

Remembering Jack, Elwood and Ralph at Kinsol celebration

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Yesterday's grand opening of the Kinsol Trestle was a momentous day for the Cowichan Valley, and one that I shall never forget.

I'm only sorry that Jack Fleetwood, Elwood White and Ralph Morris couldn't be there with us to see their labours fulfilled.

Jack Fleetwood was first to take up his pen to argue for saving the Kinsol soon after the province assumed ownership of the CNR's former Cowichan Subdivision in 1984. Elwood White's photo of the only steam passenger train ever to cross the Kinsol has become almost as famous as its subject.

Ralph Morris, a friend of the Kinsol until his dying day played a pivotal role in the trestle's salvation. First, when he was employed as a bridge engineer by the CNR, and again in recent years when it was slated to be demolished. Four years ago, I interviewed him for the record during one of his innumerable return visits to the trestle he'd continued to work for, into his 80s.

"I started with CN Rail as a summer university student in 1941, in the engineering department working out of Winnipeg," he began. "I graduated in 1946. The day after my final exam in engineering I started with the railway in the bridge department. In those days the CN's Western Region was the Lakehead to the West Coast.

"In January 1961 the railway transferred me from Winnipeg to Edmonton to be in charge of bridges and other structures [for] the Mountain Region which was Alberta and B.C. So, out of Edmonton, I was responsible for maintenance for all the bridges and other structures in Alberta and B.C. until the line was discontinued in 1979. Part of that territory included Vancouver Island.

"The Cowichan Subdivision was from downtown Victoria, Point Ellice, all the way up to Youbou, and the Tidewater Subdivision went from Deerholme out to Cowichan Bay where they had a big dock, [also] part of my responsibility, and a ferry slip."

He first saw the Kinsol Trestle in 1961.

"We did some major repairs. If [the mudsills and creosoted timbers] are in good shape today, it's because of that work."

Asked what he thought of the Kinsol after 30 years of neglect and two attempts at arson:

"Overall, the alignment is perfect and the structural integrity is there in the sense that there's no sign of sag or movement or distortion in any part of it at all. A number of the timbers have extensive rot in them and there are bracing members completely broken off but the horizontal members, which we call stringers, they look to be fairly sound and I'm told they could very well be.

The ones I could see, I was surprised how good they look. But there is a lot of rot in them and they would have to be replaced, even put a new deck on. The Howe Trusses are excellent, they're in top shape."

That, of course, was before the just completed \$7 million rehabilitation.

Of railway bridges, he firmly believed, "A wooden trestle is the finest, the cheapest, the best kind of structure to carry a light train over, provided it's not over a deep canyon or rocks. As long as you can drive piles and put mudsills [wooden footings for the vertical posts] on a very substantial bank such as with the Kinsol, you can't beat them. It's absolutely the best structure in the world to save money, costs of maintenance, nothing can beat them."

But the Kinsol was special. Special enough that he visited it annually even when on vacation from the CNR. And every year since his retirement when he and Mrs. Morris had visited their daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren in Victoria.

One Saturday, "We'd come up to visit the bridge and not the next day but the following Sunday, we were still out on the coast visiting friends and so on, and staying with our kids. That Sunday evening [eight days after visiting the trestle], we'd been out to dinner and we came home relatively late, about 11 o'clock. My grandson, who was only seven, had seen the news, so they let him stay up late so he could tell Grandpa of the bridge burning and [being] water-bombed. What surprised me was what little damage because it took quite a while for the water bomber [to arrive] It didn't burn that much. You know why it really didn't take off? Because those top pieces weren't creosoted.

If they had been creosoted, the bridge would have gone."

Ralph Morris wasn't just a friend of the Kinsol Trestle but a vital ally in its preservation. It was he who provided the complete set of plans on which timber framers Macdonald & Lawrence based their rebuild presentation to the CVRD, three years ago.

Asked his impression of working railways being used as recreational corridors, the career railway bridge engineer replied, "Oh, I love it, it's fantastic. There's a lot of trails across Canada that are old railway lines and I'm just excited about it."

Coincidentally, Ralph Morris and Elwood White passed away two months ago. But I know they were there with us on the Kinsol, in spirit, Thursday.