

Hunting History: On the Trail of Len Clay's Archive

By: Warren Bush

Anyone that uses a cannon as lawn art is someone that I want to know. Or in this case, wish I knew.

Born on 1 September 1921, Leonard Clay is remembered as a fisherman, logger, and historian of west-coast maritime lore. I have come across Len's name plenty of times while researching different subjects and events related to the coast's history. An article in *Westcoast Fisherman* remarked that "Len Clay has always been interested in this part of the world. While he was logging, fishing and boatbuilding, he continued to search out evidence of that history along the beaches of the west coast and chronicle the activities of the people, past and present, along the way." Naturally, as an explorer of the coast and passionate historian, Len was fairly well-known to the UASBC, in particular Jacques Marc, who would consult him before conducting fieldwork on Vancouver Island's rugged west coast (Len's uncanny knowledge of seemingly every nook and cranny led to numerous discoveries by the Society). Len died on Christmas Day in 2012, but left a happy legacy. However, the whereabouts of whatever research notes that he amassed over his life remain mysterious.

Frustrated by forever being stymied by people just having passed to Fiddlers Green before I needed them to illuminate some arcane corner of history, I made a decision: I took it upon myself to track down whatever Len may or may not have left behind. There's no guarantee of a yellowing 'motherlode' of research material in a banker's box somewhere, but it didn't seem unreasonable to spend a few hours searching. Further, Len is indeed known to have



Len Clay

Photo by Elaine Clay

possessed a not insignificant amount of archival material – not to mention all the artifacts that he donated to a now-defunct West Coast Maritime Museum in Tofino. Len had binders of notes and clippings, notebooks, scrapbooks, charts, several vessel logs from the fur trade era and plenty

of nautical and historical ephemera. Tantalizingly, an interview once recorded that “his extensive inventory of recorded shipwrecks is just one document in a small mountain of books, charts and first person accounts that he has accumulated.” From scrimshaw to vessel logs...where did all this stuff go?

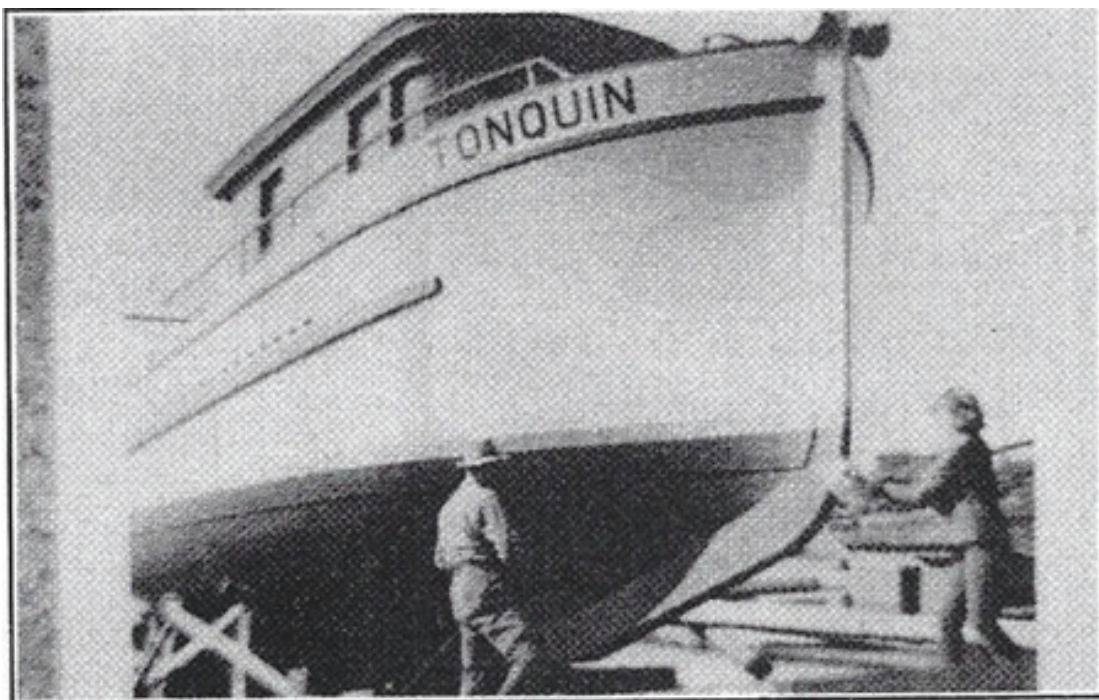
Before searching for tangible material, it is helpful to know who Len actually was. Born in Sooke, Len moved to Alert Bay when he was eighteen. His introduction to fishing began on gillnetters, but he quickly moved to trollers out of Bull Harbour. After crewing on a Fraser River seiner, Len bought his first boat, the gillnetter North Sea. He also became involved in shipbuilding in Alert Bay alongside veteran builder Jim King. By the 1940s Len was firmly established in Alert Bay. He recalled “I puttered around there, and when it came to go fishing, I’d go fishing. In the winter, there was work in the logging camps.”



Len Clay on his first boat, the North Sea

Credit: The Westcoast Fisherman, May 1991, p. 23

Reading about Len's life inspires scenes of rustic and adventurous coastal living. Being interviewed about his early life, Len reminisced, “I tell you the times have changed. All the things you used to do, you wonder how the hell a guy found enough time. You could get a few logs, put up a shed on the beach, build a boat and with a buck for a license, you went fishing.” By the mid-1950s Len had married, and had lived in many different places on Vancouver Island. In 1954 he launched a boat named the Gailin, and ten years later launched the Tonquin. Speaking to the decade between 1954 and 1964 in a 1991 interview, Len recalled, “I fished all over the coast with Gailin and Tonquin, out of Kyuquot quite a bit. With five or six tons of ice, I could make a couple of weeks trip and take the fish down to Victoria where my family was. For three cents a pound more, with 10,000 pounds of fish on board, it was worth it to run another eight hours to Vancouver. Seems to me we used to pay seven, no more than nine cents a gallon for fuel.” Len traded the Tonquin to his nephew – it is still afloat – and received the Acadia III in return. After rebuilding the superstructure he used the vessel to fish around the coast for another seven years before retiring.



Sheila and Len Clay launching Tonquin in Esquimalt in 1964

Credit: The Westcoast Fisherman, May 1991, p. 25

By this point, Len had “walked a lot of beaches looking for signs of wrecks and tying it all together with the local knowledge.” Especially fascinated with the famous Tonquin story, he teamed up with Edmund Hayes and Rod Palm to search for the wreck in Van Nevel Channel. Parenthetically, Len worked with Palm and Tofino historian Ken Gibson to found the West Coast Maritime Museum in Tofino. By extension, Len became involved in a fascinating quest to track down a lost artifact associated with none other than Captain Cook. Len’s account of the adventure warrants quoting at length:

“Captain James Cook carried medallions depicting the ships of his second voyage, the Resolution and the Adventure, when he came to this coast on his third voyage in 1778. One was found in the village of Kyuquot on Aktis Island in 1933 by Arthur Nikolaye, four feet down in a clam shell behind his house. He told me he had sold it to the archives in Victoria. It was the only one found in the Americas. For no logical reason, it had disappeared when I wanted to see it while re-searching the Tonquin. Well that got me spurred on to kind of an ongoing hunt over several years and eventually I turned up a newspaper article about the medallion being on display in Victoria just after it was found. I persisted, and not long after it came to light again, and I was able to match it up with a drawing of the medallion done by Father Anthony Terhaar, the priest in Nootka in 1933. Now it’s back in the provincial archives, where it belongs, because it’s worth a fortune in history to the people of BC.”

Is that spectacular, or what? Please note that the circumstances of how the medallion “came to light again” are vague. Regardless, if Len dedicated a substantial portion of his life to exploring the coast, recording history, and busting mysteries straight out of Boys Own, the least I could do is try and track down his stuff.

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The now defunct West Coast Maritime Museum, in Tofino, home to many of Len's finds

Credit: The Westcoast Fisherman, May 1991, p. 27

Of course, the first place to start was Jacques Marc, who told me about the cannon on the front lawn, but was tap city on further information (if anyone knows where the cannon ended up, call me – I need one). The trail then led to his obituary, which states that he died in Whaletown, on Cortes Island (as it turns out, his place of death was probably Victoria – I think the obituary was simply written by someone in Whaletown). Working this lead, I thought that perhaps a community museum may have acquired some of his research after his death. It was long shot, as the obituary that mentions Whaletown doesn't necessarily mean that he lived there, nor that his papers would have gone to a community museum on Cortes, but it was all I had. Luckily, it paid off – the Cortes Island Museum and Archives did have some of Len's research, which focused on the Dawson Family, from which Len was descended.

The folio in question introduces researchers to James Dawson, of Clackmannshire, Scotland. At some point in the early 1860s the twenty-two year old Dawson boarded a ship bound to a seaport on the eastern seaboard, probably in search of a better life and the unknowable possibilities floating just over the horizon. Dawson resurfaces in the historical record in Wisconsin, along with his nephew Alexander Donaldson (it is unclear whether they sailed from Scotland together, or met up in North America). The two men travelled west via the Oregon Trail with a team of oxen, and finally reached Victoria in 1862.

By 1866 Dawson was hunting whales in Saanich Inlet, with little success. However, on a later jaunt south to San Francisco he then teamed up with a "Down Maine" whaler named Abel Douglass, and two other California men named Bruce and Woodward. During the summer of 1868 Dawson procured the forty seven ton Kate – less than fifty feet in length – and put to sea with the three Californians. They killed eight whales with bomb-lances in Saanich Inlet, and used the proceeds to buy a scow schooner named Industry, which returned to Victoria at the end of the same 1868 season with almost 100 barrels of humpback oil, which the Hudson's Bay Company later sent to England. Dawson

clearly made an impression on Victorian society, as the Times Colonist expounded “Mr. Dawson of Saanich, in the face of obstacles, which would have deterred most men, and with a perseverance worthy of all praise, has succeeded in placing beyond a doubt the fact that humpback whale can be killed not only in sufficient quantities to pay, but to pay well.” Dawson & Douglass relocated from Saanich Inlet to present-day Whaletown, on Cortes Island, and 1869 proved a bumper-year: despite the Kate running aground, the partnership still harvested 20,000 gallons of whale-oil.

The winter of 1869 saw a man named Lipsett join forces with Dawson and Douglass to form the Union Whaling Company, which produced a modest harvest and then dissolved later that season. The 1870 summer whaling season was similarly modest, although the 1871 whaling season had different dynamics – Douglass and Dawson's partnership dissolved. The former went into business with Victorian restaurateur James Strachan and went whaling aboard the Industry, while Dawson went into business with the previously mentioned Lipsett and put to sea in search of whales onboard the Kate. Victoria's Meldrum & Small shipyard had enlarged the hardy Kate at some point during 1871, and Dawson renamed it the Dominion. Unfortunately, Dominion went aground shortly after its refit, and Dawson changed the name back to Kate – presumably a nod to Poseidon and an acknowledgment of the time-honoured bad juju associated with renaming a ship.

Incidentally, Dawson's main competitor during these adventures was Thomas Welcome Roys, a pioneer of whaling technologies and the inventor of the Roys Rocket. In 1871 Roys owned the Byzantium which sank on 19 October of that year after striking a reef in Weynton Passage, near present day Port-McNeil. This vessel, its loss, and the Society's search for the wreck are the subject of a chapter in the Historic Shipwrecks of Northeastern Vancouver Island report.

Dawson and Lipsett incorporated the British Columbia Whaling Company and harvested around 20,000 gallons during the 1871 season. Sadly, the venture did not generate enough profit to stay afloat, and the company and its belongings – including 100 acres on Hornby Island – went to auction in March of 1872 (the Kate changed owners twice before ending up in the hands of Victoria harbour pilot Thomas pennant, and was likely later employed in the sealfishery). Dawson died two years later, but his nephew Alexander built a family home on the site of the present-day parliament buildings in Victoria in 1879. Len's mother and three other siblings were born there, but in 1901 they moved to the Hudson Bay Company farm in East Sooke. Len was born in 1921, and the family moved to Ocean Falls in 1927 before eventually returning to Victoria, and Len ended up in Alert Bay as a young man by 1939. History continued to run its course, bringing us back to the present via Len's youth during the 1920s and 1930s – he probably grew up hearing campfire stories about his great-great-uncle, James Dawson the whaler. One wonders if this family connection got him interested in west-coast history and lore.

Now back in 2021 and having closed the Dawson chapter, an especially resourceful historian associated with the Cortes Island Museum and Archives was able to confirm that the folio had been provided by Len's daughter, Linda Jenner. By extension, she might know what happened to Len's research – maybe she even still had a bunch of it!

I learned that Linda lived in Whaletown and after her retirement from BC Ferries, she sold coffee and snacks from a wagon near the ferry landing area. Working on the assumption that she lived close enough to the ferry landing to drag the wagon and thus lived within a small radius, I contacted a Whaletown bed and breakfast within that arbitrary radius who confirmed that Linda was indeed a neighbour, but had not been seen for an extended period of time. Could she have lived on family land leftover from James Dawson's whaling days? In any event, Linda Jenner remains as mysterious and unaccounted for as Len's archive.

Back at the drawing board, I pursued a different angle. According to correspondence in the folio, Len was working with a researcher in Victoria to track down historical odds and ends associated with his great-great-uncle's whaling adventures. Cross-referencing this researcher with known associates of the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives produced a phone number, so I called and inquired about any knowledge concerning the whereabouts of Len's research.

UASBC Presidents' message June 2021

by: Keith Bossons

Hi Everyone,

As the summer approaches seem to finally be seeing some light at the end of the tunnel regarding Covid restrictions. If things stay on track, we can hopefully resume in person meetings in the fall. Our recent virtual Annual General Meeting was well attended as was our June Zoom presentation on the History Piracy in Atlantic Canada. A special thanks to Dan Conlin for the excellent presentation. The Zoom presentations have been a big success and we plan to continue them after the summer break.

We will also hopefully be able to run a more active dive schedule in the fall. Personally, I am looking forward to getting out on the water this summer to do some cruising and a bit of diving.

I hope everyone has a great summer and look forward to connecting again in the fall.

Stay safe.

*All the best
Keith Bossons
UASBC President*

Hunting History: On the Trail of Len Clay's Archive*(continued)*

While the researcher didn't have any solid answers, he did have my best lead yet: half an hour later, I found myself chatting with Len's niece, Elaine.

Elaine told me a significant amount of information about family lore, and coincidentally she has taken up much of Len's research – specifically into the activities of James Dawson and family genealogy. Elaine also confirmed that the whereabouts of the archival material and research notes that helped guide the Society back in the 1990s and 2000s remains unknown. At some point shortly after Len's death, the material disappeared from his residence on Cedar Hill Cross Road. This material represents a unique trove of information that cannot be replicated. Len explored the coast for decades with a notable passion for history, and generations of historians would benefit from his observations and grounded approach to the subject. If anyone knows where Len's material is, or has even the remotest idea where it might be, please contact the UASBC.

Regardless of the probable disappearance of Len's material, even my brief conversation with Elaine made apparent that the spirit of exploring the coast and its history lives on. She is privileged to count herself a descendant of the formidable Len Clay and James Dawson. Those adventurous and rugged souls must be pleased that the coast's history continues to be explored and documented by one of their own – a proud and pioneering spirit in search of answers and knowledge. Just like them.

**Don't forget to check out our website,
WWW.UASBC.COM for latest Updates!**

SS Idaho & SS Barnard Castle

By: Jacques Marc

It had been 10 years since the UASBC had last visited SS Idaho and I was excited to see if there had been any change at the site. The goal of this trip was to relocate the site, collect more accurate GPS information and to get some photographs of the site for the Southern Vancouver Island report re- write. On May 8th six divers boarded the Esquimalt Eco Tour RHIB at Pedder Bay for our trip out to Race Rocks. The group consisted of myself, Paul Spencer, Ewan Anderson, Lee Critchley, Leila Bautista, and Chris Mills. It took 15 minutes at warp speed to get from Pedder Bay to Rosedale Reef where we were to dive. The predicted slack was at 10:25. We arrived on site at 9:45 and it was clear that there was still a strong ebb happening. At about 10:15 the wave height began to drop, and the strong ebb current began slowing. I gave the group a quick briefing about what they would find at the wreck site and then dropped a shot line slightly south of the wreck site.

Ewan and Lee were first in the water and were forced to fight a bit of current. Leila, Chris, Paul, and I joined them a few minutes later. I floundered on the surface trying to get the last air out of my BCD, and finally joined Paul waiting patiently on the bottom. We navigated North to where I knew the wreck was. Within a couple of minutes, we were swimming amongst the prop shaft and boilers. Palm kelp and leaf kelp covers the wreck making it almost unrecognizable for what it is. During the 40-minute slack window we relocated most of the artifacts (boilers, engine, drive train, pintels and prop) noted in our 1995 survey of the site. The site had not changed appreciably, except that the larger of the two boilers had collapsed in on itself. I was hoping to get a spectacular photo of the large brass prop on site. Unfortunately, it was completely covered with kelp. I restrained myself from doing a little kelp pruning as the wreck site falls in the Race Rocks Ecological Reserve.



Chris Mills swimming through Idaho boiler.

Photo by Leila Bautista

During our dive Paul and I met up with the other two dive teams who appeared to be happily exploring and taking photos. During the dive we confirmed the depths of various parts of the wreck and released marker floats on the prop and boilers giving us more accurate location information. We surfaced as the flood tide began picking up steam. Once everyone was aboard, we tried to retrieve the floats. The increasing current had pulled the boiler float under and ultimately, we abandoned it to the float collecting god. I am sure glad that they are only \$5 to make, as we have lost a float on each of our past three dives.



Leila and Chris behind Idaho steam Pipe.

Photo by J. Marc

Leaving Rosedale Reef, we motored past Great Race Rock and took then obligatory tourist photos of the lighthouse and Sea Lions. Eventually we pulled into Pilot Bay and the site of the Barnard Castle wreck. After switching tanks, we prepared to dive the Barnard Castle. I gave the group a briefing on what they would find and even suggested that the shot line would be somewhere near the boiler amid ship. I also warned everyone that with the flooding tide there could be some current on the wreck. The goal on this dive was to evaluate the likelihood of doing photogrammetry on the site. Ewan and Lee led the charge and the rest of us followed. Paul and I toured the wreck looking for a few key artefacts that we knew were on site. We were able to relocate a porthole a few brass valves and even the stern wheel remnant.

The water seemed especially cold on this dive. When we surfaced everyone else agreed that the water seemed cold. Chris said it was not a figment of our imagination, the water was 2 degrees colder.

After a short boat ride, we were back at Pedder Bay Marina off loading our gear. A Race Rocks dive is never complete without sitting back and enjoying a Shipwreck Pale Ale on the Pedder Bay Marina deck. While sipping our ale we discussed photogrammetry plans for the Barnard Castle site.

All in all it was a productive day, enjoyed by all.

UASBC REVISITS The WRECKS of SAN PEDRO AND SF TOLMIE

By: Jiri Kotler

On 24 April 2021, a group of diehard UASBC divers gathered at the West Bay Marina in Esquimalt. The team included Jacques Marc, George Silvestrini, Gabriel Hill, Paul Spencer, Ewan Anderson and Jiri Kotler. Captain Daniel Boucher of Esquimalt Eco Tours with his 24-foot RIB was already at the dock by the time everybody started lugging their gear down the steep ramp. Due to the Covid 19 health directives everybody was masked and tried to maintain physical distancing as best as practical. The plan was to dive first the wreck of San Pedro at Brotchie Ledge light, followed by a dive on the wreck of SF Tolmie situated off Harrison Island.



George, Jiri, Ewan, Gabe and Paul off Harrison Island

Photo by J. Marc

The group departed the dock by 0930 in plenty of time to reach Brotchie Ledge before the expected slack tide at 10:27 (based on Race Passage). The seas were calm and the weather was overcast with light rain. Captain Daniel reminded the team to carry surface markers in case a fog rolled in. Upon arrival to the light the team noticed the unmistakable odor of seabird poo that covered the structure.

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San Pedro

The ship (331 feet long collier) struck the ledge on 22 November 1891. After numerous unsuccessful efforts to salvage the vessel, it remained there for a number of years. It became an 'eyesore' that the good people of Victoria could not tolerate. It was finally blasted to pieces and what remained slid below the waves. Thus, an untrained 'eye' without prior knowledge would not recognize the mangled steel as parts of a vessel. The dive objective was to photograph the wreckage, and in particular to measure propeller shaft pillow blocks. Jacques produced an earlier site plan (by UASBC) that gave the team an idea of the wreckage orientation and position of recognizable components. Even though there still was a bit of flood current everybody was in water around 10:00. The visibility was about 30 feet and the photographers managed to get quite a few good shots. The site teemed with sea life.



San Pedro - shaft pillow block

Photo by Gabe Hill



Remains of San Pedro hull

Photo by Gabe Hill

The account of this adventure would be incomplete without mentioning a herculean effort by Paul to retrieve one of the self-unwinding markers (used for accurate GPS positioning of wreck components). As the current increased the marker was being slowly pulled under. Paul was 'dragged' against the current while hanging on the RIB's ladder in an effort to reach it. However, it not in vain, and the marker float was retrieved but Paul had to cut the rope.

SF Tolmie

After a short lunch the team headed to Harrison Island and prepared for a second dive. FS Tolmie was a sailing vessel, originally rigged as a barquentine, that was later converted into a lumber barge. During a winter storm in 1944, while in Victoria Harbor, it broke from its mooring and became wrecked on the south side of Harrison Island. The team's plan was to identify and photograph some of the wreck's remains (such as steel deck knees, hawse pipes etc.), and to reconfirm its position with GPS coordinates. Once again Jacques gave the team a briefing regarding the wreck's likely position along the south shore of the Island. By 1200 the divers were in water. The visibility was somewhat less than earlier – perhaps 20 feet plus. Two markers were placed on the wreckage – one at the 'stern' end, and the other at two hawse pipes (the bow). Not much remains from the vessel. A series of in-line steel 'knees' serve as an indication of the wreck's general orientation, and the two hawse pipes clearly indicate where the bow is. The depth ranged (high tide) from 35 feet at the bow to 45 feet at the stern.



S.F. Tolmie Hawse Pipe

Photo by J Marc

After captain Dan noted the GPS coordinates and the team retrieved the two markers, it was time to head back to the Marina. The expedition generated additional information about the condition of both wrecks, and it provided an opportunity for the team members to practice their underwater archeology skills.

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