

Allen Robertson, interviewed by Imbert Orchard, 1965

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Well, I'll try and start with something of the family history then. About 1890, perhaps in 89, two of my uncles, my mother's brothers, came up from Vancouver looking for land, and they settled eventually in Gorge Harbor. That was Wilfred Allen and James Allen, and later Charles Allen also settled in the harbour. And some years later than that, another brother, the youngest of the family, Bernard Allen, also took up that. And he is still living there now, 85, 87 years of age. But he's the only one of the family alive now. My mother, who was born in India and educated in England, before her marriage, came across the Pacific twice on CPR boats and spent, in 1993 I think, the first time, six months with her father and three of the brothers at the first house that they built in Gorge Harbour.

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Later about 97, she made another trip on leave from India and did the same thing again, stayed for three months at that time at Gorge Harbour with her brothers. In '98 she and my father, were married and returned to the old country. Came out to this country when I was a year old, from Glasgow, although her family were Welsh and their home was Cardiff. And we lived in Vancouver for six years. I was the oldest of the family. The rest of the two brothers and a sister were born in Vancouver. But we came up to Whaletown in 1905 and bought 160 acres in Whaletown from a man named Joe Yowart, a bachelor also, an old miner and fisherman.

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And three of mother's brothers were living there then, Charlie Allen, James Allen, and Wilf Allen. Wilf Allen and Charlie Allen were married. Wilf Allen died about 1910. At the time we came to Whaletown, there was no school. A boat came in about once in ten days, usually the Union's steamship Comox, a boat about 140 feet in length, and her times of arrival, of course, were very indefinite, anywhere within three days. But I think in 1907, they started a school at Manson's, and it was necessary that I should go down there in order to give them enough children.

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They had to have ten, eight of whom were to attend regularly. So I lived with John Manson for a year, a year and a half, going to school there. Eventually more children arrived, and in 1909 the first school was started at Whaletown. We had a bare minimum number of children. Now, where shall I carry on from there?

Well, could I ask you why your uncles came out to that sort of place? What was it attracted them in the first place?

Well, they were born in India, and they wanted to get away from there. The boys were educated in India, although my mother is the oldest of the family, was educated as a medical missionary in England.

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But eventually, two of the boys, Jim and Wilf, were indentured as a farmer apprentices in Ontario, and they came out from there to Cortez. And their one thought was to own land. They never made farmers or fishermen. At the end of their lives, they worked their heads off trying to clear land and become farmers. And looking back on it now, to myself and to the members of the family that are still alive, it looks like a big mistake. They worked themselves to death, hard physical labor, clearing land that today has gone back into wild bushland.

0:05:31 They didn't actually farm, they just never got to that stage.

Yes, they made their living farming, mostly by raising eggs for market. In those days it was possible in a large number of Cortez people. The Mansons, Mike Manson, John Manson, Hawkins, a lot of the old families made their living from around 1903 possibly, certainly up until the first war in 1914, very largely by keeping chickens and selling the eggs in Vancouver. And grain had to be shipped from Vancouver up here, and then the eggs shipped down again on the Union Steamship. And when we came to Whaletown, that was our intention, the way that I lived, that supported my family, until I was about 13 years of age, when I started working in logging camps, earning a man's wages, working ten hours a day.

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And from then on, as far as my family was concerned, we gave up the chicken end of it. But we had a team of horses and two or three cows milking, and a family garden. And there was quite an orchard on the place, nearly 200 trees. And in those days, that was the history of most of the families. The men worked out part of the year, but they raised enough and received some income from their places. There was sale for fresh meat and fruit in some of the logging camps, but eggs were the mainstay around Cortez, Read Island, Valdez, as Quadra was called in those days. And it wasn't until the first war, when freight rates changed and wheat became so high, that the egg-raising died out in this country.

It was a long way to bring the grain and bring the eggs back.

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It certainly was, yes.

Were there many people earlier than your uncles on the island?

Yes, somewhere around 1870, as far as I can remember, was the first time they talked about people settling on Cortez. A man named Drinkwater, I think, had the first store in Whaletown somewhere in the 80s. And previous to that, there had been a store possibly connected with Drinkwater on Camp Island, which is about two miles from Whaletown. The settlement at Manson started pretty well about the same time as Whaletown in the way of settlers, because I think the first preemptions granted on Cortez were granted to my uncles and to John Manson and Mike Manson, who was a member of Parliament for many years in this district later on. That was about 1890.

Yes, I see there wasn't any...they were all squatters until that time.

Yes, yes, pretty well I understand.

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Does Cortez got much arable land on it, is it?

Yes, considerable, and in most cases mixed in with the rock part and what was heavy timber are good rich patches of alder bottom possibly 10 20 acres to a quarter section some of course are half woodland others and maybe only have five acres in a quarter section but there is a lot of land that is like that the old place as Whaletown is nearly 80 acres, I guess, of fine land, although it's never been developed. Only about 25 of the original 160 was ever put into crop.

Is Cortes much like Quadra, or are they different in some respects, to look at, physically and so on?

No, I would say Cortes and Quadra are somewhat similar. The southern ends of both the islands are sandy and level, dry. The northern ends are rocky with very broken shorelines and good boat harbors.

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These different sites that grew up now, let's take Whaletown. What was the origin of Whaletown?

Well, as near as I have heard from personal accounts of people that were around Whaletown when I was seven, eight years old. There was never a whaling station there, but on part of our old place at Whaletown, what was known as Whale Bay, the corner where Mackenzie now lives ¹, were some bricks in a bit of an alder bottom there, and the uncles said that they thought when they first came there, there had been brickwork set up on which the whalers may have set big iron pots for trying out blubber. There were sailing ships working in the Gulf in the 50s and 60s, but it was never a whaling center, merely an odd boat that would come in there perhaps and bring their blubber ashore and try it out.

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And then the coming of the store there was set about the yes. Yeah, it's just a good bay

Yes, it was a good harbour in those days and it was one of the two first points in which a post office was established. I think the post office in Manson's and at Whaletown came about the same time

You don't know when that would be

No, but I would think it would be about 89 or 91, somewhere in there.

Manson, what's the origin of Manson's?

Well, Manson's, I think, was about the same type of development. The two Manson brothers, Mike and John, both brought their, well, both took up land there at the same time. John Manson out on Reef Point, and Mike Manson, where the present Wharf and Store are. He had a family. John Manson, I think, in 91 went back to the Orkneys ² to bring his wife out, or the girl that was to be his future wife. I guess he was married on that trip. There wasn't too much in the way of settlement on Cortes until around 1910, something of that sort, although the first school on Cortes was I think in 92 or 93, but it only ran for about six years, five or six years, until it ran out of children, I was too late.

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The settlement came in, then there were just these few pioneers, like your uncles and the Mansons, and then a bigger development later on in the 19th century.

Yes, around 1908, and especially around 1910, there was a heavy influx of settlers, and many of them came in on smaller allotments. The government was then selling off land that had been logged and breaking it up into 40-acre tracts. But there was heavy settlement came in at that time, although many of them were bachelors that proved up on their land, and when the war came, they dispersed one way or another, and many of the places were abandoned.

¹This is approximately the site of the current ferry landing

²The Manson brothers were from Shetland, not the Orkneys

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Has it ever picked up since then?

Yes. Around the 20s, Cortez I think, probably had its heaviest number of inhabitants. Three or four schools, although at present I think there are something like 50 or 60 schoolchildren on the island, which is close to the top- the population of 350, 450. But more people were living, I think, on Cortez during the first war and up until about the 30s, even during the 30s, than in any other period. It's coming back now more than it has been, but partly from old-age pensioners and summer residents.

Is there any farming of any significance on the land now?

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Not as much as there was. There used to be considerable beef raised and potatoes sold, and as I said before, egg raising.

But did they ever grow fruit to any profit on the land?

Never able to compete in the market in Vancouver. We could sell it sometimes to local centers like Heriot Bay possibly, Powell River, and to summer visitors, but it could never compete because it wasn't the money put into spraying and that sort of thing proving that there should have been. So it never graded high enough to compete in the Vancouver Big Market.

What fruits did grow there?

Apples, pears, cherries did very well. Some places peaches did quite well, grapes, quite a lot of them grown.

It's quite a good climate, is it?

Yes, an excellent climate. Compares very favorably than anything I know of along the coast.

Is it drier than Vancouver?

I think it is probably about two inches, around 50 inches a year perhaps.

Is Quadra the same

Very similar.

There's another settlement there, isn't there, on the island, what is it called?

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Well, one of the settlements that had a school for some years was Squirrel Cove, and also Seaford had a school for a number of years. Those places at times have been joined together by roads. Some of those roads are abandoned now. Actually I guess there is undoubtedly a better road system now than there ever has been, but part of that is most of it, in the way of uniting the centers, has come since the last war, just in the last 10 or 15 years.

Did these other places, did they amount to much in the old days?

Well, each of them had their own post office, their own school, their own wharf at which the Union steamship landed, and their own store.

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Whaletown was not connected with Squirrel Cove until after the First War, and Manson's and Whaletown were only connected since the last war, except by a very roundabout rough route.

There was not enough settlement in the center of the island to make these things?

No. In those days, before the first war, water transport was the one way that people depended on getting around. If we went to a dance at Manson's, winter or summer, we depended, expected to go in daylight and return in daylight. It was a common thing then.

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Bunks were provided where the dance was to be held to the extent that families could bring all their children. When the children got tired, they were wrapped up in blankets and put to bed. And running gas boats, which were not too dependable in those days, most of us preferred to go home in daylight, so we danced until it was daylight and then went home.

Any interesting characters on this island, anything that you remember as you grew up? Because you remember some of the Mansons, for instance.

Yes, I knew the Mansons fairly well because of the year and a half that I spent going, living with John Manson's family and going to school with them.

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So most of them I knew personally quite well.

Can you tell me about some of the kind of people there and where or what they did, their background?

Well John Manson was a, I guess, as much of a farmer as anybody there, although he did quite a bit of logging at times, beachcombing and logging with horses, but he was an exceptional man in the woods. He ran sheep in conjunction with another old Scotchman named Dan McDonald, who had a wooden leg, on what was known

then as the Twin Islands, and is now called Ulloa, I think, also on Mary Island, which today on the maps is marked as Marina. And he ran sheep on Cortez.

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Well, I can remember one occasion when I was living there, he came back from a trip down towards Cortez Bay, as they call it now, Blind Creek. And he had not taken enough rope to tie the sheep's legs. He had to bring them back in a 16-foot rowboat. So he tied up the sheep's legs and laid them in the boat, as much rope as he had. Then he tore his undershirt and part of his pants to pieces to get string enough to tie up the legs of the others. And he brought something like 24 sheep back in this boat lying on their backs.

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Well, that was the way he moved his sheep around. And when he went to get them in the woods, he built corrals if possible, but in many cases he just ran his sheep down. And he was husky enough and fast enough to do that kind of thing. Mike Manson was rather more of a businessman, I think, but he did a great deal of hard work also.

Which of them ran the store?

Mike Manson ran the store at times. John Manson I don't think ever did, but for many years he depended. There was no road that they could haul from. He was about three miles from the wharf, and he used to take that sixteen-foot boat from a flat beach, quite exposed to a southeast wind, and meet the Union steamship about two o'clock, one or two o'clock in the morning, winter and summer, out in Baker's Pass, and load the feed for his chickens. He was carrying a thousand to fifteen hundred laying hens through the winter. His feed was all put into this rowboat. Sometimes he'd tow another one, but it was oars, no engines.

And that's the way he'd get rid of the eggs.

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That's the way he'd ship his eggs, too. Take them out in the boat and hand them up into the freight hold of the Comox or Union Steamship in the boats in those days, the Cassiar, rather or the Union Steamship.

Is it usually at night then that the boats came?

Well it was on that particular run coming up from Vancouver.

This Manson, what about the one that became the member of parliament.

Well, that was Michael Manson, and he had a very, quite large family. I think there were three sets of twins in that family, all girls. What were there? Seven girls, I guess, and one boy. Quite a few of them are still living. The boy is still living, I think, in Vancouver.

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And two of the girls are married and living on the island yet.

He's not related to Judge Manson.

Yes, there were seven brothers, either five or seven brothers. And one of them was a judge, I believe, and another one, an attorney general. They had big families in Nanaimo and around Hatzik.

These were two of the brothers, then?

Yes.

Where did they come from, then, the Mansons

From the Orkney Islands.³

The family came out...

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Came direct, yes. The boys came out as they had the opportunity. I think there were five brothers, originally.

How did he... about what time was he a member of parliament?

Well, he was a member of parliament, I think, for 42 years. Seems to me, certainly at that time, it was the longest period that any member of parliament had served. But it would be from about 1905 up until somewhere around 1940.

What party did he represent?

The conservative party.

Which was that? The MLA or MP?

0:23:02

Yes, MLA, a member of the provincial legislature for Comox originally, and when he died he was a member of parliament for the Bella Coola district, or McKenzie I guess it was called.

He was certainly well known.

³Shetland Islands

Yes, very well known, yes.

Any other interesting people on the island there that should be mentioned? Outstanding personalities?

Well, I don't know that I can mention outstanding characters. Of course, to me as an individual, there were plenty that way.

We found that Quadra Island was full of them and so forth, and you heard some stories about them.

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Looking back, of course, over the period, some of the things that we thought at that time turned out to be quite wrong. At Whaletown, there was a family called Malcolm, and they were regarded as rather unfortunate that the mother and father didn't get along. But one or two of those boys today are probably the wealthiest of any of the children that were raised in that period at Cortez.

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They've moved away from there now into the city.

Was it a place where there were sort of eccentric people at all, or living alone by themselves, or married, or where the people were sad, or what kind of people?

No, I don't think we had any. There were some outstanding characters. Tiber was one man, an old German that lived up in what we call Green Valley, cleared a farm there. The first family grew up, then he changed his location to the lakes at Manson's and married for the second time there to a German woman who had two families. She was his third husband.

She was his third...

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No, he was her third husband. That's better. I knew him quite well. He was quite a character. Lived by himself for many years in Green Valley, at the big and little lake, as we call them.

What way was he a character?

Well, he was very independent. When he built, he had to build his own road, four miles, to get in there. When he moved from Green Valley down to Manson's Lakes, what is now Hague Lake, he did the same thing. He cut his own trail through the bush that his horse could carry his furniture on. And, oh, I can remember growing up perhaps when I was eight years old, my dad and I walked out to his place one day. I thought it was quite strange at the time. He was cutting up cabbages in a barrel over the top of a big barrel in his kitchen, along a split cedar house that he had built at the Little Lake in Green Valley.

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But he had parts of saw blades set on the top, so he would take the head of cabbage and rub it across the top and cut it up in little shavings and it dropped down in the barrel. And in the barrel was a mixture of fluid which made his sauerkraut. And I remember he had steel falling wedges laid on top to keep it submerged in the liquor. But when he went out on the lake, he took me out on the lake fishing off a raft, catching trout about 10 or 12 inches in length. And when I would haul one up, he would say to me, don't take it off the hook, Al.

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Let me have it. And he would clean it before he'd let the hook be taken out of it. So when the hook came out, it was ready to go into the pan.

Growing up there, do you remember any incidents, you know, when you were a child, or some of your earliest memories, kind of like this?

Well, my father was crippled with rheumatism. He had been quite a football player in his... and still was when he recovered from it. In later years he was captain of the first football team in Vancouver in 99, I guess. But due to this muscular rheumatism trouble, he wasn't able to do much heavy work, and so the looking after the thousand chickens and the sawing of the wood, much of that was done by my mother and myself.

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We had, after I was eight years old, I usually had two cows to milk, a horse to look after, five hundred chickens to feed before I went to school in the mornings, and houses to clean when I came home after school. So the period until I was 13 years of age was one with no idle time. I don't know what I felt put upon. I don't think I did. But looking back at it now, I consider that at 13 or 14 years of age, I was fully capable and certainly thought I was as any man was. At 13, I worked away from home for three months in Reed Island, sawing wood for a donkey, getting a man's wages and working ten hours a day, and in the wintertime, that meant starting (end of tape)

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