

PostScript

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COWICHAN SCHOOLS

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The Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society was formed in 2007 by retired teachers and school district staff with three purposes:

- To research all the available information about schools in the Valley.
- To collect historical documentation and ensure it is stored in an appropriate facility, so it is safe and available to other researchers in the future; and
- To inform the public about the importance of educational history here in the Valley.

Since 2007, the Society has made good progress in meeting its purposes. Members have documented over 200 former schools--both public and private--within the borders of the current School District

No. 79 (Cowichan Valley). Many of these former schoolhouses are no longer in existence. Some deteriorated, some were moved to new locations, some were dismantled, some burned completely to the ground, and some are still with us today but in a new format (private home, community hall, childcare centre, etc.). The earliest school, circa 1849, was Green Point Indian School at the southern tip of Mount Tzouhalem and was taught by Father Lamphrier.

The oldest school still standing in the Valley is that of the 2nd Cowichan Station School, also known as Koksilah School, built in 1885 for \$385 on Koksilah Road on property belonging to pioneer James Mearns. It closed in 1895, and the land reverted to the original homestead with the schoolhouse used as a home for the farm manager.



Oyster School, c. 1906 (later called Saitair School, then Mount Brenton School)

In 1977 the schoolhouse building was moved to its current site beside the Fairbridge Farm Chapel on Fairbridge Drive, Duncan.

We have collected hundreds of archival records in the form of schoolhouse photos, school class photos, school registers, school newspapers, school yearbooks, as well as newspaper clippings detailing events and activities at each of the schools we have uncovered. All of these items have been transferred to the Cowichan Valley Museum Archives to a specific fonds (collection) labelled in the name of the Society. This fonds is now available for review by other school researchers via an appointment with the Archives staff.

Lastly, many articles on our discoveries and research have been published in the former Cowichan Leader and the current Cowichan Valley Citizen newspapers, as well as the Cowichan Valley Voice magazine, South Cowichan Life magazine, BC History magazine, and the BCRTA Postscript magazine. Copies of many of these articles, together with both schoolhouse and student class photos, can be viewed on our public website: www.cowichanvalleyschoolsheritagesociety.com.

In 2012 our Society made the decision to honour former schools with signage placed as close as possible to the original site of the former school. We felt the signage should feature two items which, even in this era of digitization and technology, are still recognized symbols of a school, the old hand-held school bell and the red-coloured one-room schoolhouse.

We first had to choose which of the former schools should have signage. The former Duncan High School was a definite choice. We knew exactly where the school had stood, and we knew there were still many in the community alive today who attended this school before it burned to the ground in March 1946. The same rationale applied to the former Lake Cowichan Superior, Mount Brenton Elementary, Bayview Primary, and Cobble Hill II Schools.

Other schools were so remote that we thought that very few community members would actually see the signage. We worried, too, that some would use the signage as great for target practice. Mount Sicker School, for example, operated between 1901



Kokuluh School, c. 1960



Queen Margaret's School, 1921

and 1910 at the Mount Sicker townsite, the fourth largest townsite on Vancouver Island in 1901. Today, any visible traces of that former townsite and school on Mount Sicker have been erased by salvage, vandalism, weather, logging, and natural forest regrowth, so this school was not chosen for signage.

We also needed confirmation that our locations for former schools were correct. This was not always easy, particularly with those schools attached to temporary logging or sawmill camps. We have yet to find traces of Lakeshaw School which operated 1930-1932 at mile 53.9 on the E & N railway between Kinsol and Deerholme, as well as Benallack School which operated 1925-1934 at mile

65.4 on the CNR railway track between Duncan and Lake Cowichan, so neither of these schools was chosen for our signage project.

And lastly, we needed to work with local government authorities for permission to put up some of the signs, as well as get signed agreements with current owners of the properties where the former schools once stood. Where permission was unobtainable, those schools were not chosen. It was all a very time-consuming person-to-person process, and through the COVID years as well!

It has taken us 12 years, but we have been successful in having our school-bell-shaped signs placed at the sites of 61 former schools.

Our signage now appears to be an important part of Cowichan Valley history. More and more persons are discovering these signs on their own and asking about the schools named in the signs. Our website is much used for information and local community members have recalled schools and commented positively on the signage on Facebook. All this has been gratifying to current members of the Cowichan Valley Schools Heritage Society. It confirms our suspicions that community members do not want former schools in the Valley forgotten.

The cooperation and assistance of the maintenance department of School District 79 (Cowichan Valley) has been much valued.

We are also very grateful to the BCRTA Heritage Committee for the heritage grant monies which allowed us to carry out our signage project over that past 12 years. Thank you.

To conclude our signage project, a printed booklet was compiled, featuring the 61 former schools that have signage, as well as listing all the schools without signage. Copies of the booklet were given to the local school district, the BCRTA Heritage Committee, every museum, archives, and local government in the Cowichan Valley, and to each property owner where a former school was once sited.

CAROLYN PRELLWITZ serves on the BCRTA Pensions & Benefits Committee and is a presenter at our Pre-Retirement Pensions and Benefits Workshops. She lives in the Cowichan Valley. Photos provided by author and CVSHS.

