

# A walk through time... 1926-1935

From Boom to Bust. Courtenay doesn't escape the harsh effects of the Great Depression, but as the service centre for the agricultural economy of the surrounding area, it continues to grow and this decade sees the creation of two important sites in the life of the city – the Native Sons Hall and Lewis Park.



Home at 185 Duncan, built around 1927 | City of Courtenay

Population: 1,219 (in 1931)

Map above shows the City boundary during this era.

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION

By 1933 Canada was in the grip of the Great Depression, and 30% of the labour force was out of work. The four western provinces, because of their reliance on the export of raw materials, were hardest hit. Average per capita income in B.C. decreased, between 1929 and 1933, by 47%. Courtenay didn't escape the ill effects; in the autumn of 1930 the City registered 200 unemployed out of a total population of around 1200. Protests by the unemployed occurred in 1931. And was it coincidental that in 1932 there was a 10% cut in the civic payroll and school teachers offered a 7% reduction in salaries, and that in 1937 doctors were to receive a grant to treat indigent patients? But things were worse in Saskatchewan with a drought lasting from 1933-37, and 66% of the population having to go on relief. In 1936, Courtenay's newly-formed Rotary Club sent a boxcar of fruit and vegetables to Saskatchewan "to relieve the suffering from drought". Only the onset of the Second World War brought an end to the "Dirty Thirties".

## LEWIS PARK

Lewis Park has for many years been a focus for community activities. In 1892 the Agricultural Society leased 2 acres across from the Courtenay House. The Fall Fair became an important annual tradition which focused not only on Agriculture but also Industry with Comox Logging Company holding their annual picnic during the Fall Fair. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, horse races were a popular sport.

In 1928, the City purchased additional land for a playground and park for the use of citizens. Over the next few years, 6 separate parcels of land would be acquired as well as the Agricultural Hall. In 1927, the Board of Trade purchased two Totem Poles that were placed at the entrance of the playing fields which had covered bleachers for spectators. These Totems were later replaced but two Totems still stand prominently at the entrance greeting visitors on their arrival.

During the second world war, Lewis Park served as barracks for the "Fishermans' Reserve" who were the crews of the Assault Craft moored at the Courtenay River Slough. This site was one of the areas in Canada used for combined operations training and played a key role in the preparation for the defense of the west coast of Vancouver Island and future operations in Europe.

Lewis Park continues to be a social and recreational hub with softball fields, tennis, lawn bowling, outdoor pool and spray park, skatepark and the newly renovated Lewis Recreation Centre. In the summer it serves as the terminus for Puntledge River tubing trips and the park hosts the annual July 1st celebrations as well as the Highland games.

## NATIVE SONS HALL

The Native Sons Hall is a unique structure built from cedar and fir logs some of which came from the 1922 Merville fire. It is the largest free-span log structure in Canada. Seed money for the building was raised at the 1927 Dominion Day Celebrations which honoured the Silver Anniversary of Canadian Confederation. The Hall opened in 1928 with 400 people in attendance for the banquet followed by dancing to the music of three orchestras. The upper hall with its large floating dance floor and smaller assembly rooms downstairs became the cultural centre of the valley with a variety of activities from arts and crafts, basketball, to political rallies. It would be a temporary home for the Post Office, the Canadian Scottish Regiment and the Courtenay and District Museum. During WWII dances held at the hall were a focus for social activity for servicemen from all three armed forces that were stationed in the valley. It is said to have the best dance floor in the world!



Native Sons Hall | Courtenay & District Museum, 990.29.1



Logger Sports in Lewis Park, 1927 | Image F-08671 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives



Lewis Park Totem Poles | Courtenay & District Museum, 996.353.1



Boys (Hot Shots) and Girls (Peps) Basketball teams in 1931 | Contributed by: L. Burns



Police Station, Later Became City Hall | Contributed by: L. Matthews



On a regular basis, a federal government grant was used to dredge the Courtenay River to allow the transport of freight. | Courtenay & District Museum, 982.29.7



Fifth Street Parade, 1927 | Courtenay & District Museum, Stubbs Collection

## THE BLIZZARD OF '35

Courtenay may be regarded as being in the mildest, balmiest corner of Canada, but it had its share of extreme weather in the past. January 20-21 1935 saw the worst blizzard since 1916. Nearly 140cm. (54 inches) of snow fell on the level, and it drifted much higher. All road and rail traffic was halted, and the small amount of equipment available was not up to clearing it, until private tractors etc. were pressed into service. Transport had to be by boat; to bring the mail from Comox to Courtenay for example, and to take a doctor from Courtenay to St. Joseph's Hospital. (At the end of his boat trip he had to climb the steep bank to the hospital through waist-deep snow). That was the worst snow since 1916, and that was the worst snow since the winter of 1889-90. Then there were no tractors, and snow reached a depth of 6 to 8 feet. Eric Duncan remembered it "came on about the middle of December and lay till the sun wore it away in April".

## THE VOLUNTEER AMBULANCE SERVICE

St. Joseph's Hospital opened in 1913, to serve the Comox/Courtenay District. In the early 1920's The St. Joseph's Hospital Women's Auxiliary purchased the first Comox District Ambulance. It was housed in Simm's Motors Garage in Courtenay and operated by volunteers from Courtenay. Other men also offered their services. In 1932 Simm's Garage was destroyed by fire including the ambulance.

The members of the Courtenay Volunteer Fire Department, with their increasing knowledge of First Aid, saw the need for an Ambulance Service and decided to provide this much needed service. Funds to purchase an ambulance & equipment were raised by the Fire Department, through

dances, raffles, and subscriptions. Major employers in the district, such as Canadian Collieries (D) Ltd. Coal mines and Comox Logging & Railway made substantial donations.

In 1935 the C.V.F.D. Ambulance commenced. It was operated out of the Courtenay Fire Hall by the volunteers as a non-profit business. As the area and population grew, a second ambulance was added to the service and new vehicles purchased as they were required to keep up with the times. It was operated continually until July 1, 1974, when the Provincial Govt. Emergency Health Services Commission took over all the ambulances in the Province.

