

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Bench School (1886-1950)

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Bench School was built on one acre of land donated by Mr. and Mrs. John Nelson to the BC Department of Education on June 19, 1886. Measuring 20 by 34 feet the schoolhouse was an unpainted frame building built by contractors, William John Shearing and T. B. Shaw, for a cost of \$690. Plastered inside and nicely painted, the schoolhouse was a model in its time. It was furnished with factory-made wood desks and seats, each made to accommodate two students.

The first teacher in his new schoolhouse was Mr. John Robert Scott, who was hired in August 1886. He had 29 students in his class.

In June 1887 the school had its first act of vandalism. William West was paid 75 cents to repair a lock on the schoolhouse *“deliberately broken by an unknown party.”*

Miss Annie Jane Munro was the second teacher in the school, hired August 1887. She sent the following letter dated August 18, 1887 to the BC Schools Superintendent: *“I thought I would just pen you a few lines to let you know how I had succeeded this week. I found everyone kind, a nice schoolhouse and very obedient children to teach. I have only had 12 pupils so far but quite a number are expected next week. The oldest pupil is 15 years of age and as tall as myself but so far very easy to manage. I have no very bright scholars. At present I am staying with Mr. & Mrs. Richardson at their Hotel at the Bay. I am the only boarder. It seems quite a difficulty to get private board. Mrs. Nelson will not take anyone; the only other nice person to stay with has only one bedroom but if her husband does not return soon I shall go to her. . . I find Mr. Scott used to supply the pupils with books, which they always forgot to pay for so I have given them to understand I cannot purchase books for anyone at all.”* Miss Munro resigned in December 1887 and the school year was completed by Miss A. J. McDougall.

Miss Alice L. Johnston was the fourth teacher at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bench School teaching there between August 1888 and June 1890. She had 31 students in her class in October 1888 and 34 students by May 1890. She penned the following note dated February 1, 1890 to the BC School Superintendent: *“In regard to the daily attendance which is so far below the average this month I wish to state that it has been almost impossible for the pupils to attend as it has been snowing with the exception of one or two days every day this month and at the present moment here is about four feet of snow on the ground and from all appearances it is likely to remain there for some time. As you are no doubt aware that in the country the roads are not broken as in the city, and it is not an easy matter for young children, as mostly all of my pupils are, to wade through such a depth of snow two or three miles. In regard to the number of days school was not in session I have been present at school every day, but no pupils presenting themselves I naturally went home again.”*

The school was closed between November 1, 1891 and June 1892 due to lack of sufficient attendance. It reopened in August 1892 with Miss Mary Catherine McIntyre as teacher and a register of twelve students. Classes began daily with the recital of the Lord’s Prayer.

At the beginning of the 1894 school year a dilemma occurred which threatened an immediate school closure. Mr. Dougan would not send his five children to the school at the same time as Mrs. Routledge was sending her two and which she did not do on a regular basis. Miss McIntyre proposed a solution which was accepted by both parents, the school trustees and the BC Superintendent. She would teach

Mrs. Rutledge's children after regular school hours from 2:30 pm to 4 pm. and count the Rutledge children's attendance in her attendance reports.

By May 1895 there were eighteen students on the register. This dropped to fifteen by October of the same year. In September 1896 the school closed due to inability to maintain its average daily attendance required by Statute. Students in the Bench area who wanted to continue their school were forced to walk about four miles each way to attend the newly built 3<sup>rd</sup> Cowichan Station School.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Bench School finally re-opened in September 1909. This was also the year the school officially became known in the records of the BC Department of Education as Bench School, even though locals had referred to it by that name for years. Miss Mary Muriel Buss was hired at a salary of \$55 per month, the same provincial rate it had been for the past thirty years! It was not until September 1911 with the hiring of Mr. Arthur Thomas Hunkin at a rate of \$65 per month that wages for teachers began to slowly increase.



1912 Bench School class with teacher Arthur Thomas Hunkin

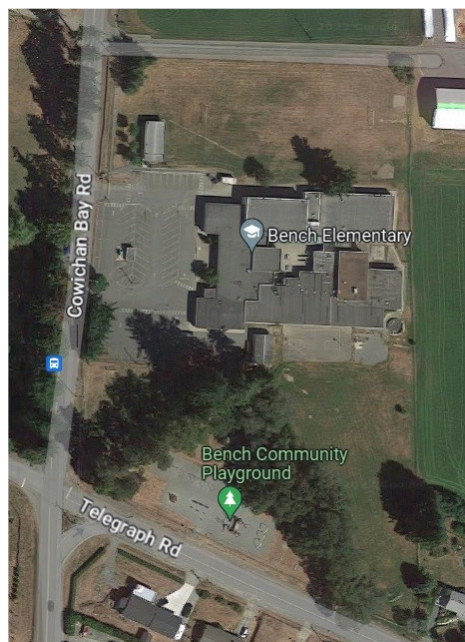
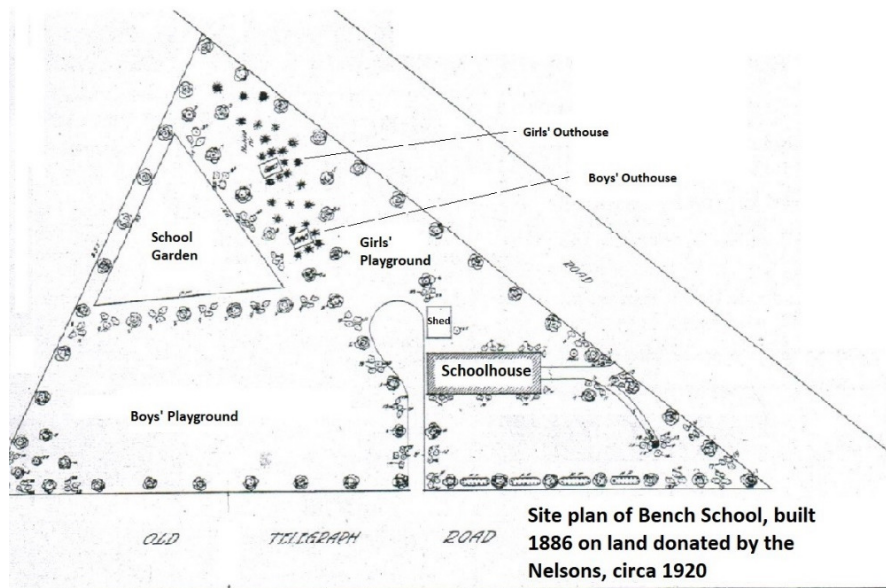
Tenders for the enlargement of the Bench School were published through the spring and summer of 1913 in the *The Cowichan Leader* newspaper. Student, Morris Dougan attended Bench School in 1945. He described the building as long and narrow. "There was a line in the middle of the floor where you could see that the building had been extended at some point. There were two pot-bellied stoves at each end. The students in the middle of the classroom furthest from the stoves were always cold."

With the start of World War I in 1914 the school grounds were used for drill practice every Monday evening at 8 pm by the Cowichan Bay Home Guard. Evening concerts to raise monies for the Canadian Red Cross Society became the norm. The sum of \$100.50 was raised at a concert and fancy box social in November 1917.

The war touched everyone, even the teacher. Miss Mary Muriel Buss, who was re-hired to teach at the school between 1917 and 1919 learned of the deaths of both her elder and younger brothers during this time. At the end of the war, Victory Trees were planted in the school yard in a fitting ceremony in late November 1918.

Influenza had the next impact on the school community. In-person meetings of any kind were banned in December 1918. Former teacher, Jane Darbyshire who taught at Bench in 1911, succumbed to the epidemic in 1919.

In 1920 a plan was made to plant trees, shrubs and bedding plants in the school grounds. Some of the acacia trees planted in 1920 along the original triangular-shaped school property are still present today as noted in the 2023 satellite image of the site.



The last Friday evening before Christmas Day was always set aside at the schoolhouse as an evening of entertainment for parents and friends put on by the school children under the direction of the teacher. Once the school programme was finished Santa would suddenly appear with much jingling and whistling to his reindeer to the delight of everyone present. He would then distribute the gifts from its drooping branches to all the students and children present and then disappear from whence he came. This would be followed by games, which occasioned much fun and frolic for old and young alike, and refreshments. Then the floor would be swept and cleared, and dancing would be enjoyed for another hour or two by those with nimble feet until the wee hours of the morning. This format continued to about 1935 when the evening concluded after the refreshments were served.



Circa 1931

School closing exercises each June involved a reading of the grade promotion lists and a presentation of Provincial Rolls of Honour, followed by a picnic with games at either Cherry Point or Cowichan Bay. Ice cream was always a part of the picnic.

Some past winners of the Provincial Roll of Honour established in 1884 were:

| Provincial Roll of Honour | Proficiency           | Deportment           | Regularity & Punctuality                  |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---|
| 1886                      | William Jones         | Maria Dougan         | Edward Jones                              |
| 1889                      | Paulina Nelson        | Dorothy Alice Rogers | Alfred Nelson                             |
| 1893                      | Louie Shrapnel Barter | Edna May Rogers      | Edward Shearing                           |
| 1894                      | Louise Esther Barter  | Edna May Rogers      | Edward Shearing                           |
| 1895                      | Alfred Nelson         | Edna May Rogers      | Edward Shearing                           |
| 1896                      | Edna May Rogers       | Enoch Daniel Dougan  | Edward Shearing                           |
| 1920                      | Franklin Banister     | Edna Dougan          | Weston Raniter                            |
| 1921                      | Edna Dougan           | Charles Essery       | John Sing                                 |
| 1922                      | Hazel Dougan          | Leala Dougan         | John Sing                                 |
| 1925                      | Fred Dougan           | Earl Sutton          | Joyce Cox                                 |
| 1926                      | Margaret McIntyre     | Muriel Dougan        | Isabel Robson                             |
| 1930                      | Henry Carey           | James Longbourne     | Lewis Beesley                             |
| 1931                      | Kathleen Dennis       | Doreen Dougan        | Billy Dennis, Joe Hughes & Charlie Dougan |





1932-1933 Bench School Class with teacher Miss F.M. Horne

The annual combined sports day involving Bench, Cobble Hill, Cowichan Station, Mill Bay and Shawnigan Schools had its start on Thursday, May 23, 1935 at Shawnigan Lake School, then located next door to the current Black Swan Pub and Liquor Store. 200 students participated. That year Mill Bay won the cup for the largest number of points in all events.

Electric lights were installed in the school in February 1939 with the help of a government grant and donations.

Motor cars were seen as a danger to students in March 1940. The school zone signs were moved farther apart and placed in more prominent positions.

World War II saw the resignation in August 1940 of the teacher, Mr. A. G. Wright, due to his enlistment in the Royal Canadian Air Force. In December 1941 the students decided that part of the money which is usually spent on their presents on the Christmas tree should be given to a fund for the aid of bombed out children in Britain.

Miss Ruth Dickson (later Buckham) was appointed the teacher at Bench beginning September 1942. This was her first assignment as a teacher. When she was interviewed for the job, the trustees asked her what she would like to have and she answered a "a basketball hoop", which was immediately installed.

Miss Dickson boarded with Mr. and Mrs. Bomford whose home was two miles from the school. Seventy-four years later, she still remembered walking that "darn gravel road" each way, except for those mornings when she got a lift with the Scott & Peden milk delivery truck. She had a great janitor who lived near the school and who would have the two stoves in the schoolhouse going each morning. Two

students, John and Eric Shearing, looked after both stoves during the day. At June 1943, Miss Dickson resigned as she had enlisted in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service for the duration of the war.



1942-1943 Bench Class with teacher, Ruth Dickson (later Buckham)

Morris Dougan attended Bench School in 1945. He said, "There were two two-seater outhouses, one for girls and one for boys, and one well with a hand-pump. The cloakroom had six metal basins. Everyone was to wash his/her hands and throw their dirty water off the porch when done before entering the classroom."

In 1946 School District No. 65 (Cowichan) was created by the provincial government to administer all the public schools within the Cowichan Valley between Shawnigan Lake and Westholme and Sahtlam and Maple Bay areas. Bench School which had up until then its own Board of Trustees was now amalgamated with the neighbouring public schools and would now be administered by a board of trustees operating out of Duncan, BC.

This did not go down well with the ratepayers in the Bench area. They met October 30, 1946 and passed a resolution that the schools of South Cowichan separate from this newly-formed school district and form its own school district to be centered at Cobble Hill. They also passed a resolution that School District No. 65 (Cowichan) take immediate steps to provide adequate accommodation at Bench School which now had 46 students in the one-room schoolhouse.

The immediate response of the new Board of School District No. 65 was let the first resolution play out and to put out tenders to taxi companies in the area transport some of the Bench children to Cobble Hill Elementary School on Cobble Hill Road where they could be accommodated. The T. R. Hull Taxi, Cowichan Bay won the tender and the Bench students were moved. The new Board also decided to make plans for a new schoolhouse on the present site.

In 1947, Bench School, then the oldest school still in use in the district, had its interior repainted. Students in the Bench area were still being transported to Cobble Hill Elementary School to relieve the overcrowding at Bench.

Building plans for a new Bench School approved by the Board of School District No. 65 in 1947 showed a rectangular structure with two classrooms, cloakrooms, toilets and a teachers' room. Once voting on the new school district building by-laws was completed in January 1948, the Board had a mandate to proceed with the building of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bench School.

Until the new school was built, overcrowding in the 1886 schoolhouse continued to be an issue. In March 1950 the Board of School District 65 decided that 15 Bench students in Grades 5-6 would be transported to Cowichan Station School which had space. This suggestion was endorsed by the parents of those students and on March 18, 1950 this transfer occurred.

At the end of the June 1950 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bench School was permanently closed as a schoolhouse. The last teacher at the school was Miss Margaret L. Askham who had been hired the previous September 1949.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Bench School became the Bench Community Hall for a very short time before being demolished. There are no remains of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bench School today.



By Carolyn Prellwitz, Secretary-Treasurer  
Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society  
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