

Behind the successful fight for the Kinsol

Hard work, luck combined to save historic structure from demolition

By T.W. Paterson, Times Colonist July 31, 2011

Thought to be the longest and highest surviving structure of its kind in North America, the highest in the British Commonwealth - now, possibly, in the world - the Kinsol Trestle over the Koksilah River was an ambitious undertaking even for experienced railway construction men.

Reaching 187 metres (614 feet) long, 38 metres (147 feet) high - as tall as a 12-storey building - and gently arcing six degrees from south to north, it was built entirely by hand of timber on concrete footings. The result of these mostly anonymous pioneers' handiwork is an Erector kit of such mammoth proportions that modern-day visitors are invariably awed.

Undoubtedly, it's this organic charisma that charms not only those who see it firsthand, but the hundreds of thousands more who were made aware of its threatened demolition via a sympathetic media and the Kinsol's very own website.

Two websites, actually, one of them created by a teenaged fan who lives in the Shawnigan area and whose online exuberance infected thousands of virtual visitors from around the world.

Named for the Kinsol Valley, which takes its name from the nearby King Solomon copper mine that was active at the turn of the last century, the Kinsol Trestle was built in 1920 by Canadian National Railways at Mile 51.1 of its Cowichan Lake subdivision. (Construction by the Canadian Northern Pacific Railway actually began in 1911 but was halted by bankruptcy and the First World War.)

Originally this line was to go to Alberni and, it was hoped, the Mainland via a bridge over Seymour Narrows' infamous Ripple Rock.

Comprised of as many as nine tiers of cross-hatched timbers above a Howe Truss span just above river level, the original trestle had its Howe Truss atop a wide-open span. This was not as attractive, aesthetically speaking, as the present structure, nor as structurally sound, as was demonstrated by the first bridge being damaged by a rampaging Koksilah River within 10 years of its completion.

The restyled, and now "rehabilitated," structure, last used for rail traffic in May 1979, not only withstood 50 years of crossings by heavily-laden log trains, but a further 30 years of neglect, vandalism, arson and, as a consequence, the crushing weight of the firefighting cargo of a Martin Mars water bomber.

The CNR line on Vancouver Island, which was acquired as a recreational corridor by the provincial government in 1986, is now part of the Trans-Canada/Cowichan Valley Trails system, the latter administered by the Cowichan Valley Regional District. However, while the former railway grade has been maintained for hikers, cyclists and equestrians, the trestle, because of its magnitude and the attendant costs, was allowed to deteriorate and was badly damaged by arsonists in 1988, and again 10 years later.

As early as January 1984, when the rails were about to be lifted, and two years before B.C. acquired title to the former right-of-way, the late valley historian Jack Fleetwood unsuccessfully appealed to the provincial government to "repair the trestle in fit condition to be a Cowichan Country showpiece" so as to attract tourists to the valley.

The minister of lands, parks and housing replied that the private company contracted by the CNR to salvage rails and ties had been instructed to leave the trestle intact (other than the rails), and that Fleetwood's suggestions would be considered "in reaching a decision as to future use when the property is returned to provincial ownership."

Three months later, the provincial secretary notified the Duncan-Cowichan Chamber of Commerce that he wouldn't recommend designation of the Kinsol Trestle under the Heritage Conservation Act but would "alert

all agencies of the government to the historic value of the trestle and ensure that it is considered in all planning for the future use of the former railway corridor." There would be no money: "No provincial investment in its preservation will be possible in the foreseeable future."

An application to Projects National Parks Centennial Citizens' Committee for funding for the Kinsol's restoration drew only an offer to write a letter of support to other agencies.

In March 1986, Fleetwood was informed that management of the former CNR grade had been transferred to the Ministry of Transportation and Highways. In the last letter in Fleetwood's portfolio, dated a week later, Transportation Minister Alex Fraser informed him that, "at the request of local Historical Societies, we have left the Kinsol Trestle standing" on the understanding that "formal application will be made by one of your organizations for a lease covering this portion of right-of-way and that organization will be responsible for any liability insurance as well as maintenance of the structure."

When Jack Fleetwood passed away in January 1998, the issue of the Kinsol Trestle's salvation remained unresolved and, in 1990, Shawnigan resident Richard Pope tried to organize the Vancouver Island Industrial Heritage Society to preserve the Kinsol and two other, privately owned wooden bridges in the Shawnigan-Renfrew areas as "historical artifacts of the logging industry and as tourist attractions." He, too, was unable to garner the necessary support.

In August 1998, the Department of Environment, Lands and Parks announced that it had issued permits for work to begin immediately on the proposed Cowichan Valley section of the Trans-Canada Trail. But the Kinsol Trestle, by then declared to be unsafe, wasn't part of the plan despite its being described, four months later, as "the Jewel of B.C." by a member of the CVRD's development services, which had received a Heritage Trust grant to undertake a \$9,000 structural/feasibility study for restoring the trestle the following spring.

This study determined that the trestle could be repaired for use by pedestrians, equestrians and emergency/maintenance vehicles for \$525,000. Alternatively, it could be reduced to its Howe Truss mainframe for foot traffic only - at the cost of "eliminating a significant feature in the railway history of Vancouver Island, B.C. and Canada." The CVRD asked staff to approach the federal and provincial governments and interested parties for funding.

Earlier, the federal government had rejected a request for \$175,000, citing a lack of local financial support.

The provincial government also cried poverty then about-faced with a \$250,000 grant, in October, and a challenge to Ottawa to match it. A year later, Human Resources Canada came through with \$91,000 and the Rotary Club of South Cowichan anted up a further \$35,000 towards improving the trestle's approaches.

In January 2002 it was back to talking of razing the decrepit structure to its Howe Truss span. Even this radical surgery would consume the originally estimated half-million-dollar budget. Said Lake Cowichan's Mayor Jack Peake: "If we lose that, we kill the trail here. I'd rather spend a million and a half to restore it than \$5 to replace it."

Regional directors were shocked by another engineering study that estimated a cost of \$3.9 million to dismantle and reconstruct the trestle - but not to its original state, which would cost more because of further deterioration. After committing \$80,000 as its share of the costs of a Rails to Trails project, the CVRD launched another detailed engineering study and an economical benefits analysis to determine whether it was worth rebuilding the trestle.

And so it went until late 2005, when the CVRD parks department, having despaired of restoring the Trestle, raised the matter of public liability with its legal owners, the provincial government. As announced in April 2006, the government had committed \$1.5 million to tear it down and the CVRD was pursuing the construction of a replacement span designed by the firm involved in rebuilding the Okanagan's Kettle River Valley trestles lost to fire three years before.

The projected cost included \$1.5 million "for the safe and environmentally sensitive removal of the existing structure" and \$2.7 million for construction of what was described as a "slightly modified wooden trestle design . to realize cost savings while retaining the span, height, design quality and historic character of the original structure."

According to a CVRD Parks representative, the reconstructed trestle (using three timbers to every five of the original) would be "something very similar to what is there now."

On the grounds that a lookalike would simply be a river crossing without the appeal of the original, Cowichan and Victoria "historical purists," as they were later termed, began a public relations campaign to save the Kinsol Trestle.

The result, six years later, has been described by one of them as a "perfect storm of fortuitous circumstance." The Ministry of Transportation went from prodemolition to offering the \$1.5 million intended for that purpose to the CVRD for the trestle's reconstruction.

Then the noted heritage timber framing firm of Macdonald and Lawrence, armed with a set of plans of the trestle donated to the Cowichan Valley Museum by the late CNR bridge engineer Ralph Morris, made a hard-numbers proposal for rehabilitation. This rekindled the CVRD's interest and, with most of the projected cost of \$6.5 million for major rehabilitation and a further \$1 million for "non-core timber work" provided by grants from the provincial and federal governments, the Island Coastal Economic Trust and the Trans-Canada Trail Foundation, contracts were let for the trestle's rehabilitation.

Even with most of that work now completed, and the trestle's formal opening to the public on Thursday, the Cowichan Foundation's Toonies for the Trestle fundraising drive continues.

T.W. Paterson of Duncan, the author of 23 books on B.C. history, worked with other residents of the Cowichan Valley to save the Kinsol Trestle from demolition.

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