

Koksilah School: One Classroom, One Hundred Years Strong

Every day hundreds of cars travelling on the Island Highway just south of the Silver Bridge in Duncan pass by one of the last standing one-room schoolhouses in the Cowichan Valley. Located on the corner of Chaster and Charlotte Roads Koksilah School is one of the area's heritage treasures.

Just prior to school opening time on January 21, 1914, the first Koksilah School at that location burned to the ground. It had stood less than three years. An eyewitness to the fire was ten-year-old Eddie Fletcher. He and his sister, Eva, were walking to school along the highway (now Allenby Road) carrying their lunches in Burn's Company lard pails. Suddenly volunteers from the Duncan Fire Department galloped by. Looking ahead the children saw a smoke column above the trees. They ran towards it and saw their school engulfed in a massive flame. Only the two outdoor toilets and wood-shed were left undamaged.

The sudden holiday for students was short as their teacher Miss Mona Favoretta Macdonald quickly resumed classes in a large tent erected between the school ruins and the highway. Eddie remembered the tent classroom as a very pleasant interlude. "Miss MacDonald was a wonderful teacher. She took us on lots of nature hikes. We would return to the tent to dip flowers in wax. She frequently joined our game of rounders at lunch time. So the fire and tent were not all bad."

A tender for a new one-room schoolhouse was published March 19, 1914. The specification for the new school included removal of the debris of the old schoolhouse and erection of the new building on the same site by July 15, 1914. *The Cowichan Leader* announced in its issue of April 16, 1914 that the contract had been awarded to Robert McLay, Jr. "*The new school is to be a first class one, having a concrete basement as a recreation room. It is to be built on the old site and work will begin at an early date. At present the school is being held in a tent near the old site, which will prove very healthy for the summer months.*"

Robert McLay was a well-known builder in the area. Son of Cowichan pioneers Robert McLay, Sr. and Elizabeth Crawford he had built the Duncan Garage, the Whittome Building/Odd Fellows Lodge, the Cowichan Merchants Building (both the 1910 original and its 1912 replacement) as well as the old Hydro building on Canada Avenue in Duncan. Built as per the design from the BC Department of Public Works, the 1914 Koksilah Schoolhouse is one of the few surviving wood frame buildings attributed to him and for which he was paid \$1927 as the contractor.

There were 13 boys and 7 girls in grades 1 to 8 in the new schoolhouse when it opened August 25, 1914. Inside the school the teacher's desk stood on a twelve-inch high platform between the two doors from the cloakroom into the classroom. The platform doubled as a stage for the annual Christmas concerts.

Miss Macdonald carried on as teacher in the new school until the end of October 1917 when she resigned to take up a position at the Bank of British North America in Agassiz. On Thursday, October 28, 1917 her students surprised her with a farewell tea, a gift of an ivory-backed clothes brush and best wishes for success in her new role. She was also given the following letter of reference: *We, the Trustees of Koksilah School, heartily recommend Miss Macdonald as a very careful and thoroughly competent teacher, and regret very much her departure from our school. We would be most please to re-employ her as teacher should she need to return.* Miss Macdonald later married Jack Haddon East in 1920 in Duncan. She died at age 85 in 1976 in Penticton, BC.

Between February and March 1923 all public school teachers in the province submitted a form to the Department of Education in Victoria. Miss Lois Ruth Pearcey reported that there were 18 children of school age in the Koksilah School District, of whom 17 were registered. She also reported that she was paid an annual salary of \$960, that the condition of the school building and grounds was good, and that the Koksilah school trustees did engage a janitor.

Miss Helen Bunty Huby was the longest serving teacher at the school. She was hired as of September 1930 and taught for ten years. At her request the Koksilah School Board bought a small piano for the school. According to Miss Huby "the piano was nearly always out of tune, but the children sang with such gusto no one noticed!"

In 1936 Miss Huby took the school children for a year-end picnic at the Cowichan River near the Indian Mission where the students enjoyed swimming, ice cream, candy and fruit.

At the December 15, 1938 Christmas concert, Miss Huby received a gift from her students. Three cheers were given for her and for Santa Claus who had earlier distributed presents and bags of candy from the decorated tree.

In 1946 Koksilah School came under the jurisdiction of the newly created School District No. 65 (Cowichan). The following year the severe overcrowding in the one room schoolhouse resulted in grade 7 and 8 students being transferred to Duncan Junior-Senior High School.

Koksilah Elementary School on Boal Road opened as a new one-room school for grades 4-6 in 1958. A second classroom was added in 1960 and three more rooms in 1963. During this time the 1914 schoolhouse continued in operation for grades 1-3 until closure came at the end of June 1964. It was reopened for the 1971-1972 school term during further construction expansion of Koksilah Elementary School. Final closure came at the end of June 1972. After that the Old Koksilah School, as it came to be known, carried on as a storage facility for the Cowichan school district.

In 1986 the Cowichan School Board offered the schoolhouse to the Cowichan Historical Society on condition that it be moved to another location. Unfortunately the poor condition of the building at the time and the cost to relocate it were far beyond the means of the Society. At a school reunion later that year former students decided take steps to save their school.

In February 1987 the Koksilah School Historical Society was formed with four objectives: first, to keep the building on its original site; second, to restore the schoolhouse to its original appearance while retaining the rear door and stairway; third, to restore the classroom as it would have looked in 1935; and fourth, to renovate the basement to include washrooms, a kitchen and photo display area.

The new Society was successful that fall in gaining from the Cowichan School Board a ten-year-lease for the schoolhouse and its grounds for the period July 1, 1986 to June 30, 1996 for \$1 per year.

First actions were to clear brush and dead trees from the property, raise funds and begin the restoration. In 1990 the Koksilah School Historical Society won the first annual Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys' Ecomuseum Heritage Award. The following year the school district granted the Society a twenty-year extension on its lease to June 30, 2016. The rent remained at \$1 per year.

The school celebrated its 80th anniversary on August 28, 1994 with a heritage parade from the Yorktown Inn to the school by way of the Old Farm Market. A sprinkler system was installed to protect the school from fire and a website for the Society was established in 2001.

On June 10, 2009 the Cowichan Valley Regional District passed a resolution to place the 95-year-old Koksilah School on its community heritage register. Congratulations must be extended to the Koksilah School Historical Society for achieving its primary objectives set out back in 1987.



Sandy Riecken, Vice-President, Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society, checks out the books on the teacher's desk at the August 25, 2013 Koksilah School Historical Society picnic. Photo by Carolyn Prellwitz

A picnic on the school grounds is held every August by the Society for members, former students, teachers and friends to commemorate the school. This Sunday, August 24, 2014 between 10:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. attendees will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 1914 schoolhouse. This is a great opportunity for all to view and support Koksilah School as well as to salute its contribution to public education in the Cowichan Valley. See you there!

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12 August 2014