field.

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Still within the BC Electric property, at (D) one sees the staff houses of their personnel, including Jack Elliott, superintendent at that time, whose impressive headquarters had been built originally for the DI Walker family. At lower right foreground stood the home of CPS superintendent at the time, George Percy. Still standing today, this house was once the home of hydro employee Frank Rumsby. He, too, had married a teacher, Nettie Maloney, and their first son Larry was born while they lived there.

Prior to motor vehicles, Jordan River lumber companies used railway logging. In 1907 the railway had come down the hill, with the cars pulled by a Climax steam locomotive, dumping at a wharf at the point, left foreground, a location where the pilings could still be seen at the time of this photo.

Across the Jordan River bridge, immediately to the right, (E) stood the Jordan River Hotel built by DI Walker in 1935. (Unfortunately this popular hotel and pub was lost to fire in 1984.) Further on were cottages, a gas station and grocery store and the building that became The Breakers Cafe. While a logging road proceeded up the hill beyond, there was no road through to Port Renfrew until 1958.

Forestry workers remembered as living in camp houses during the 1950s and 1960s include well-known names such as the Ole Dales, the Harold Goudie family, the Jack Rust family, the Bob Lajeunesse family, the Jim Hunters, the Elmer Dods, the Bert Soderbergs, the Norm Petersons, the Gordie Cuthberts, the Stig Nybergs, the Lawrence Cawseys, the Ernie Van Beers, the Vince Albertis and many more.

Jordan River's history encompasses a number of industrial developments. When the early Sunro mine was reactivated as Cowichan Copper in 1962, an influx of miners including their president Ozzie McDonald, found accommodation in some of the camp buildings shown as well. We're told that the discharge of mine waste mill tailings was carried several hundred feet out into the Strait of Juan de Fuca via a pipe in the lower right foreground.

When the hydro dam was completed in 1912 it was heralded as a major engineering feat, with one thousand men on location for the project. Though today only a handful of residents make Jordan River their home, in the century that the dam has stood, many hundreds of families have enjoyed sharing their lives in the traditionally warm-hearted community at the mouth of the river.

Recent BC Hydro proclamations may cause some speculation – could it be possible that the watershed's geography has in fact meant that untold numbers of people have been imperiled here over the past hundred years?

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Elida Peers, Historian

Sooke Region Museum



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