

Memories of Manson's Landing. Bill and Mary Block in conversation with Dianne (Theal) Hentschel and Doreen (Huck) Thompson, at their home in Campbell River. March 2005.

We were living in Drayton Valley, Alberta in 1966 and were ready for a change when we heard about Cortes Island from our friend, Albert Larson, had been in the Navy with Bill Mathews during the Second World War. Bill had lived on Cortes before joining up (and went back there afterwards). Albert had visited with Bill on Cortes and told us what a nice place it was so we thought we'd go out there and take a look. We thought it would be a good place for kids to grow up. So that's where we went and where we raised our boys, Billy, Gord, Ron and Gary. Gary was just eight months old, Bill and I were in our thirties.

We bought a place near Bill's at 1438 Carrington Bay Road. It was a little three room house that had belonged to Andy Byers who once homesteaded in the area between Seaford and Cortes Bay. We were warmly welcomed into the community. Bev Mathews and Edith Huck both offered to help clean the place up and make it more livable. We actually ended up staying at Mathews for a short while. The house was fine for a bachelor like Andy but much too small for our family of five very active young boys. We weren't there long before we found a bigger place at Manson's and moved to what had been Bob and Doreen Borland's home. (821 Sutil Point Road) That was in 1966. It was an old place, originally built by David Robertson for the Petznick's during the early years of the nineteen hundreds. But it was big, had been well kept, had an established orchard, lots of cleared land and room to spread out. It had a tiny view of the lake when we first went there but it was no time at all until the trees grew a little more and we had none. It was also close to the school.

We put in a garden, all the usual vegetables and lots of berries. Bill started a row of strawberries that grew to be a patch about a hundred feet square with several layers of gillnet suspended over it to keep the birds off. We had eight hundred pounds of strawberries one season, we gave a lot of berries away that year! Bill always liked picking berries. One time when we were still in Alberta Bill picked enough wild strawberries that I made a hundred and twenty five jars of jam. We tried raspberries but didn't have much luck with them.

We were told that when the house was being built Mr. Petznick brought the windows and stuff up from the wharf in a wheelbarrow. We learned another bit of the history of the house when Miss Lettice, the teacher who planted the original dogwood tree in front of the school came to the island for a visit and dropped in on us. She told us that she had boarded with the Petznicks. (Miss Lettice taught at Manson's from 1914 until 1918, throughout the First World War. Her annual salary was \$75.00 per year).

We had owned and operated a couple of stores in Drayton Valley. A general store for about fifteen years then a menswear store for about a year. We realized that living on Cortes required learning new skills that would enable us to make a living from natural resources and wherever else we could find a job. We'd try anything. We did what most islanders were doing for a living in those days. We picked salal, Mary was forever getting lost, never knew where the road was when it was time to pack her bales out; we picked oysters, Bill deckhanded for Jim Palmer on a fishpacker and was a fish buyer at Cortes Bay.

Mary took over the janitorial work at the school when Pearl Graham retired in 1969. The school had three classrooms upstairs at first, a fourth in the basement where the playroom had originally been and was finally augmented by two portables for woodworking and art classes. A lot changed between 1969 and 1982 when she retired. George Gardner was the principal, followed by Ed Piggott. The teachers included May Freeman, Bev Mathews, Joan Guthrie, Anna Gregg, Miss Hilborn - the health freak who never ate anything, she always juiced everything AND she dumped a bunch of soup bones down the toilet and it had to be taken out to get rid of them! - Penny Hansen, Ron Kosky, Sherry Sprungman, Lisa Johnson - she left dead animals in the science room until they stank and we had to get rid of them - Jonathan Edwards. Some were only part-time. Ernie Guthrie was the busdriver/maintenance man followed by Frank Braun and Bruce Campbell. Frank had come in from Campbell River and didn't stay long. Bruce lived at Cortes Bay. The old school closed, the new school opened at 950 Beasley Road. Working conditions changed from a start of \$3.44 per hour, 4 hours a day, 5 days a week to almost \$12.00 per hour, 8 hours a day. Students grew up and got married. "It was a lot of hard work because I thought everything had to be spotless".

The boys grew up and followed in our footsteps, working at whatever they could find - oysters, fishing. They all eventually bought trollers and are still fishermen. Ron had gone on to University but island life brought him back.

Billy married Debby Barton from Barton's store down at the Landing in 1975. The wedding was held at the community hall. They later moved to Campbell River. Gord died in an accident when the truck in which he was a passenger went off the end of Manson's dock. That was in 1992. Ron built a home at 997 Cemetery Road but has since sold it and moved to Campbell River. Gary is the only one of the boys who still lives on Cortes, along with his wife, Andrea and daughters.....

Raising a family on Cortes was good. There were so many outdoor things the kids could do, swimming, hiking, playing in the woods. Gary learned to swim when the older boys threw him off of a float down at the lake! Fishing down at the wharf. The boys and their friends loved playing in an old dump out back, left from when Borland's had the place. There were lots of snakes around there, they'd have wars with garter snakes! Lottie McDevitt had bowling for kids at the hall. She did that for years. Raising a family on Cortes was good. There were so many outdoor things the kids could do, swimming, hiking, playing in the woods. Fishing down at the wharf. The boys and their friends loved playing in an old dump out back, left from when the Borland's had the place. There were lots of snakes around there, they'd have wars with garter snakes! Lottie McDevitt had bowling for kids at the hall. She did that for years.

When Billy was about twelve he saved enough money to build a boat. Otto Ellingsen helped him make it. We bought him a little motor. The kids spent days and days spearing dogfish down in the bay. I don't know where they got the speargun but they had one. One time they got this big old dogfish and it pulled the boat around til it hit a rock and they lost the motor overboard. A lesson in outboard maintenance! Another time they caught a big skate and managed to get it up on the wharf. They brought it home and hung it in the shed where it greeted Mary on her return from a trip to Alberta. It was a big ugly thing, we had no idea what to do with it and were not impressed!

Jack and Ev Summers still had the store when we first went to Manson's. I remember Bob and Edith Cadwallader and the McCoys running it for awhile before the Bartons took it over. then the Bartons. Hector and Pearl Graham ran Graham's Confectionery next door to the school. School kids with money to spend (not as often in those days as now!) bought pop and candy there at lunchtime. They also sold cigarettes and tobacco.

Getting off the island. We occasionally went to Campbell River by floatplane to visit the dentist and shop for things you couldn't get on Cortes. Later on Lottie McDevitt and Mary travelled to town on the ferry. The most memorable trip, though, was in Billy's twelve foot plywood boat. Gordie had to have his eyes tested, we were going to fly over to town but Bill suggested we take the boat. Gary was just a little guy, he'd stay home with Bill. Billy and Gord, Ronnie and I left Manson's in Billy's boat on a calm morning, got out to where we didn't know and the fog came down. We WERE lost. We could hear that fog horn blowing but we couldn't tell where it was coming from! I mean GREENHORNS!! Billy was about fourteen, it was his boat and he was running it. We just kept going and met a couple of loggers who were out there in another boat. I said to Billy, "FOLLOW them." It turned out that they were on their way OUT, going to camp. Luckily, their boat broke down and they stopped to fix something so we came alongside and asked them how to get to Campbell River. They took one look at us and said, "Just wait til we get this fixed and we'll take you in! That worked out just fine. By afternoon we'd seen the optometrist and done a few things and were ready to go home. The fog had blown away, the wind was still blowing a bit. We got into the boat, got out a ways and discovered that the wind was blowing HARD. The waves were picking us up and we'd come down "CRACK!" I told Billy we'd better turn around and go back. By the time we got safely turned and back into Campbell River were all soaking wet. The first thing we had to do was go buy some clothes and get a hotel room. Morg May was in town at the same time, in his big boat. The next morning we tied Billy's skiff behind Morg's boat and came home with him. I swore I'd never go to town in an open boat again!

The Fiesta at the spit was a big event in the first years that we were there. There were games to play, local crafts to buy, entertainment and contests. Lots of garage-sale type of stuff there too, you could buy all kinds of stuff, I got some brass candlesticks that I still use. Everything was good quality and priced right! The first year we were there the kids contest was called "Sea and Shore" they were to build whatever they wanted out of bits and pieces found on the beach. I still remember what our boys, who had grown up on the prairies built. Billy made a dish out of a piece of abalone-shaped wormwood, found an abalone to put in the hollow and a tiny starfish to put in the abalone. An Abalone Dish! Gordie found a big old piece of boat-shaped wormwood that he put masts made out of bits of metal rod on. He rigged it with bits of string. They both won first prizes! Ten dollars each. They were SO happy! They bought all kinds of stuff from the garage sale tables -- for ten cents and twenty five cents and prices like that.

The Barbecue down at Smelt Bay was another island celebration down at Smelt Bay. That was back when a pit was dug the night before barbecue day to cook the beef in. They'd light a fire in it and get a lot of rocks hot and when it burned down to ashes the beef, wrapped in tinfoil, was put in and the whole thing was covered up. The next day it was ready to serve. Lottie used to make baked beans for it, lots of people did. And coleslaw. People would come from all over, lots of boats anchored offshore. There were kids games and races, contests for adults. Nail driving. Log bucking. A greasy pole with a bottle at the top for the first person who could up there. Handy for the dance that followed at the community hall.

We had quite a few neighbours, among them were the Gordon Fretwells (742 Sutil Point Road), Robbie and Beth Graham ((1016 Belwood), Hector and Pearl Graham at Belwood and Sutil Point Roads, Ernie and Jessie Guthrie (768 Sutil Pt.), Bobby Hayes (762 Sutil Pt.). Otto and Gladys Ellingsen were among our friends on the island. Otto was Elmer Ellingsen's uncle. They lived down by the park in Smelt Bay (434 Smelt Bay Road). Otto grew a huge garden, always said that planting cabbages under the power lines than were above it made them grow bigger than they would anywhere else in the garden. He was really particular about what he ate but when he came up here for dinner he would eat anything.....and if Gladys buttered a piece of bread he'd tell her it wasn't good for her, take it away - and eat it himself! They were a great old couple, always friendly and welcoming. Gladys liked to add a shot of rum to your coffee if you came visiting on a cold day.

What did we see as positive changes while we were there? Ed Piggott taking over at the school. That was the best thing that ever happened to Cortes! There were some parents who didn't think so. The ones that thought their kids never did anything wrong. They should have become a janitor for a little while and they could see what their kids were up to! Kindergarten was added, the school enrollment steadily increased during the time I worked there, that was before Linnaea started.

When we got older and had health problems it got too hard for Bill to get wood in, we both needed medical support and felt that a move to town was in order.