

The First Bench School (1869-1881)

Cowichan South School District was the first public school district in the Cowichan Valley. It was created by the Colonial Legislature of British Columbia on June 16, 1869 and comprised the District of Shawnigan and those portions of the Cowichan and Quamichan Districts which were situated south of the Cowichan River.

The first schoolhouse in this district was a log building hand-built the same year, 1869, by James Dougan, Thomas Manley and William John Shearing at the west end of Old Schoolhouse Road (now Telegraph Road). The logs were cut and hewn near Cowichan Bay and hauled to the site by William Manley and his team of oxen. James Mearns directed the building as he was skilled in the use of a broad axe. The spaces between the logs were filled with a clay mixture and the roof was covered with cedar shakes. The floor was rough sawn logs. The building measured not more than 16 feet by 22 feet, with two small half-windows on each side. The desks were handmade benches with bookrests. From a well beside the school, drinking water was drawn by hand.

Known in the Legislature as Cowichan South School, the locals simply called it "The Bench School", so named as the geography of area was a natural bench, a flat open area of land on the side of a hill overlooking Cowichan Bay.

Mr. Horace Arthur Lapidge was the first teacher. Born in 1848 in Portsea, Hampshire, England, he was formerly a clerk with the Royal Navy. At age 20 he arrived by boat in New York, New York USA with Vancouver Island listed as his final destination. He taught for a short time in the house of Mr. James Boal before being appointed to Bench School. By April 1872 he had resigned from his teaching to go on a railway survey. In 1873 he was working as a turnkey with the police and jails in Victoria, BC and in 1875 was listed on the BC Voters' list as living in Cowichan and being a boatman. He returned to London, England in 1876 and died of an illness seven months later he in 1877 at the age of 28 years.

The first students were James Dougan, John Dougan, Maria Dougan, Austin Ordano, Baptiste Ordano, Dan Mahoney, William Mearns, Robert Mearns, Jack Blythe, Agnes Blythe, Isabella Blythe, Joseph Fielding, Fred Fielding, Richard Fielding, William Shearing, Mary Shearing, William Manley, Robert Manley, Margaret Manley, Sophia Lindsay and Polly Lindsay. The tuition fee for each student was 25 cents a month.

The second teacher was Alfred Wellwyn Rogers. He was appointed July 23, 1872 with a salary of \$50 per month paid by the BC government. His assignment was to teach two hours at Bench School and two hours at the first Koksilah School, a log structure measuring 12 feet by 14 feet, located near Kelvin Creek and the current Koksilah Road, every teaching day, alternating morning and afternoon weekly, with two hours of school time for travelling from one schoolhouse to the other. This Mr. Rogers did until he resigned from his position in March 1874 and both schools were subsequently closed.

William Henry Lomas was hired October 15, 1874 as the third teacher at the school. Well respected in the community, Mr. Lomas had previously taught at the first public school in the Cowichan district located on what is now the BC Discovery Centre and then worked as a Indian catechist. His teaching salary was \$50 per month. Like Mr. Rogers, his assignment was to teach at both the Bench and Koksilah Schools, but on alternate days.

Canute Lemo enrolled as a student at Bench School in 1874 and thus became the first student of pure First Nations extraction to attend a public school in BC. He came to school every day by pony. His mother had been taught at St. Ann's Convent School on Tzouhalem Road and she wanted her son to be educated as "an English gentleman". She was also conscious of her son's birthright, as Canute was the grandson of Claseton, chief of the Cowichan Tribes during the time of Sir James Douglas, the first Governor of the Colony of British Columbia.

In June 1876 Mr. Lomas sent a letter to the BC Superintendent of Education in 1876 that his salary of \$50 per month was barely enough to support his family. His working expenses included keeping a horse to travel to the schools and paying ferry costs to reach the two schools. His salary remained unchanged until 1880 when it was increased to \$55 per month. Mr. Lomas retained his post as teacher at the two schools until April 5, 1881 when he was appointed the first Indian Agent of the Cowichan Indian Agency.

Thomas Clyde picked up the teachership at the two schools with the departure of Mr. Lomas for the remainder of the 1880-1881 school year. Former Bench student, Nathan Paul Dougan, later reported that "We pupils didn't take very kindly to him somehow. Some of the boys in a moment of facetiousness dubbed him 'Old Tom Skite.'"

The 1st Bench school was replaced by a new schoolhouse in 1881. No remnant of the old log schoolhouse remains today.

By Carolyn Prellwitz, Secretary-Treasurer
Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society
30 January 2023