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## **Newcastle Townsite**

Anne Royle

Recorded as presented to the Nanaimo Historical Society in 1995

Transcribed by Dalys Barney, Vancouver Island University Library, on March 25, 2025

Pamela Mar

Nanaimo Historical Society, 1995. Continuing our short vignettes given at the monthly meetings of life and recollections in Nanaimo.

[recording stops and restarts]

Daphne Paterson

... that your speaker is sitting here, waiting. She was well informed ahead of time that we have the business meeting and that we have a ten-minute vignette that we started this last fall. And this evening's speaker is Anne Royle. Anne is a stalwart. She has done a great deal of research into Nanaimo. She has given many, many talks. She has worked up in the archives on the third floor of the museum for how many years, Anne?

Anne Royle

It must be about 12.

Daphne Paterson

That's a lot. If you haven't been up there, please do go up at some stage. That's a long time in that area. And Anne has been doing a lot of research on the Townsite area. In fact, she has come across so much that she feels that at some stage she will be able to give a full evening's talk about Townsite and its beginnings. So, this evening, she's just going to stick to her own reminiscences of Townsite. So, will you please welcome Anne Royle, and here we go. [applause]

1:31

[recording stops and restarts]

Anne Royle

And would you please give me the signal when ten minutes are up? Because I don't want to ramble on all night.

Daphne Paterson

We all will.

Anne Royle

You all will! Okay, you can just say to me, "That's enough!"

Newcastle Townsite, just an introduction, how it was started. As the population of Nanaimo town grew with the influx of the miners and their families in 1860, the city council obtained 500 acres of land on the north side of the Millstone River. Now, the area was named Newcastle Townsite, and at that time, 47 lots were sold, and that was mostly in the Rosehill area there. And the remaining lots of half to three acres were not offered at that auction, as the public did not appear disposed to bid anymore. And I'll leave that there.

Now, I moved into Townsite in 1956, our family: four children, my husband and myself. We came over from Vancouver because we wanted to live on the Island. And we were there in Townsite until 1970, so I had a good chance to absorb the area. Now, my first recollection is coming in from the Black Ball ferry on a beautiful October day, and all the trees in Departure Bay absolutely gold. What a wonderful place! We came up and along towards Townsite and along Stewart Avenue, and I just admired all the lovely houses there and the gardens that led up to Townsite Road.

Now, just along on Terminal Avenue, there's still that very old store that's had a heritage grant. And at the time, there was an old grocery store there, Cook's Grocery, and a coffee shop. And of course, with the heritage grant, the building still stands, but it's all been refurbished, and we're really up to date now. We've got a jacuzzi, a glass shop, and a fireplace showroom. So, that shows where we're heading.

Now, on the corner of Terminal and Townsite, across from the present motel, the Port-O-Call, that white one on the corner, still stand the original auto court cabins, the U Rest it was called, built by Mr. Hawker, whose daughter married Leo Inscho and still lives up in the area. Unfortunately, these cabins, which became low rentals, are now, I see, are zoned for five. So shortly, I suppose they'll disappear, and some grandiose thing will go up in its place, which is a shame.

4:19

Now, as you go up above the E&N Railway tracks, there was an area of very wild land there that was purchased after the war by Jean Burns and the Lindsay family. And the four avenues: Arbutus, Aldorann, Churchill, and Northumberland were occupied by the more affluent citizens at that time, doctors, lawyers, and etceteras, who built designer homes and lovely gardens. And it's still a real pleasure to walk around that area. If you haven't been up there lately, it's just as it was in the '60s. And it's very, very pleasant living area.

Then we come up towards Brechin School. And across from Brechin School, there was a gas station, which is still there now as a repair shop. And next to that, in the building that is occupied by the, oh dear, who are those people? The Elks, with their purple pillars, and they have the bingo hall. That was originally stores, and Nat Martin had a small grocery store. I remember there was a post office and the Townsite Hardware and Central Drugs. So, that area was quite well served.

And behind that store, or the Elks Hall, if you like, now, right on the edge of Millstone, my son reminded me that there was a railway buffer there that they used to play around. And I'd sort of forgotten it, and then when people talk about these things, you remember. And that was the last remains of the New Ladysmith Lumber Company Railway, which ran up between Rosehill, and I'll hope to go into that in some future date.

Now, Brechin School on the corner, it was quite an old wooden building, even in the '50s, and it was moved from Departure Bay in the 1930s. It had again become an elementary school, and my children were happily enrolled there. And Townsite would daily be filled with children on foot and on bicycles and pouring down that road. And, of course, in those days, they didn't have to worry about much traffic or anything else. And it was a great school, great spirit in there. And I got introduced to PTA where I first learned public speaking, because after speaking to forced small children for several years, you can only say three words at a time. So, that, I thank the PTA for that. And we had bazaars and Christmas concerts, and, of course, the wonderful Christmas concerts, when all the children dressed up like illustrations for Rockwell, or at least their mothers thought so. You know those Rockwell covers?

Now, in front of the school was a small red shingled building where the children used to play, and it was the old firehall. And my son reminded me of this because it had been wiped totally from my mind. And it evidently had a tower which was either a hose tower or maybe something to do with air raid precautions according to Don Sale.

7:30

So, at the time of my arrival, across from these Elk Hall stores, what you like, there was on the south side of Millstone, a huge scrubbed, grass field bearing a few stunted hawthorn trees. And it was bordered by the Millstream, which was down a very steep bank. So, here, Mrs. Noella Wavell, I don't know if you remember her? She was a very enterprising woman, and she'd hauled off half a dozen small cabins and rented them. She got these cabins from all over, dragged them in, and she made a little living out of it, anyway. And this, to my surprise, was my first home in Nanaimo, this cabin, because at the time, with all the immigrants coming in and the lack of building during wartime, you just couldn't get anywhere to live.

But anyway, the field had its advantages. The children could play out there, and they were quite safe. And right on the corner, there was... One corner was a hairdresser's, on the other corner, there was a fish and chip shop, which was very, very well, had great patronage, I should say. And in those days, I remember we could stand up on that hill and look right down into the harbour. And there was no large buildings in the way. And I remember the day when the Second Narrows Bridge went down, and we all, sort of, clustered up there looking down across the water as though we could see it, you know, with the shock of the thing. It came over the news about one o'clock. That's one thing I remember about that field.

Well, eventually, Nat Martin moved his SuperValu across to the field in the '60s, and there was great publicity at the opening. It was something I didn't understand. It was the first store with a canopied roof. It's always rather puzzled me. And of course, Radio CHUB was down there and interviewing, of course, all the eager customers. And when we got in the door for bargains, Nat Martin was handing out loaves of white bread. A great thrill, you know. We thought, "We're really going to get something." But Nat, he ran that store with an eagle eye, and it was a great store, and he, Nat, knew everything that was there. And the lovely smell of a bakery in the morning, and I remember donuts were 56 cents a baker's dozen. And then afterwards, they brought in a little plaza. And to our joy, the first laundromat on Townsite, and that made a great difference.

10:05

Well, next to the fish and chip shop was the Brown family, and Brown... Two minutes? Oh, I haven't started yet. And Brown was a rear gunner in the bombers, and he survived the war. And next to them were the Rosses. And the Rosses, Mr. Ross was a wonderful gardener, and people used to come in droves in coaches to see the Ross's garden. And here again, it was a wonderful garden: shrubs and flowers and a fishpond. He was so proud of it. And after he died, unfortunately, the lot was subdivided, and the garden just went straight back to a wilderness. It was unbelievable, and there's now two houses on the site. Is that time? Oh, I thought you gave me two minutes.

The roads in the area were pretty rough and there were no sidewalks, and there were open ditches and full of rain and snow in the heavy winters. And I remember walking down to the store in the middle of the path the snow plough had cleared and hearing a police siren behind me, and down Townsite comes the police car. So, I hastily jumped aside into the nearest ditch, and I was waist deep in snow when the dear man went roaring past me. So, I was very glad when they filled in the ditches, but they never put in sidewalks. And considering all the taxes that have gone into Townsite all these years, it seems totally unfair. But anyway.

On Morpeth [Avenue], there was the Latter-day Saints Church [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints], and it's now been turned into a daycare. And that was opened in 1933, by Dr. Conrad

Oviatt and had a congregation of 68 members. The hall provided a meeting place for youth groups of the area, and I had my Brownie pack in there, and that was great.

And of course, you know John Cass lives on Sunderland [Avenue], but he couldn't remember why it was called Sunderland. But anyway, the names came from Northumberland. There was Northumberland Avenue, Sunderland [Avenue], and Blythe Avenue. And, of course, old Mr. Turner gave out money on Halloween, so that was a mecca, sort of, for the children.

Now, Johns Avenue was named for the pioneer family that first lived there. Mrs. Johns worked in the gardens a great deal, and Mr. Johns was a mailman, but I just don't remember him. And they had a great big old house with a great veranda for sitting out in the summer and looking down to the Millstream. But when they passed on, another family moved in, and sadly, the house burnt down very fast during the 1970s. And the neighbours said because they had left a pile of glass windows against the wooden shingles, and in the blazing August up the whole lot went, and they said it was one big fireball. So, that was the end of the pioneer residence.

13:03

Now, we lived on 435 Johns, right on the edge of the ravine, and we could look down and see the Millstream roaring down in the wintertime. And of course, in summertime, it turned into the swimming hole, where the children turned to swim. And unfortunately, when they started drawing the water off of Brannen Lake and higher up, the children lost their swimming holes and also the diving rocks, which are down by the picnic tables in Bowen Park. The children used to dive off those rocks and you could tell how much water was there then.

Now, we had a fairly modern house, a post and beam, and it was a lovely house, lots of sunshine. And, of course, we only had one bathroom for the six of us, this was common. And we had the children, the four children, shared two bedrooms. But then again, in those days, that was quite normal. We all had lovely gardens in spite of the rocky soil, and we grew all sorts of vegetables, which were swapped around in the summer, during the canning season, when the wasps came along also.

And we had a pretty interesting life up there. Because the average family was three or four or sometimes even up to six children. And it kept, you know, it kept, housewives were home. It kept us really busy looking after all these kids and doing the washing and hanging out the clothes on the clothesline and dragging it in when it rained. And, of course, dresses had to be starched. And well, we were busy.

And the men used to take the only family car to work in the morning, so the women were stuck there anyway. So, we used to have what they call coffee klatches. And, of course, all the men

used to come home and say, "Oh yes, I know you've all been drinking coffee all day, and we've been killing ourselves at the mill." But that was life.

And, of course, at suppertime, you'd hear all the mothers out on the porches, yelling out the names of their offspring, because they were all playing in great mobs somewhere: kick the can or whatever. And when the mothers started yelling, the kids came home because the last kid home did the dishes, so that brought them all in. So, they had a pretty good childhood up there on Johns Avenue. Or they say that they had. That's it?

[unidentified female speaker]

Time.

Anne Royle

One more paragraph? Because the '60s were do-it-yourself times and the fathers, as you, well, you men here would have done it. You repaired your automobiles, you fixed shoes, you built fences and gardens, and you added additions to your houses, if Ben Boers wasn't around with his little notebook, charging you for them. And the sons handled the tools, and they picked up all the skills in later lives, because the boys had to work. And the older boys could go down to Martin's SuperValu, and he trained a whole horde of what you call box boys in the store. They filled the shelves and bagged and carried groceries. So, they had a good start and good pocket money for out of there. And the girls babysat. And that was, that was the life up in Townsite. Right? [applause]

16:24

[recording ends]