

Last spike hammered home

Canada's Father of Confederation performed task to loud cheers

By Jim Hume December 7, 2008

So, whose got the "silver" hammer or the more important ceremonial spike Sir. John A. Macdonald tapped into an E&N railway tie with the silver hammer at Cliffside near Shawnigan Lake on Aug. 13, 1886?

Lori Treloar, curator of the Shawnigan Lake Museum would love to know. So would her husband Grant, once the principal at Sangster Elementary School, now conscripted guide, visual display operator, custodian and janitor of the small but growing artifacts collection housed at the old fire hall in the heart of Shawnigan Lake village.

The husband and wife team are just two of a dedicated group of local historians, members of the Shawnigan Lake Historical Society, determined to remember the earliest days of settlement -- and before.

The museum leans heavily on its railway connection and the driving of that last spike, hammered into ceremonial place on a bright summer day by an aging and far from well Sir. John A. That auspicious ceremony, witnessed by dignitaries travelling on Robert Dunsmuir's private coach and settlers from remote farms and forest operations crowding into a small forest clearing at "Milepost 25," took place just before lunch on what became a long, hot and thirsty day.

For Sir John and Lady Macdonald the day had started at 7 a.m. after an early breakfast at the Driard Hotel in Victoria. Picked up by carriage, they trotted through early-morning streets on a dusty four-mile ride to Esquimalt where they boarded Dunsmuir's private coach, renamed "Maude" after he bought it as "Eva" from Canadian Pacific, but known by railway workers as "the palace." The carriage to Esquimalt was needed because that was the southern railhead. To borrow a 21st-century phrase, Victoria didn't get online until 1888.

The train was short in length. As it left Esquimalt at 8:25 a.m. there was a locomotive, Dunsmuir's "palace" and a flatcar. The flatcar was to accommodate excess luggage and Lady Macdonald, who had expressed a preference for the open air over a "palace" parlour car full of smoke and male gossip. She sat on a hastily constructed "plank seat" and by all accounts enjoyed the ride.

The Colonist reported the train arrived at Cliffside "shortly before nine o'clock." The same story also reported the train had left Esquimalt at 8:25 and took a leisurely 54 minutes to travel the first 20 miles plus a "few minutes" more to reach the last spike ceremony site. It might be safe to assume it was shortly before 10 o'clock when Sir John was "provided with a golden spike and silver hammer" and "drove the spike home with a few well delivered blows."

That was the description in a "special -- exclusive to the Colonist" dispatch published Saturday, Aug. 14. In Sunday's morning Colonist more details were available, and I suspect editor-reporter D.W. Higgin of glorious prose fame wrote or rewrote the Sunday dispatch. The Colonist reported the Sir John A. special had "sped swiftly along with its human freight ... thundered over high trestles and dashed through the only tunnel on the

line ... crossed Arbutus Canyon its (train whistle) echo seven times repeated ... (then) the train descended and came to standstill where were gathered about 100 persons ... The party disembarked and as the last rail was placed, Sir John, armed with a silver mallet, advanced and struck the ceremonial spike home. As the last blow was delivered the echoes were disturbed for the first time since creation with hearty cheers for Sir John and Lady Macdonald, Mr. Dunsmuir and the Island railway."

And with that brief ceremony out of the way the dignitaries climbed back on board for the run to Nanaimo with a whistle stop at Duncan's Crossing where early settlers W.C. Duncan, W.P. Jaynes and W.H. Lomas "had gathered others to greet the prime minister."

It is said that the numbers gathered at Duncan's Crossing surprised even Dunsmuir and led to a permanent timetable stop at what was first named a new townsite of Alderlea but was never known as anything but "Duncan's" until 1912 when the "s" got lost and Duncan became permanent.

In Nanaimo there were more receptions, more speeches, more "three cheers" for Sir John and the railway, more banquets and a trip down a Dunsmuir mine with differing versions of the same tale.

The Colonist reported the visitors, including "Lady Macdonald and several of her suite descended a shaft 600 feet deep" after which "they proceeded to the Royal Hotel for lunch with Mr. Dunsmuir."

In his book *Coalmine to Castle: The Story of the Duns-muir's*, James Audain suggests that after the silver hammer and the golden spike ceremony both Dunsmuir and Macdonald had felt desperate need for a celebratory libation. Their wives, however, sticklers for circumspection while on public parade, made it impossible for either to get even a sniff of a cork.

At Nanaimo, Dunsmuir asked Sir John if he'd like to see a mine at work and politely invited the ladies. But, he warned, they would have to discard dresses in favour of workman's overalls and would need to make arrangements for a bath and clean clothes after the tour.

The day being bright and sunny, both ladies declined. Audain says they retired to await their partners' return --and Dunsmuir and the PM dropped six hundred feet to where Dunsmuir "had had the foresight to cache" a case of Scotch. Thus was the E&N duly blessed.

And I'm left wondering if that's where they lost the silver hammer and the ceremonial spike. If anyone out there knows, give Lori Treloar a call at 250-743-8675. *

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