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FHABC 2005 AGM REPORT

The FHABC's 2005 AGM was held on September 17th at the Tigh-Na-Mara Resort Spa & Conference Centre in Parksville. The main items of business concerned the newsletter, a web page, our healthy finances, charitable tax status, funding for upcoming publications, and how to raise our profile and promote all aspects of forest history. President Stan Chester reported on the oral history project, the display and book prizes at the ABCFP AGM, and the developments at Green Timbers in Surrey.

Mike Apsey updated us on the Forest History Society's progress in forming a Canadian Chapter and Edo Nyland described the 75th anniversary celebrations of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development and the formation of the Forest History Association of Alberta.

Following lunch we relocated to Cathedral Grove in MacMillan Provincial Park, on the highway to Port Alberni. Retired B.C. Provincial Parks forester Kerry Joy was our guide and kindly provided an interesting and informative presentation on the human and natural histories of the park. A written version follows.

The current FHABC Executive is as listed in the December 2004 newsletter, number 75.



Recycled paper

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CATHEDRAL GROVE, MACMILLAN PROVINCIAL PARK by Kerry Joy

Let's start with Cathedral Grove's origins as a public protected area. In 1886 a wagon road between Nanaimo and Alberni, some 85 km, was completed. It was located on the north side of Cameron Lake. In 1911 the road was relocated to the south side of the lake and a railway was built on the north side. These corridors enabled transportation of people and goods and exploration of the vast forests of the interior of the island.

H.R. MacMillan, B.C.'s first Chief Forester, was highly aware of the value of our old-growth forests. As an entrepreneurial opportunist, he staked his claim on the coastal old growth by leasing Timber Berths and obtaining logging rights to large numbers of entire river valleys by leasing blocks of timber at the river valley mouths, thus reserving entire valleys of old-growth forests. One such example was the Cameron River valley, whose river exited into Cameron Lake just 300 m north of Cathedral Grove.

When the road was improved in the early 1900s and the Alberni Valley timber industry burgeoned, the population swelled to meet the logging and milling demands. Many of these people traveled for business and pleasure across the Mt. Arrowsmith road hump to Nanaimo. On the way to or from that city it became common, and finally traditional, to stop off at Cathedral Grove for a picnic and visit to the old-growth forest. Cathedral Grove was said to be named by Governor-General Viscount Willingdon during a 1928 visit.

For the next 15 years the public, represented by the Vancouver Island Tourist Association and the local chambers of commerce, petitioned H.R. MacMillan to donate Cathedral Grove as a public park. H.R. steadfastly refused, citing the high values of the old-growth timber as necessary to his company's well-being and future growth. Finally, in 1944, at an historic meeting of the Vancouver Island Tourist Association in Port Alberni, H.R. was pressured by all present to give the grove to the public. After much haranguing, verbal battling, and shouting, H.R. stormed out of the hall, shouting "All right! You can have the God-damned grove," slamming the door as he left. This public victory resulted in provincial park protective status for 136 ha of old-growth forest, including Cathedral Grove, in 1947.

In 1944, my family moved to Port Alberni. Like many other residents we used to picnic in the grove and walk along the Cameron River through the huge trees. This experience as a small boy may have played a role in my decision to become a forester and conservationist, and finally the Parks Forester in charge of Cathedral Grove and all forest and vegetation matters in B.C. provincial parks.

Old-growth tree species found in MacMillan Park include coastal Douglas-fir, western red cedar, western hemlock, and grand fir. Bigleaf maple has a much shorter life span but can live up to about 200 years. These forests are transitional between the drier Coastal Douglas-fir Biogeoclimatic Zone (CDF) which characterizes the east coast of Vancouver Island and the wetter Coastal Western Hemlock Biogeoclimatic Zone (CWH), found along the west coast.

Old-growth trees can live for 600 – 800 years, with extreme ages of 1500+ years reached on drier upland sites. Trees in Cathedral Grove are not the largest or tallest, but heights are up to 50 – 60 m and diameters exceed 2.5 – 3 m, the largest is 4.4 m. One old veteran Douglas-fir was estimated to contain enough lumber to build five three-bedroom homes. In the BC Parks and Protected Areas Branch this analogy is not emphasized because it is felt that visitors should focus on the extraordinary living characteristics of the trees and supporting forest.

I once brought a visiting British forester to Cathedral Grove. After walking the trails and describing some of the forest's features to him we stopped near one of the larger Douglas-firs. I noticed that tears were flowing down the man's face. I thought he was in some physical pain, so I asked what I could do to help. His somewhat choked reply was that I had provided him with the most extraordinary experience of his long forestry career. He was overwhelmed by the amazing size and beauty of the grove. Some 300,000 people now visit the park each year. Many foreign visitors are bussed from Victoria and other centres to view the large trees.

Logging of the remainder of the upstream valley has resulted in significant damage to the Cameron River's course and the adjacent forest. In 1990, extreme runoff from a tropical storm caused extensive flooding and high winds resulted in 6 ha of blowdown and streambank erosion. In 1996 high winds estimated at 110 km/h resulted in windfall and broken tree tops, causing extensive damage to the grove and surrounding forest.

Park visitation has compacted the soil over sensitive root systems with vegetation removal and damage. In the 1990s BC Parks initiated a trail rehabilitation program with replacement of coarse woody debris along the trails to prevent further damage by controlling public access.

Parking has traditionally been along both sides of the highway just west of the Cameron River bridge. This was judged to be too dangerous for tour buses and cars together with loaded logging trucks. An alternate parking area was planned in 1998 – 1999 in an area of red alder and second-growth Douglas-fir adjacent to the Cameron River (upstream from the grove and occupying a former logging staging area). As a result of public controversy this site move has been delayed and the parking hazard continues today.

MacMillan Park's Cathedral Grove still represents the only highway-accessible area of protected old-growth Douglas-fir forest in British Columbia. Even though it is damaged and disturbed we in B.C. are happy that it still remains to provide an awe-inspiring example of Canada's temperate forests.

