

THE TIE THAT BINDS

A Community spirit arises where people
LIVE ❁ WORK ❁ LEARN ❁ PLAY

A look at communities in the Comox Valley from 1862 to 1962

Since 1862 when the first European settlers arrived at Comox Bay and established small farms, a number of diverse communities have been established because of their employment opportunities. Where men found work, their families came to live, their children were enrolled in schools and the hours of leisure were spent in a number of activities such as Lodges, music and sports.

It is these four activities: where they LIVED, WORKED , WENT TO SCHOOL and spent their LEISURE time that a community spirit arose and remained with the people long after the communities disappeared and remain now only as a name on a map.

COURTENAY The Business Community

While other areas of the Comox Valley grew quickly, Courtenay was late in developing. The deep forest deterred the early settlers from farming the area on the west side of the Courtenay River so it was the east side around the slough that businesses gradually moved from the wharf in Comox to better serve the farmers along the Upper and Lower Prairie roads.

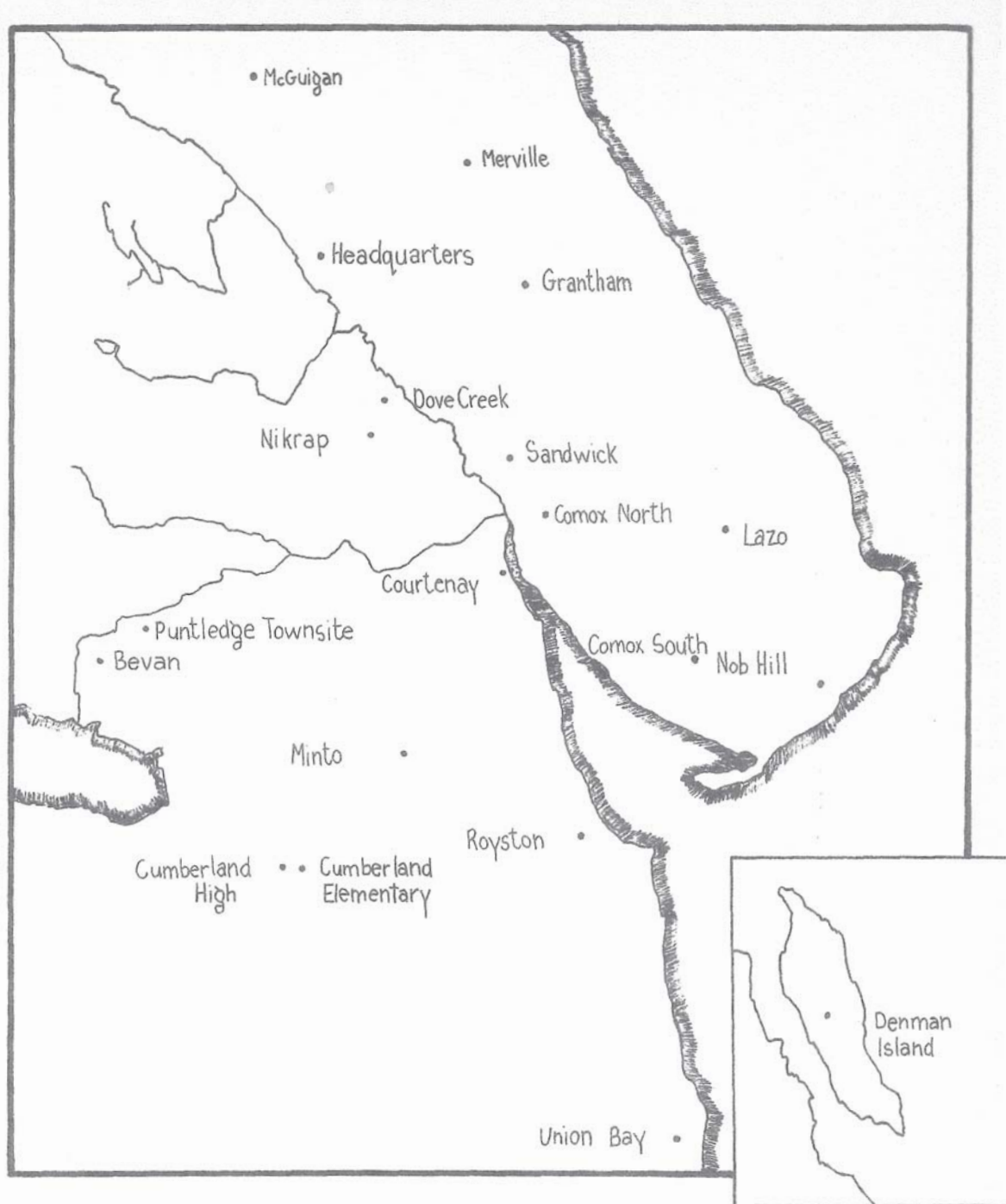
It was not until Joseph McPhee laid out a townsite across the river that Courtenay developed. With the decline of coal production and the imminent arrival of the E&N Railway in 1914 with a connection to Nanaimo and Victoria, businesses in Cumberland began to open a second store in Courtenay which was incorporated as a city in 1915. The population was 800. By 1941 the population had risen to 1737.

The Courtenay River became an important transportation link with barges bringing cargo up river to

the wharves of companies who had large storage warehouses. After the First World War the centre of commerce was shifting to Courtenay. The opening of the Native Sons Hall in 1928 provided the whole Comox Valley with a large building suitable for many activities from A to Z.

Modern transportation since the end of World War II has provided easier access for everyone to connect to a large centre. When the smaller communities of the valley no longer lived in isolation Courtenay became the new centre of commerce. In 1963, all senior high students graduated from Courtenay High School.

Today many of the thriving communities based on farming, mining and logging are ghost towns. They are only names among those on a map of valley schools: Bevan, Headquarters, McGuigan, Nikrap, Nob Hill and Puntledge Townsite.



Map of Schools: *For our Children, a History of Comox Valley Schools*



COMOX

The First Community Developed Because of Farming



Comox Wharf circa 1890s

Courtenay and District Museum 989.143.6

Cultivation of the rich farmland of the Comox Valley began in October 1862 when the HMS Grappler brought the first group of settlers into Port Augusta. They pre-empted land along the Tsolum River along two roads first known as Lower and Upper Prairie Roads and later renamed Headquarters Road and the Island Highway.

Small farms did not develop across the Courtenay River until a bridge was built for Reginald Pidcock's sawmill.

The farmers connected to the wharf at Comox where their eggs, butter and field produce could be shipped south to Nanaimo and Victoria. Small enterprises at the wharf formed a community with general merchandise stores, blacksmiths and hotels.

The arrival of the British navy ships was cause for much celebration and sports competition. It also brought a boost to the economy to the little settlement at the wharf.

One-room schools were formed when there were enough students (ten) for parents to apply for a government grant to build the school and hire a teacher.

Farms were also settled along the Courtenay River delta, Nob Hill, Little River, Lazo and later as far along the Upper Road as the Grantham area.

After the Great War veterans were given land at what they named Merville to remind them of their service in France. In the 1930's, Black Creek was developed with the arrival of the Mennonite farmers.

Both Denman and Hornby Islands were dotted with small farms before the Great War.



Comox School, 1892

Courtenay and District Museum 989.22.1

The area west of the Courtenay River was not settled until the arrival of miners when the Union Collieries went into production. Now there was a ready market for farm produce. This gave a money economy for all the subsistent farmers.

War ships at Comox Harbour, circa 1905



Courtenay and District Museum 972.245.2



Chris Carwithen Barn, circa 1905

Courtenay and District Museum 990.24.233

MINING

The Development of Cumberland as the Centre of Community

C160-020, Cumberland Museum & Archives

Two Miners Standing Beside a Coal Cart [before 1920]



The Collieries would eventually open eight separate mine shafts at Cumberland, around Comox Lake and north to the upper Puntledge River. The communities of Union Bay, Bevan and Puntledge would have schools, stores and a post office.

Miners came from around the world, and brought an ethnic diversity which enriched the cultural activities and promoted sport rivalries. At times men were

hired for their expertise on the soccer field rather than their knowledge of mining! There was a large Chinatown, a Japanesetown, and a small community of African Americans.

Most of the Chinese community were bachelors and many of the Japanese brought their wives and families, and although the Japanese children attended public school, their community also had two Japanese language schools. Eventually the ethnic diversity included Americans, Chinese, English, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Scottish, Welsh and Yugoslavian miners.

Coal mining is dangerous, so in time just out of town, separate cemeteries opened for Protestants, Catholics, the Chinese, the Japanese and the Buddhists.

By 1897, the population of the City of Cumberland was 3,000. In 1921 the population was 1179, by 1941 there were only 885 residents.

The decline in the coal production began after the strikes of 1912-1914 and the end of the Great War. By the 1950's smaller communities like Bevan and Puntledge would become ghost towns. Yet, their imprint remains today on the hearts of those who once lived there.

Coal was sent by rail car to Union Bay where it was loaded from wharves that connected the valley to sea ports around the world. The rail line for coal would at times become a passenger train, connecting the populations of the smaller townsites to the other mine communities for special events such as a holiday celebration or sport events.

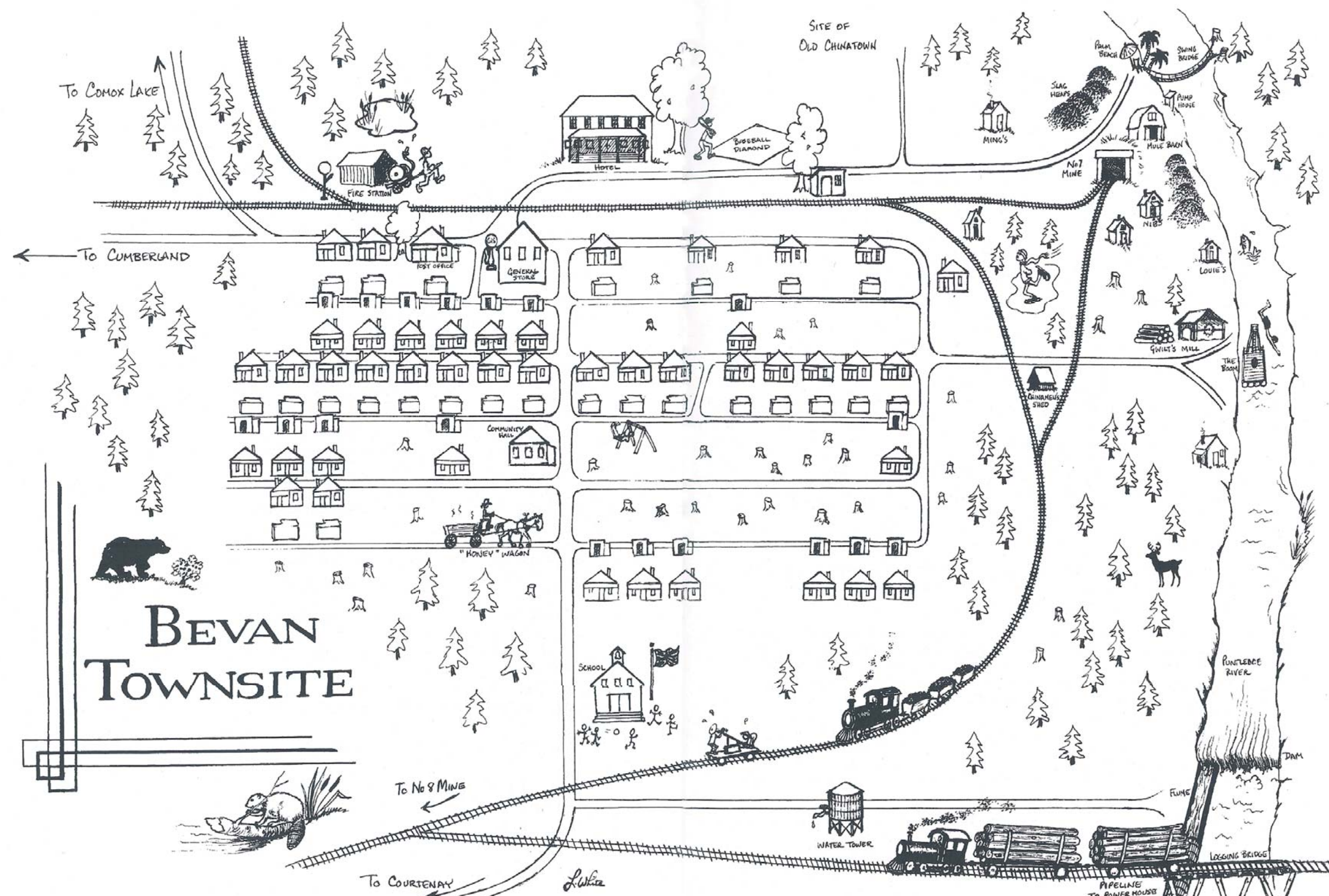
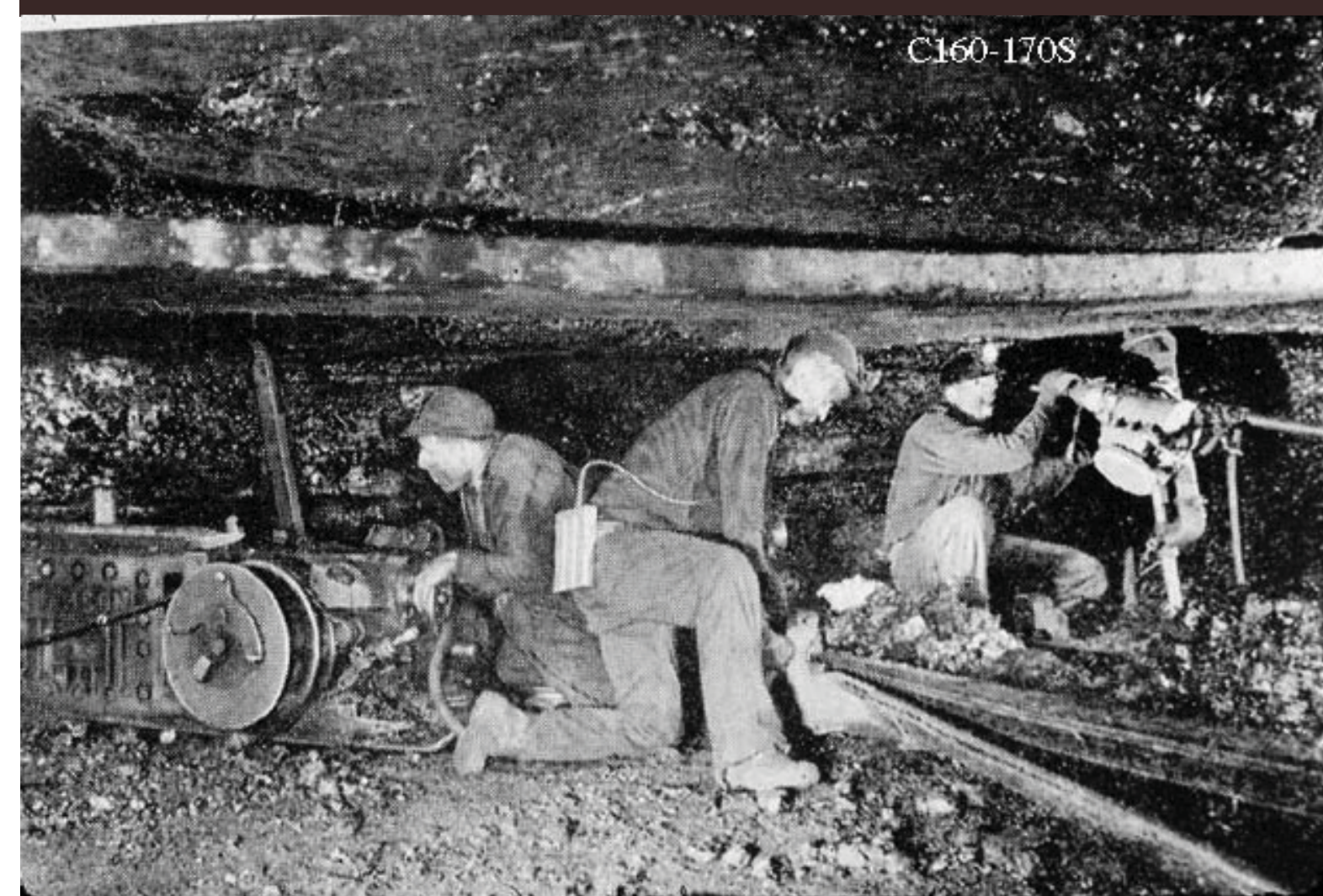
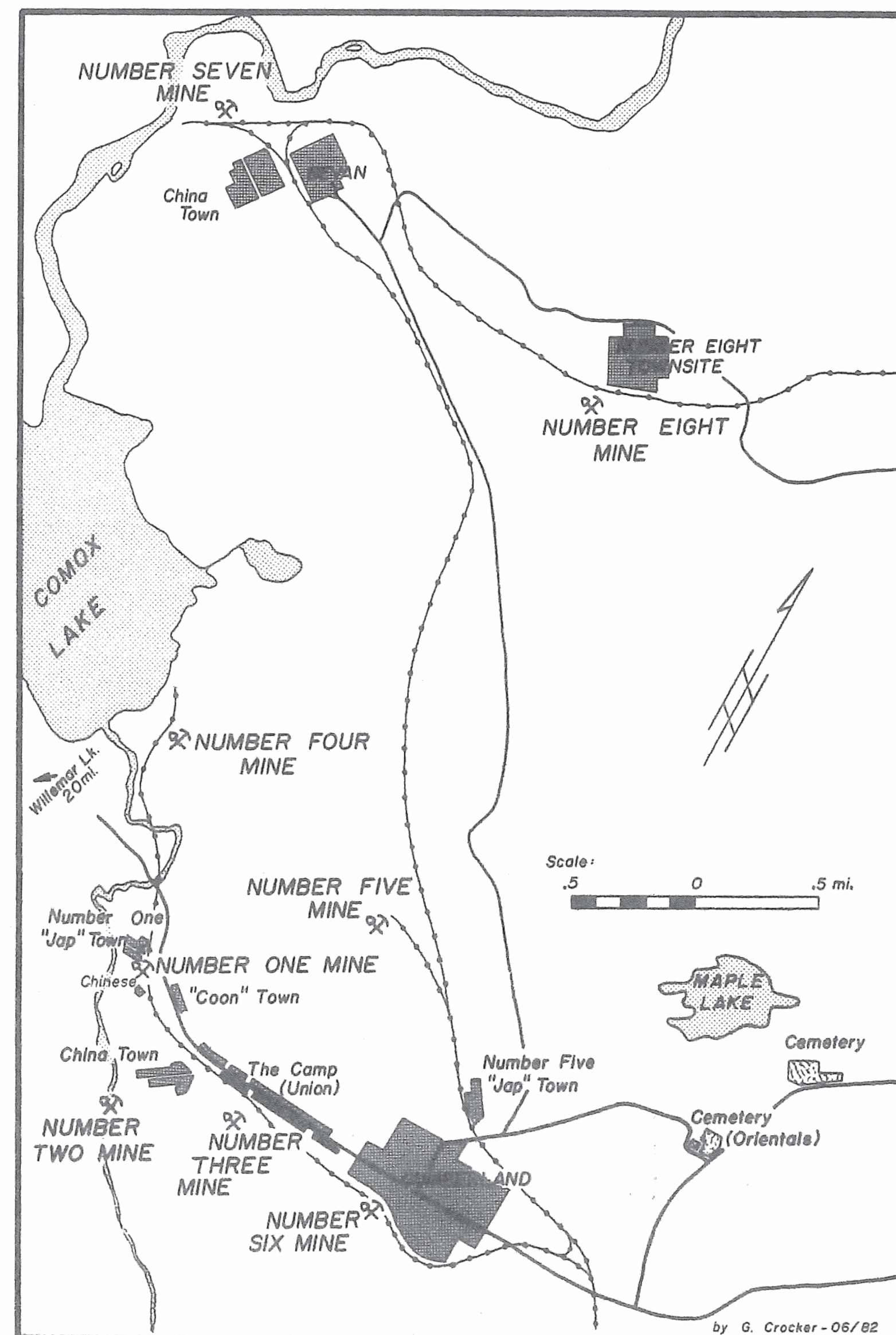


Illustration from "Voices from Bevan" by Betty Annand, 2002

Coal Miners Working Underground

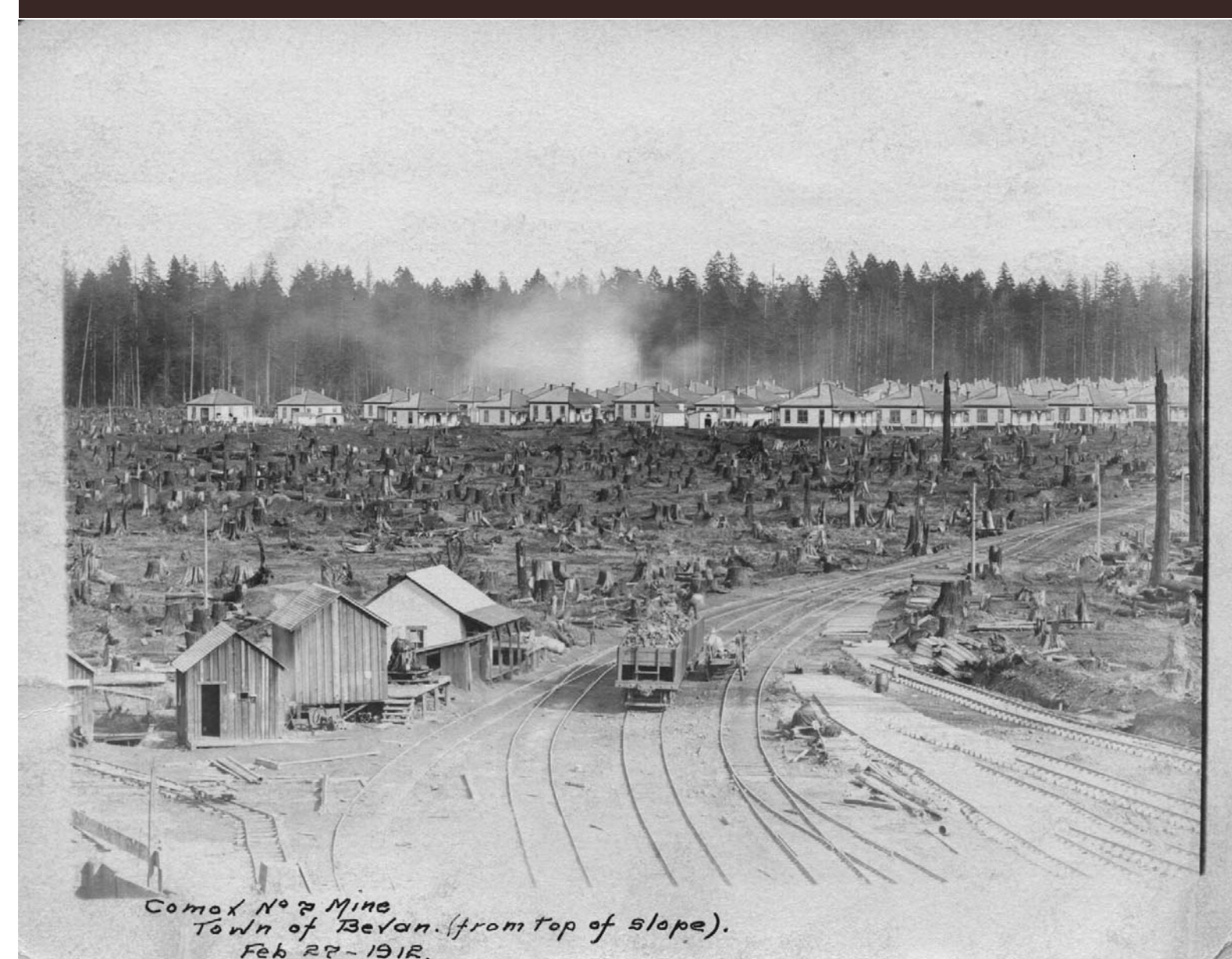


C010-001, Cumberland Museum & Archives



The Mines and Towns of the Comox Valley.

No.7 Mine at Bevan, Feb 27, 1912



C020-011, Cumberland Museum & Archives.

Chinatown, Cumberland B.C.



C160-1705, Cumberland Museum & Archives.

LOGGING INDUSTRY

For the earliest settlers, the vast timber forest was a nuisance that had to be felled and taken away, then the stumps blown out of the fields before they could be cultivated. Some logs would be used for homes and the first church, but until 1872, when Reginald Pidcock established his mill to cut the raw logs from the farms of those first pre-emptors, the trees were simply “in their way”.

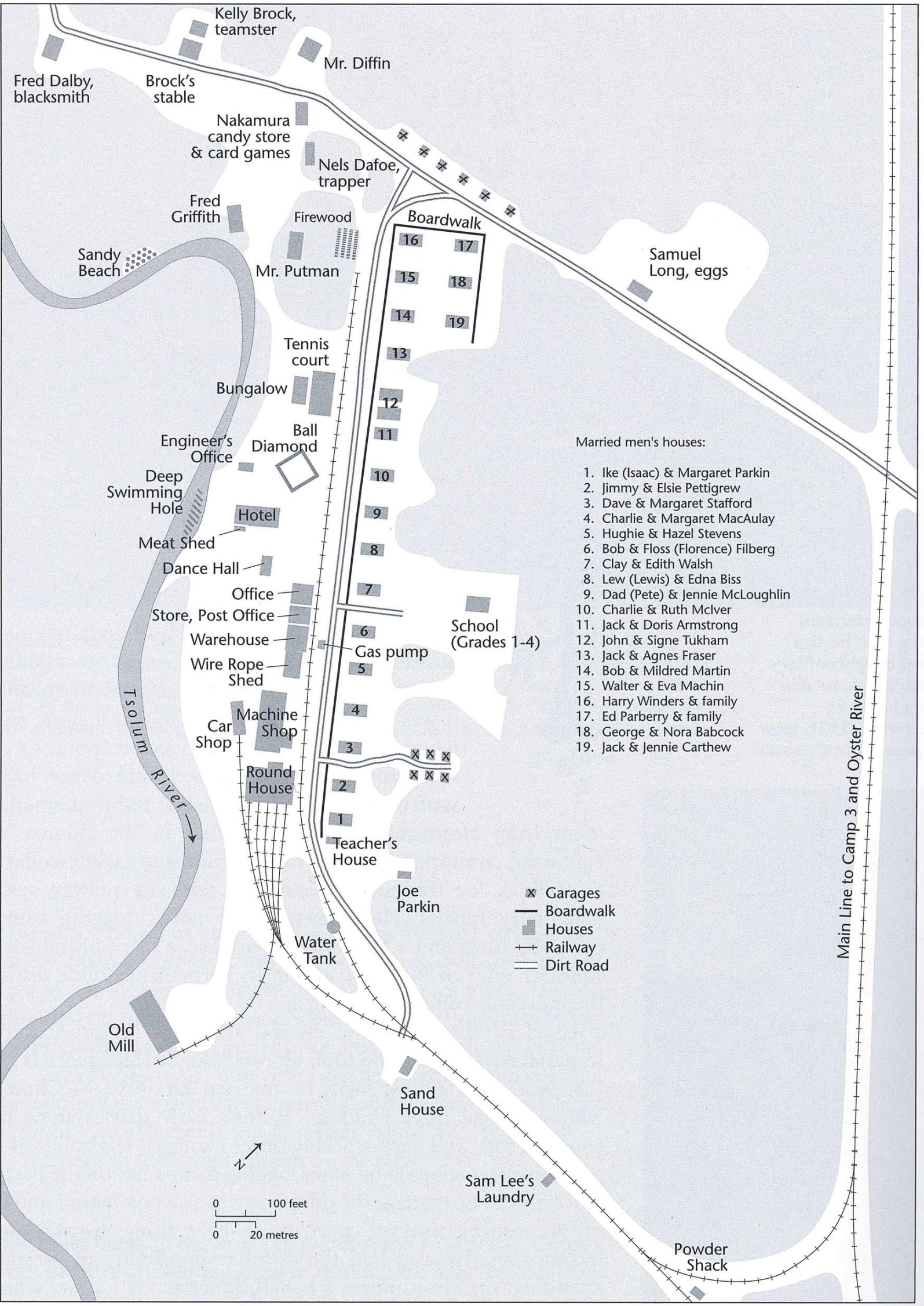
In the 1880’s small logging operations began to operate in the valley, but the logging industry did not become a “timber rush” until the turn of the new century when the Government of British Columbia gave timber licences to syndicates and individuals. The cost was the annual interest on the value of the timber. In 1907 these were no longer issued. At that time the largest logging company in the British Empire was the Canadian Western Lumber Company which was incorporated on

10 March 1910 with Comox Logging and Railway Company, a subsidiary of which sent logs from here to Fraser Mills at Millardville, now Coquitlam.

Soon a network of logging railroad track was winding through the farmland of the Upper Prairie. To accommodate housing for the staff, which included loggers, rail engineers, labourers and management, a permanent “hub” was established at Headquarters, with often-moved townsites along the railways such as Nikrap, Camp 3 and McQuigan.

Schools and sports would play an important role in the life of these communities. The Tsolum Girls basketball team, with no gym for practicing or proper uniforms, won the provincial championships in 1933. A tight friendship developed and although the communities are gone, the spirit remains.

Headquarters, 1926



Photos and illustration from “Island Timber: A Social History of the Comox Logging Company, Vancouver Island” and “Mountain Timber” by Richard Somerset Mackie



About these panels
and the Heritage
Advisory
Commission

Information for this panel was compiled by a working group of the City of Courtenay Heritage Advisory Commission, with the help of resources and staff at the Courtenay and District Museum, and it was designed by City Staff.

The nine-member Commission is in its 21st year of service, and has expanded its scope over the years as it focuses on education about, and promotion of, heritage in Courtenay.

The Cumberland Heritage Faire has been the stimulus for displays on such topics as the Courtenay River and Heritage Neighbourhoods, while the City's Centennial led to the research

resulting in the Commission's 11-panel display on Courtenay's One Hundred Years, available on the City of Courtenay website.

The Commission has developed a Residential Heritage Inventory of over 200 properties. It contributed to the creation of the City's Heritage Register, currently listing 22 properties, and it has an ongoing programme of placing Commemorative Plaques at properties and locations of heritage significance.

More about the Commission and the items mentioned here can be found on the City's website at www.courtenay.ca/heritage