



BC FOREST DISCOVERY CENTRE

History of Sawmilling Backgrounder

1. Outline of Project

The project is necessary for two reasons: one, to make better use of the Doman office building located in the bunk house area of the logging camp display. The Doman building is very unsuited to its current site; two, there is not a good display of the history of the sawmilling sector at the museum. The project should centralize the sawmilling display in the area of the current sawmill and bring with it a major redevelopment of the area including, the sawmill and planer mill area, as well major brush clearing. The site itself may need to be enlarged to accommodate the necessary displays highlighting the people of the industry. The new display will also provide an excellent opportunity to showcase the Doman family and the contributions of others who supported thousands of families by providing jobs for immigrants within the industry. This project is as much about the physicality of the industry as it is about the people who pioneered the industry.

2. Brief history of industry

Once the sawmilling sector moved from bush style mills to larger industrial complexes there was a steady reliance on large pools of labour to staff the industry. In many cases the industry, having exhausted the local supply of labour, brought in larger ethnic groups to provide the labour. Notably Indo Canadian and Chinese workers, although Japanese and other groups also found work in the industry. It should be noted that the more visible the minority the more open to discrimination through double standards on wage rates and promotion prevailed. Between WW1 and after the WW2 the industry expanded at a rapid rate with mills up and down Vancouver Island and the lower Fraser Valley. It was not uncommon to find mills with a work force as large as 1000 workers. (MB Somass Division and BCFP Hammond Division) There were many mills which employed 300 – 500 workers. (The project should make and an effort to compile a more accurate inventory.) The peak of employment was 1979 – 1983 when major companies slated to be taken over and had real balance sheet issues. Some of the majors had relied on expansion and inflation to keep them alive during the financial crisis of the time. It did not work! The Cowichan and lower Island area saw job losses well over 4500 workers. Similar numbers in the Port Alberni Region and the lower mainland. During this period other companies were growing, Doman Industries is an example of such a company.

3. Ethnic Participation at the ownership and worker level

It is not possible to put any history of the industry together and not include the likes of HR, Gibsons, Bentley's etc , most of which are well documented, and require very little new research. That is not the case for many other significant operators Doman's, Mayo's, Kapoors, Palins, Johwals (mainland sawmill), and many others whose very mill sights are lost or merely a collection of pilings sticking out of the water with no one really sure what was once there! (The names are merely examples there are lots more who would be on any list!) The project will also shed light on the struggles of the workers to achieve a level playing field!