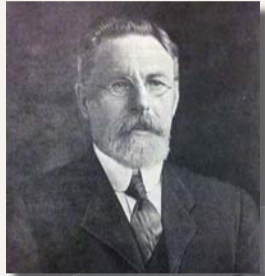


# A walk through time... 1916-1925

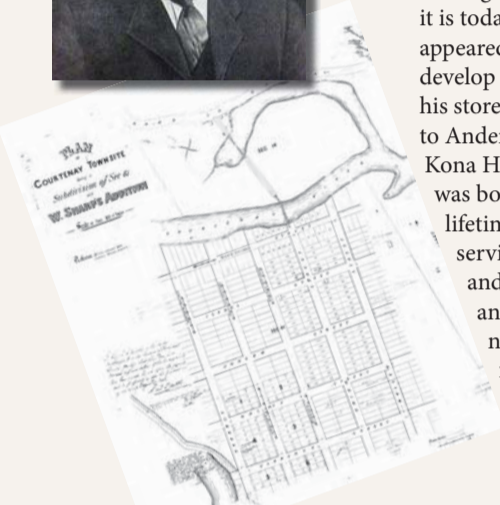
The Early Years. The downtown heart of Courtenay has clearly moved from the east side of the Courtenay River to Joseph McPhee's townsite on the west side. Despite the setbacks of more than one devastating fire, urban amenities are being introduced, and the fledgling city is on its way.



## THE FATHER OF COURTENAY

Joseph McPhee, an energetic and forward-thinking entrepreneur, believed that cities "of consequence" developed on rivers. He purchased some of Pidcock's property on the west side of the Courtenay River and hired surveyor George Drabble to layout a townsite. The townsite plan was registered in 1890. Union Street (now 5th) was the main street as it is today. At first just logged-over bush, slowly houses and businesses appeared, and Courtenay as we know it was born. McPhee went on to develop further business interests in Courtenay and elsewhere. One of his stores, which originally fronted on Union Street, was later moved to Anderton Avenue and can still be seen in altered state as the present Kona Hostel. Joseph McPhee, often called "The Father of Courtenay", was born in 1848, and died, almost 98 years old, in 1946. During his lifetime he helped to establish the Courtenay Board of Trade, ferry services to Denman & Hornby Islands, and publicly-owned power and water systems. He served on Courtenay's first School Board and the Valley's first Hospital Board, financed the first community newspaper, and donated land for the first school. He was also the first president of the Agricultural Society that started the annual Comox Valley Fair which continues today.

Adapted from the *Life and Times of Joseph McPhee* by Ian Kennedy



TOP: Joseph McPhee | McPhee Collection as shown in "Land of Plenty" by Isenor, McInnis, Stephens & Watson BOTTOM: Courtenay Townsite Plan 1892.

## MEMORIAL CAIRN

The Memorial Cairn located on Mission Hill at Dingwall and Island Highway was dedicated in November 1922. The Great War Veterans Association had proposed a Celtic Cairn with an Anglo Saxon Cross to be built from rocks brought from the farms of those men who had served overseas. The Cairn would honour not only those who died but all who had gone away to war to serve the British Empire.



TOP: War Memorial Cairn erected to honour those serving in World War I. Over time names of those who died serving in World War II, the Korean War, and Peacekeeping missions have been added. | Courtenay & District Museum Stubbs Collection. BOTTOM: Young men in uniform arriving on E&N | Courtenay & District Museum, 2004.28.2

## HELP! FIRE!

### Fire spreads through downtown in 1916 and 1919

At 10:00 P.M. July 21, 1916, just as Bert Whittle, Manager of Courtenay Opera House, was closing up he heard the cry "FIRE! FIRE!" and the sound of crackling between the buildings. Shortly afterwards the Church Bell sounded calling the volunteer firemen to "man" the buckets, ladders and ropes. There was no water system in the newly formed City - firefighters depended on water from the Comox Creamery reservoir, a few wells, and the Courtenay River.

Before long a large crowd of willing workers had gathered and assisted in rescuing people and building contents. The wood frame buildings were no match for the fast spreading fire and before long all the buildings on the south side of 5th Street between Cliffe Avenue and Duncan Avenue were engulfed. The fire spread across to the north side of the block and north on the west side of Cliffe Ave. Where there was space between buildings, wet blankets were used to keep the exposed walls from igniting. The Riverside Hotel and Charles Brown Furniture (now Tab Imports) suffered some damage but were saved in this manner.

Dynamite was used to blow up buildings in attempt to stop the fire from spreading however many buildings were destroyed. In the early hours of July 22, an exhausted army of volunteers viewed the smoldering remains. In all 13 buildings including 33 businesses were destroyed. Fortunately most of the contents were rescued and there was no loss of life. In the next several months, cleanup continued and new construction ensued. Downtown rose up through the ashes.

Fire struck again in the early hours of September 13, 1919. It was another downtown disaster but this time the damage was less extensive. The fire struck the north side of 5th Street from Duncan Ave west to what was then vacant land. The Canadian Bank of Commerce, Tarbell's Hardware, and a 2 storey building that was home to several businesses were ruined. Again, with no water system wells and buckets were the only defence. This continued to be a problem. On December 22, 1921 fire demolished the Majestic Theatre at the bottom of 4th Street. These tragic fires reinforced the urgent need in providing a water supply and fire fighting apparatus and equipment.



Courtenay Fire Hall | Contributed by L.Burns



Courtenay Fire, 1916 | Courtenay & District Museum, 972.54.3

## CHANGING TRANSPORTATION

Originally horse and carriages drove down the road or lanes as was deemed fit. Roads and bridges, originally constructed for the horse and carriage, were carefully being used by the automobile, and necessary upgrades were made. The first automobiles and trucks were right hand drive and the rules mandated driving on the left side of the road, as it was in Britain. Effective January 1, 1922, the law changed- all vehicles were to drive on the right hand side of the road. Newer motor vehicles came equipped with left hand drive as it is today.



Driving on left side of road, downtown Courtenay, 1921 | BC Archives A-07138



City Hall built in 1916 | City of Courtenay, unknown date.



Population: 810

Map above shows the City boundary during this era.

Courtenay School 1922. Creamery in background. Present day Thrifty's site.

## THE VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE

Early minutes of Courtenay's first Mayor and Council reveal that fire protection was a priority, but there were almost insurmountable obstacles with no reliable water supply and no effective method of moving the available water to the scene of a fire. Council did what they could. Five volunteers were appointed, and several buckets, ladders and ropes were purchased and located around the city on power poles or trees. The Presbyterian Church Bell was used for calling the volunteers into action. These were improvements but Council minutes reflect concern over the missing or borrowed fire equipment and the need to replace buckets, etc. The inefficiency of the service was evident at the time of the major fire in 1916 which destroyed most of the business district. Following the fire a hand drawn chemical truck was purchased for \$300 but was not much better.

During 1919 -1921 Council was working on installing a water system from Brown's River. Finances slowed progress but in March 1921, the Water Works System was moving ahead along with the decision to reorganize the fire brigade. Under Alderman W. R. Cooke, approximately 14 volunteers were enlisted and Fire Chief Jock Thomson was reappointed. His workshop was the temporary headquarters and housed 1000 ft of 2 1/2" newly purchased hose and a hand drawn hose wheel borrowed from Cumberland. A drive for further funds commenced with the goal of purchasing a motorized apparatus and fire hall. A used 1921 Cole Chain Drive Touring car was purchased and converted into a Fire Truck locally. The pride and joy of the brigade! No more pushing and pulling the apparatus. This was quickly followed by the construction of the first fire hall in 1922. The City purchased the materials and the firemen and volunteers constructed a two bay fire hall on the corner of 6th and Duncan next to what was then City Hall.

