

Somenos School: A Short History

Over the past twelve months *The Cowichan News Leader* has included articles in its print issues celebrating the 100th anniversaries for a number of former schools within the Cowichan Valley School District. These include Cobble Hill, Cowichan Station, Koksilah, Mill Bay and Duncan Elementary Schools. One more former school deserves recognition and that is the third Somenos School now the Somenos Community Hall.

Somenos was the name of the first public school in the Cowichan Valley. Opened in 1864 in a log building on what is now the BC Discovery Centre (aka BC Forest Museum), this first Somenos school started with 11 students. That school continued until 1885 when it was replaced by a second Somenos School opposite the Mountain View Cemetery on the corner of what is today's Somenos and Drinkwater Roads. The second school operated until 1918 when it was finally closed due to concern over contamination of the school's drinking water supply from the cemetery.

Meanwhile, a third Somenos School, first known as Somenos Station School, had been erected in 1914. The builders, James McLeod Campbell and his partner, Mr. Brown, were paid \$2740.70 for their work. The one-room school was built on one acre of high ground between the former Somenos Post Office and Somenos Road on the south side of what is now Highway #18. It opened January 5, 1914 with Arthur Henry Thomas as its first teacher. He held a 1st class teaching certificate and was paid a salary of \$65 per month.

Declining enrollment saw the school used as a community hall in the 1940's. But with the loss of Duncan High School due to fire in March 1946 and the critical need for school accommodation, the old schoolhouse was brought out of honourable retirement. Some renovations were made and it became an annex to Duncan Elementary School for students in lower elementary grades beginning September, 1947.

At the February 4, 1948 Cowichan School Board meeting trustees learned that title to the third Somenos School was vested with the Municipality of North Cowichan and that the Somenos Women's Institute held the option for purchase. The Board wished to buy the schoolhouse to bring it up to school standards as a permanent school, but at their meeting of March 11, 1948, trustees learned that the Women's Institute had already exercised its option.

The Women's Institute were adamant that the Somenos area needed a community centre and would not sell to the school district. The institute was, however, prepared to rent the building to the School Board on a yearly basis with the rental being in the form of various repairs and improvements. Repairs were needed to the furnace, lighting, floors and sanitary installments. The School Board accepted the terms of the Somenos Women's Institute in order to continue to have access to the building as a school.

By 1952 the third Somenos School building was in rough shape. A damning report in December 1952 from the Vancouver Island Health Unit stated among other things that the water was contaminated, the toilets were inadequate and there were no separate washing facilities for girls and for boys to wash. Further, drinking water was being carried to the school by the janitor from his home.



Old Somenos School, circa 1953

Needless to say, the third Somenos School continued in operation until June 1960 as an annex of Duncan Elementary School. It had been renamed Old Somenos School to distinguish it from the new three-room (and fourth!) Somenos School which had opened in 1953 on the ridge behind the offices of the Municipality of North Cowichan.

The closure of Old Somenos School encouraged the Somenos Women's Institute to call a public meeting at the site in September 1960 for the purpose of discussing the use of the building and property as a community centre. What evolved from that public meeting was the formation of the Somenos Community Association in October 1960. The former school thus took on its present life as the Somenos Community Hall.

Hidden behind additions to the front and east side of the community hall one can still see the original framework of the former schoolhouse. It has served the Somenos area for 100 years and continues to do so. Congratulations, Old Somenos!

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