

E & N Background

by Lori Treloar

In 1873, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald chose Esquimalt, site of a busy naval base, to be the terminus for the Pacific Railway on Vancouver Island. In 1883, the British Columbia Government (desperate to avoid potential American control of the Island's railways, land and mineral rights) appealed to Robert Dunsmuir to build the railroad.



In return for building the railroad Dunsmuir received \$750 000 and two million acres of Vancouver Island. This large land grant amounted to approximately 20% of the land on

the island and included all of the known coal deposits. On September 27, 1883, The E & N Railway incorporated. It took 3 ½ years to build, provided 72 miles of track, and was serviced by nine locomotives, between Esquimalt and Nanaimo. Much of the line was constructed by Chinese crews who worked in their own gangs and lived in their own camps. The railroad was a great benefit for the development of Vancouver Island as it gave access to the island's forest and mineral resources which, in turn, provided jobs and encouraged settlement.

On August 13, 1886, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald drove the last spike at Cliffside, on the east side of Shawnigan Lake at mile 25, with a silver hammer and a gold spike. This auspicious occasion fulfilled MacDonald's promise to Vancouver Islanders of a rail line from 'sea to sea'.

Prior to the railway, local settlers relied on a weekly steamship visit in Cowichan Bay to bring goods and transport passengers. With the advent of the railway, businesses developed and settlers arrived daily. Shawnigan Lake, which, hitherto, had been an uninhabited wilderness, flourished. A sawmill and lumber company was established in 1890 by a former E & N employee who could see the market potential in the forests around the lake. Most of the lumber produced at the mill was transported by rail. By 1900, two large hotels at Shawnigan Lake were serviced by the railroad. On weekends, several hundred people from Victoria came by train to dine and dance at the posh hotels. Excursion trains regularly brought people to Shawnigan for regattas, sculling matches, dances, picnics, band concerts and fishing parties.

Summer residents, hunters and fishermen relied heavily on the E & N rail line to access Shawnigan Lake. Many families packed their belongings and pets onto the train as soon as school ended and headed to the lake for the summer. There were many stops along the east side of the lake, and from there, "summer people" trekked to their cabins, cottages and summer camps (sometimes this meant rowing across the lake). From 1903 to 1907 a summer commuter option was available -the train would leave the lake each morning and return later in the day for the benefit of businessmen staying at Shawnigan Lake. Let us hope that this particular bit of history will repeat itself!

For many years, the railway connected the communities of Vancouver Island. Trains pulling several passenger cars came through Shawnigan daily – two northbound and two southbound. As more people owned cars and the roads improved, rail traffic declined. In 1958, the station agent at Shawnigan was removed. The number of trains gradually reduced to one trip daily, from Victoria to Courtenay and back, on the Dayliner.