

The Malahat by Lori Treloar, Curator

My family was fortunate enough to have a summer cottage at Shawnigan Lake. Therefore, for as long as I can remember, the trip between Victoria and Shawnigan has been a part of my life. When my husband and I made the decision to live permanently at the lake there was great anticipation for leaving behind the frustration of city driving and embracing the pace of rural life. After all, the largest intersection around is the four way stop in the village.



c1930 Tunnel Hill on the Malahat

Until we could move into our house, we stayed briefly at a lovely cabin that sits between the lakeshore and the East Shawnigan Lake Road. To our surprise, the first morning arrived with a vengeance. Traffic began at 5:30 a.m. - the pace fast and relentless - the noise constant. After several nights, we felt like we had been hazed in some strange initiation ritual. We realized then that we had not been prepared for the **COMMUTE!**

Strangely, Real Estate agents often promote the daily trip from the Cowichan Valley to Victoria as an easy commute. That might be the case if the drive didn't include the Malahat. The Malahat Drive was built in response to pressure from the increasing number of automobile owners who demanded that the Government provide a decent, direct route to access up-island communities. In fact, Cowichan Valley residents began petitioning in the late 1800's for a new road.

Prior to the Malahat highway there were two land routes to the Cowichan Valley. The first, known as the Goldstream Trail, was a five foot wide trail carved through the wilderness in 1862. Although this was upgraded, it never achieved the status of a real road. The second land route, which made the Cowichan Valley accessible by automobile, was the Old Victoria Road. This road passed by the Goldstream Hotel then out to the Sooke Lakes before following the east side of Shawnigan Lake to Cobble Hill and on to Cowichan Bay. Bert Todd, a member of the Victoria Motor Club, took matters into his own hands when he hired Frank Verdier to stake out a possible route over the Malahat. The Provincial Government then hired surveyors to revise and survey the project in August 1909. The new 17 miles of highway over the mountain were constructed in 1910 at a cost of \$200 000.

The first vehicle to take the trip over the new Malahat road did so in January 1911 through 18 inches of snow. The Native name "Malahat" was officially adopted in the summer of 1911. The new highway was not for the faint of heart. The original gravel road had no railings and was generally one lane with turn offs for vehicles to pull out when cars were approaching from the other direction. The road was steep and narrow with stretches that went on forever with no place to turn around. Accidents were frequent

and brakes were often destroyed in a single trip. Many oldtimers can tell stories of harrowing trips over the Malahat. At the entrance to Goldstream Park there was a tight curve known as "Suicide Corner" that was the scene of many accidents. Fortunately for us the 'Hat was "modernized" in 1956.

Even in the early days the Malahat was the scene of regular speed traps. However, in those days the speed limit was 12 miles per hour. If you exceeded the limit you would receive a \$20 fine which was a princely sum at that time...and apparently it was impossible to argue your way out of paying.

The Malahat Drive is a scenic route through old growth forests and over mountain tops providing spectacular views for travellers. Bliss Carmen, well known Canadian poet, was inspired enough after his trip over the mountain to write a poem titled "Malahat". In 1911, only the privileged owned a vehicle. By the 1920s, cars replaced many family horses. During the 1920s auto camping became a favourite activity and the Hamsterley Farm Auto Camp was built on the Malahat, near the site of the "lookout", to accommodate automobile travellers. Although the original building burnt down, the replacement was in business until 1953.

The Malahat, after almost one hundred years, continues to be the only road link between Victoria and the up-island communities. However, traffic on the Malahat has increased at an alarming rate and a single accident can tie up traffic for hours as there is no alternate route. And sadly...the morning commuters hardly have a chance to enjoy the incredible scenery as, bumper to bumper, they flow, fast paced and relentless toward the city. Easy commute? I think not. Worth it? Absolutely!

If you have stories, pictures or information regarding people, property or incidents regarding life around Shawnigan Lake we would love to hear from you. We are compiling data regarding residents and property owners around the lake from the late 1800's forward and every piece of information, and every story, even if it seems insignificant, adds to the overall picture of life at Shawnigan. We are also looking for people who are willing to be interviewed, or tell stories, on film about life at Shawnigan.

We look forward to your visits. Thanks for your support!
Lori Treloar - Curator