Native groups have been in the area for thousands of years but there is no evidence to suggest that they ever inhabited the shores of Shawnigan Lake on a permanent basis. The natives lived on the waterfront around Mill Bay and Cowichan Bay and interacted with other native groups by water. Their use of the lake area was likely for fishing, hunting and collecting rushes for weaving. Arrowheads dating back 6000-9000 years have been collected from the north end of the lake and are part of the museum inventory.

HOW DID THE PEOPLE GET HERE?

1861 – The Goldstream Trail was built to enable settlers to take a land route from Victoria to the Cowichan Valley. It was a 6 foot wide rudely built foot path that covered the 40-50 miles between Victoria and the Cowichan Valley. The trail wound gently up the southern, and down the Northern slopes of Goldstream Hill and then traversed the eastern borders of Sooke Lake and Shawnigan Lake to the west side of "Cobble Hill" through the lowlands to Dougan's cemetery (the only untouched part of the old trail) and continuing over open terrain before turning sharply westward. It proceeded up a gentle slope and then northward again and, approx a half mile above Cowichan Bay, it turned eastward and down the hill to tide water. The trail was impassable in many places during the winter where bridges had not yet been built but, most times, a man could drive his cattle or transport his worldly goods along to his destination. An able man could walk the distance from Cowichan Valley to Victoria in a single day if necessary. The trail was soon upgraded with bridges and culverts and increased to a width of 10 – 12 feet. This was the only road link between Victoria and the Cowichan Valley for over 50 years.

1862 - Steamship "Hecate" brought one hundred pioneers to Cowichan Bay, then called Harrisville, after the original settler Sam Harris

1863 – A road was built to connect Mill Bay to the Goldstream trail at Cowichan Bay. This road was later named Telegraph Road after the telegraph was strung in 1879.

1886 – The E & N railway

1911 - The Malahat was completed at the cost of $200 000. The first vehicle to use the route came over the 'hat in January 1911 through 18 inches of snow. Even in the early days speed traps were set up on the highway and caught many drivers exceeding the 12 mph speed limit. The fine was $20.

1911 The first cars appeared in the Cowichan Valley. The speed limit was 10mph in town and 12 mph on the highway. Cars were driven on the left side of the road until 1922 and had to give right of way to horses. Drivers could purchase a lifetime driving license for $1 starting in 1925.

INDUSTRY

1889 – The Shawnigan Lake Lumber Company was founded by William Lossee. He had worked as a master mechanic for the E & N railway. As he rode regularly up and down the island with his job, he could see the potential in the timber he passed. He was especially impressed with the timber at Shawnigan Lake. He approached James Dunsmuir (son of Robert) to ask about leasing the timber. The lease was granted and Lossee was given access to the timber around the entire lake and back one mile from the shore. The agreement gave the E & N payment of 50 cents per thousand feet of sawn timber. Lossee bought a four and a quarter acre parcel for the mill site, which was not far from the first hotel in the area (Morton House). Until this time most sawmills in B.C. transported their lumber by water. Lossee had chosen a spot on the rail line, which would enable him to transport his lumber by train rather than sea. Having the sawmill close to the available timber meant that they were able to transport lumber rather than logs which was less costly.

The community of Shawnigan Lake developed largely because of the lumbering operations. Many employees of the Shawnigan Lake Lumber Company became the first Permanent residents. Gradually farmers and other settlers arrived but they, also, relied on the company in many ways. Essentially there were two groups of residents: transitory full time lumber workers and the permanent and summer residents. Together these groups created a viable community.

The men involved with the sawmill and logging were reputed to be more unsavory than most social groups and relished the moniker of "timber beast" which was frequently used to refer to them. This was a rough class of man and the men at the Shawnigan Lake Lumber Co. were typical of the industry. Sawmill workers were generally more stable and often married – perhaps because they worked closer to the community. Loggers led a roving existence and rarely stayed in one place long.

Typically, a Saturday night was spent in the bunkhouse drinking whiskey and playing cards. Men talked about their drinking prowess, told filthy stories and bragged about their conquests of women and their ability to cheat at cards. However, the men of the Shawnigan Lake Lumber Company were considerate and respectful of the local women.

There was a wide range of nationalities at the Shawnigan Lumber Co. including English, Scottish, Irish, French Canadian, American, Swedish, Native and Black. The first cook was Chinese and, later, many of the sawmill employees and wood crews were Chinese and Japanese.

Early conditions at the camp were primitive. The first bunkhouse was a rough two story building near the sawmill. The men provided their own bedroll and straw from the barn was used for mattresses. A central wood stove provided the heat. Conditions improved after 1910 and Camps provided single metal bunks and clean bedding. A bullcook was usually provided to clean the bunkhouse and light a fire prior to breakfast. Food was simple but plentiful. The cook was very important! Good cook – good production. Not so good cook – poor production.

The camp for a while was constructed on rafts which were towed around the lake to areas that were active. As the logging sites moved farther from the shore in the 1920's the camp constructed buildings on skids that could be moved by railway cars as the camps shifted location.

As Shawnigan developed a close connection grew community and company. Together, they worked on issues to improve the area and gained strength from each other. The operation of the mill meant much to the economic and social life of the community. When the Company flourished, the whole community thrived. The final closure of the Shawnigan Lake Lumber Co. was a blow to the community. Fortunately, the fact that Shawnigan Lake had grown as a resort area, with easy access, helped the community survive better than many others in BC which simply disappeared.

An environmental issue that was faced by the company was the accumulation of debris in the lake from years of sawmilling and logging. Debris was evident all over the lake; splinters of logs, sinkers and bark. The accumulation at the mill stream was especially dense and prevented fish from entering the lake. Over the years the company went to great lengths to clean up the lake. They burned debris, placed a boom across the mouth of the lake, and removed sunken logs.

SETTLERS
CLEARING THE LAND

The first job of the settler was to clear the land so that a house could be built and crops planted. This was an arduous task in the Cowichan Valley because of the heavy forests. The forest was first ***underbrushed,*** which meant that all of the bushes and small trees were cut down and piled for burning. This made room for the chopper to swing an axe and cut down larger trees. Generally, one man could underbrush one acre of forest in six days.

The farmers and theirs sons (sometimes with the help of hired hands) then chopped down the trees. Trees were cut into ten foot lengths to make them easy to move. Some of these logs would be used for buildings, some for fencing and the rest burned with the underbrush. The logs for building were dragged to the site by oxen. The work was very hard and neighbours often had "bees" to help each other. An average settler could expect to clear approx 22 acres in the first three years.

After "clearing" the field, the field would still be covered by stumps and roots. The roots could be grubbed out with a maddock but the stumps were so difficult to move that often the first crops had to be planted around them. Stumps had to be cleared out one by one: some pulled out by oxen, some blasted by gunpowder. Others were left to rot. Boulders, also, had to be dug out or pried and hauled away.

It took many years for the farmer to create the smooth level fields that we see today.

THE HOUSE

The first house was usually a rude cabin made out of logs. Later, this building would be replaced by a more suitable dwelling and the original used for animals or storage.

Without furnaces, electricity, televisions, fridges or even radio the modern child would wonder how the settlers survived. A kitchen range, a kerosene heater or a fireplace usually heated the house. Coal oil lanterns, or possibly single gas lamps, would have provided lighting. Water for bathing, washing or cooking had to be hauled up from a well. Later, people installed hand pumps. These had to be primed with a few drops of water before they would work. Women had endless chores in their home as cooks, housekeepers, nurses, dressmakers (most of the clothing would have been home made) and teachers. Children were put to work at an early age with a long list of chores: milking cows; feeding pigs and chickens; keeping wood ready for the kitchen range; packing water (by hand) to the house and livestock; gathering in the cows at the end of the day. After chores, they would walk to school (sometimes several miles). There were no organized sports for the children.

THE COW

One of the first things a farmer acquired after clearing his land was a cow. A cow provided milk and calves (calves were sold and slaughtered for meat). If the cow was male, it would be trained for pulling the plough and wagon. Cows milk was made into butter and cheese to sell, or used to fatten pigs and hens. Very little milk was used for drinking.

Cows produce milk to feed their young. A mother cow can be milked five days after birth and will produce more milk than her calf needs for ten months. In the early days, a settler was lucky to get 20 litres of milk per cow per week. Today's cows produce much greater quantities due to the improvements in health conditions and food.

Everyone on the farm learned to milk the cows but, in general, the dairy was the work of the women and girls. The girls learned the skill of using a gentle rhythm to coax the milk from the teat. If a cow was upset or uncomfortable it did not let her milk down. It takes approx 350 squirts to get a litre of milk.

Cows were milked early so that they could then graze in the cool of the day when the dew was still on the grass. In the heat of the afternoon, they would rest in the shade and chew their cud (re-digest their food). It was important that the cows did not graze on garlic, wild onion (leeks) or turnips or the milk produced would have a strong, unpleasant taste. By evening, they were ready to be milked again. Cows that were milked regularly at the same time each day got used to coming in at the sound of a horn or bell. Cows who had recently calved would come to the bleating of their hungry calf. Some cows were

stubborn and had to be fetched each day for milking. This was usually a job for the children in the family or the dog.

Milk spoiled quickly before the advent of iceboxes or fridges. The settler women could prolong the shelf life by changing the milk into butter or cheese.

Milk has fat globules that are wrapped in a protein coating. Churning breaks the coating and the fat globules stick together resulting in butter. Fresh milk would be left in a shallow pan overnight and the cream would rise to the top. The next morning, the cream would be skimmed off with a wooden spoon. Then the cream was left until the surface was shiny and the taste slightly sour. Believe it or not, sour cream makes tastier butter than sweet cream. Experienced butter makers could tell by looking at the cream when it was ready to churn. In the winter the cream would have to sit for several days in front of the fire before it was ready – in the summer it was usually overnight.

The cream was poured into the churn and the dasher (a stick with paddles on the bottom) was pounded regularly up and down. The dasher would agitate the fat globules and break the protein casing which caused the globules to stick together. After about 15 minutes of churning, the cream would start to feel heavy. After another 15 minutes the cream would separate into buttermilk and grain sized pellets of butter. This was a back breaking job and often done by children as young as 10. Singing helped keep the rhythm and pass the time.

The buttermilk was drained off and used for baking or to feed the pigs. Then the butter was washed thoroughly with water several times. If all the buttermilk was not rinsed off, the butter would go rancid. To get rid of the rinse water the butter was squeezed against the sides of a bowl with a butter paddle. Then it was worked into a lump or pushed into a mold. Finally, the butter was sprinkled with salt and stored in a cool place to prevent spoiling.

Cheese was more difficult to make than butter but it kept longer. Settler women could make enough cheese by collecting the excess milk in the summer (a high producing time) to last the whole winter.

A gallon of milk from the morning and from the evening milking would be kept aside and let to stand overnight. The next morning a small piece of rennet (made from the dried stomach of a newborn calf) was soaked in a half of cup of water. Rennet makes the protein particles in the milk clump together. The rennet water was added to the milk and soon after, whey (watery milk) appeared on the top and curds (thick custard like clumps of protein) underneath. The curds were cut into small cubes and stirred in the whey over a small fire. When the curds crumbled, the whey was strained off by pouring the mixture into a basket lined with cheesecloth. Salt was mixed in. The salted curds were stored in a cool place with heavy weights (stones or bricks) placed on top. Over many months the cheese was pressed until it became compact and solid. This process is called curing.

1913 - The Cobble Hill Telephone exchange opened and served 40 subscribers in the Cobble Hill, Shawnigan and Mill Bay area. At that time it was a luxury to have a phone.

Late 1920's – Electricity came to Shawnigan. Up until then, the smaller houses used lanterns, coal oil lamps or single gas lamps. The old hall had its own gas lamp system.

SCHOOLS

1893 – The first Shawnigan School, originally called Malahat School, was built on the site of the present day Catholic Church on the Cobble Hill Road. It was renamed Shawnigan School in 1914. Children from around, and down the lake and as far as the end of Sylvester Road rowed, walked or rode (horse) to this school.

1912 – A private school for girls was established ¼ mile east of the Village. The school moved to two buildings that were eventually bought by Mr. Lonsdale who was, at that time, the manager of the Strathcona Lodge Hotel.

1916 - Mr Lonsdale founded the Shawnigan Lake School on the site. This school opened with six students, four boys and two girls. One of the girls was Frances Margaret Oldham, later known as Dr. Frances Kelsey. The local high school has been named in her honour.

1927 – Strathcona Lodge School for girls opened in the old Hotel with 25 students in grades 8-12. Alice Gibson, the historian, who wrote the local history of Shawnigan Lake, "Green Leaves and Fallen Branches", was one of the first pupils at the school.

1959 – Cliffside preparatory School opened on the site of the current Easter Seal Camp on land that was previously owned by Judge Hunter. A significant landmark on this property is a concrete lion that was made early in the 20th century by George S Gibson, well known architectural carver. To this day the lion still guards the property on the waters edge. The lion was adopted as the symbol for the school crest.

HOTELS

1885 – Morton House was built by James Morton as hunting and fishing lodge in anticipation of the E & N railway.

1891 – Mr. and Mrs. Koenig bought Morton House. They remodelled it in 1897 but it burned down in 1902. They replaced it with The Shawnigan Lake Hotel, which included a store and post office. Prior to 1914, the Rail station in Shawnigan was called Koenig

Station. When the first world war seemed imminent the Koenig's changed their names to Kingsley (many Germans in the area did the same). Mrs. Kingsley sold the hotel in 1912 and, in 1916, it burned down again. It was never replaced.

1900 – The Strathcona Hotel was built at a cost of $15 000 overlooking the lake in a spot called Gilesville. The original owners were given a 99 year lease. It was set to open in mid May but burned to the ground on May 15th. Rebuilding started immediately and the hotel officially opened on September 19, 1900. The old building which had lived through a few incarnations was eventually bulldozed in the mid 1970's.

1916 (approx) A third hotel known as Savira Lodge operated as a hunting and fishing lodge on the West Side of the lake opposite "10 Acre" or "Long" Island. During its heyday, a launch named Savira stopped at the village every day for mail and supplies. The lodge did not have electricity or water and there was no road access at the time. The Lodge was well known for its excellent cuisine.

1926 – The Forest Inn opened and guests were housed in the old Armstrong house. In 1939 the Inn became the Shawnigan Beach Hotel and, in 1967, became the Shawnigan Inn. Currently, there is little evidence of the original quaint Inns or Hotels as a large condominium complex, The Shawnigan Beach Resort, fills the land.

STORES
1911 – Mill Store operated until 1935 for the benefit of the loggers, mill workers and their families.

1913 – Mrs Kingsley built a large house with a store and post office downstairs.

1917 - Pen Y Wern Store opened in the village.

1920 - Cliffside Store operated as store and post office until 1962. It was located first up near the tracks at Cliffside and then relocated to the southwest corner of East Shawnigan Lake Road and Cliffside Road.