Words of remembrance by Arthur Roy, whose younger sister was Jessie’s age

Growing up in Chemainus

I felt that a description of the town would be useful for context. Chemainus was a ‘sawmill town.’ Many years ago, around the end of the nineteenth century, a man named John A. Humbird purchased a large timber tract and then formed a company VL&M (Victoria Lumber and Manufacturing Company) that built a large sawmill on the north side of town next to the sea at the head of the sheltered inlet. The Company also built a railroad to the logging camp from the saw mill. As well, Humbird built the beginnings of a town. He had housing built for workers who could then rent a house very cheaply (outdoor toilets). Workers initially came from Eastern Europe, Central and Eastern Canada, China, and Japan, and these groups generally congregated together in separate housing areas. The Japanese were the largest group, and their children comprised about one third of the school population. The Japanese children attended their own school after our school closed for the day. The few Chinese did not bring a family.

The best land, at the centre of the town, was reserved for stacking lumber to ‘season’ for some months before shipping. Housing surrounded this area. The Roy family rented a house located in a block on the south side of town. This block consisted of two rows of houses separated by a back alley. The Mantle family home was separated from the Roy family home by this alley.

Several lots were located on the north side of town overlooking the harbour and were built by the town’s elite (doctor, land surveyor, and saw mill supervisors). In a few years, some workers built their own houses. Mr. Humbird built a very large house on a piece of property located next to the lumber yard. It was a few years before entrepreneurs added a barber shop, a building supply facility, and a women’s clothing store.

The Company built a general store that stocked food and clothing and almost everything one would need, including hardware. Workers would run a tab and it would be covered by their wages on a monthly basis. A private butcher shop was attached to the general store, and Dad would shop there on his way home from work to purchase next day’s meat. Milk was home delivered daily, ice for our icebox about once a month. The school for grades two to eight was built near the centre on the town. Grade one was separate and located at the waterfront. We were bused to Ladysmith to attend high school.

The Company built two halls on the south side of town, just next to the E&N Railway station. The larger hall had a bowling alley, a boxing ring, and a large dance floor. I recall enjoying Saturday night dances in that hall. We also entertained ourselves with street games in the evenings (including hockey with a tin can for a puck), softball or football on the school grounds, and inter-town baseball games. We spent summer times on the extensive lovely beach located on the east side of the town. I recall walking to the beach by myself in the summer time, clad only in bathing shorts. We could walk safely anywhere at any time, no matter how young we were. I recall as a six year old walking by myself across town through the lumber yard to the grade one school located next to the beach. We bicycled to Ladysmith on many Saturday afternoons for movies. A theatre was eventually built in Chemainus, financed by local residents. Halloween gave the youth an opportunity to move gates and fences and anything not tied down. Windows were soaped for non-treat-givers.

The War took a terrible toll—a friend told me that all the boys in her class went to the War and none survived. I was fortunate to be just young enough to miss being called up. On Victoria Day, the town had a very large parade which was organized locally and participated in by most of the town residents. I recall decorating my bicycle and my sister decorated her doll buggy to participate.

We had three churches – Anglican, Baptist and Catholic. The United Church came many years later. An interesting fact that few knew was that the Baptist minister was a Buddhist. He felt a calling to preach and realized that he wouldn’t have congregation in Chemainus as a Buddhist. A school for the Catholic children was constructed next to their church.