

HISTORY OF TAHSIS

Tahsis takes its name from a Mowachaht word, Tashees, meaning “gateway or passage”. The Mowachaht, whose winter home was here, used the valleys of the Tahsis and Nimpkish Rivers as their route for trade with aboriginal people on the east coast of Vancouver Island. The area has been home to First Nations people for over 6,000 years.

There are three prominent First Nations groups of the Pacific Northwest who have divided the land between themselves for thousands of years: the Nootka, the Coast Salish, and the Kwak’waka Speaking Peoples. The rich land and marine resources enabled them to develop complex societies and the intricate aboriginal art forms that are now internationally acclaimed.



The head of the Tahsis Inlet, traditional winter home of the Mowachaht First Nation.

As recently as 220 years ago the northwest coast of North America was one of the least explored areas in the world. The geography of the land presented many formidable natural barriers to European explorers. The huge Pacific Ocean separated distant landmasses off the west coast. The desire to explore and discover new land and natural resources prevailed in the second half of the 18th century, with expeditions mounted by the Russians, American, Spanish and British explorers and traders.

The peaceful existence of the aboriginal people was to change soon after the first contact by Europeans in 1778. Captain James Cook’s third voyage around the world included a visit to Friendly Cove on Nootka Island, where he became the first Englishman to set foot on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island. While anchoring in Resolution Cove on Bligh Island, across from Friendly Cove, the natives hollered “itchme nutka, itchme nutka”, meaning “go around” (to Yuquot), but Captain Cook misinterpreted their calls, believing the name of the area to be Nootka.

Yuquot, also known as Friendly Cove, was the summer home of Chief Maquinna and the Mowachaht/muchalaht people for millennia, and retains historic significance today as the site of the

first contact between Europeans and First Nations people in British Columbia.

The Spanish arrived and set up a base at Nootka Island in the command of Don Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, who had claimed the coast of Alaska for Spain. In 1792, fourteen years later, Captain George Vancouver with his ships Discovery

and Chatham arrived at Nootka Sound to regain control under the terms of the Nootka Convention. Captain George Vancouver of England and Governor Bodega Y Quadra of Spain met at Tahsis with Mowachaht Chief Maquinna to settle the international dispute over ownership of the Pacific Coast from Alaska to California. Both

explorers made the trip to Tahsis to resolve years of Spanish/English rivalry that had played out on this Island, and commenced working together at the task of mapping and exploring the coast.

The Treaty of 1793 gave the two countries joint ownership of Nootka. A Spanish trading post, Santa Cruz de Nutka, was maintained here between 1789 and 1795, with Nootka becoming an important focal point for English, Spanish, and American traders and explorers, but it was not long after the signing that Spain’s dominance in North America began to wane.



The Tahsis Museum features displays of First Nations culture and the early mill town days in Tahsis.

The last Spanish ship was ordered out of the area in 1795, marking the end of the Spanish influence in British Columbia. Except for the fur trade, this part of British Columbia remained unchanged until the early 1900's, when logging was introduced.

One of the most colorful people of this area was Mr. Gordon Gibson. He was born in 1904 in a Miners cabin in the Yukon and became a self-made millionaire in his forties. His nickname was 'Bull of the woods'. His many occupations were logger, seaman, towboat operator, construction boss and hotelier. As a member of the B.C. Legislature he was thrown out of the house for standing up and saying "money talks" in the granting of Forest Management Licenses and was proven right when a cabinet minister was subsequently sent to jail. This was the man who believed in this area and believed that deep-sea ships could come to the west coast of Vancouver Island to pick up lumber for worldwide export.

The Village of Tahsis, which is twenty miles from Nootka Island, was the dream of Mr. Gordon Gibson in the early 1940s. He knew that many companies had gone broke trying to produce lumber on this wild coast. He perceived several advantages to building at Tahsis. There was a level plateau at the head of the inlet with easy deep-sea access for ocean going vessels. The site faced southeast getting maximum sunlight.

This was very important because if the freshly cut lumber didn't get enough sunlight it would mold within a month due to the rains. The logs only needed to be handled once instead of being towed to



An early Tahsis lumberyard, now homes

Vancouver at considerable expense. Any logs that had come from the west coast of Vancouver Island were towed at that time and would inevitably arrive 50 to 60 logs short, with a loss of \$100 a log that could never be recovered.

The valley was cleared except for an exceptionally fine stand of Timber along the Tahsis River that is in the heart of the village now. The trees could be felled and floated down the river right into the booming ground. The logs were sold in order to pay for the new mill being built. The first accommodations were

floating bunkhouses and a cookhouse for the crew. Gibson was buying up all the old camps in Nootka Sound that were still afloat for the men he was hiring. These bunkhouses had two decks with living accommodation for twenty men. He started providing houses for married couples. He hired six carpenters and

built the houses about 20 feet apart along the bank of the river.

A house was built every four days. It was a crude affair with the floor being heavy tarpaper, a shingled roof and the outhouse out back. There was no running water. These houses sold from between \$200 and \$400 depending on the size and location.

A man was allowed to improve his home as long as he occupied it, and he could sell it back to the company or to any other employee. Some people made a profit of \$2,000 to \$3,000 after living in their houses for two to three years.

To interest more families into moving into Tahsis Gordon Gibson promised to build a school. All of this had been done within a year.

In 1945 the first ship, *Tipperary Park*, came to Tahsis to pick up a load of lumber. The captain was very proud that he had brought the first ship into the new Tahsis Harbour. He had helped start an enterprise, which would load many thousands of ships.

In the fall of 1946 a church was built for the shantymen, which had a good local following. Dr. McLean had built a hospital about ten miles from the mill beside the beer parlor, the cannery and the church. He traveled up and down the coast in a little



An original Tahsis sawmill along the waterfront, now converted to a Fishing Lodge.

gasoline-powered boat, dedicated to his medicine and his missionary work.

Dr McLean took charge of the church but the congregation was started to fall off until only five or six were in attendance. Gibson told the doctor that according to the contract he had to have more people attending the church. The doctor asked for help from him because he knew Gordon could get people to start coming back. Gibson agreed to help only once and after that it would be up to the doctor or he would find someone else because there was no sense in two people doing the same job. Gordon had promised to keep the crew working six days a week and pay the bills, but Dr. McLean had to fill that church on Sundays.

A notice was put up on the bulletin board saying that he would take everyone down to the beer parlor in his boat on Saturday and bring him or her back at 2:00 in the morning if they would promise to be at church by 11:30 on Sunday. The church held up to 80 people and it was overflowed with some not able to get in.

On July 5, 1948 a huge fire swept through the sawmill from a welding spark. Within five minutes the flames were consuming the roof and machinery. By the time the fire was out there was nothing left of the sawmill.

A mill from Port Alberni that was for sale was bought the following day. While the fire was still smoldering a new mill was already underway beside the site where the mill had been lost. There were forty families dependant on that sawmill and orders needed to be filled to meet the contract or they would lose their credibility with the financial backers. That's when East Asiatic from Copenhagen came into the picture. The Tahsis mill had been cutting for East Asiatic and when the mill burnt down they were seriously considering building a bigger mill of their own. Gordon Gibson realized that there was no way that two mills could make it on the west coast so a deal was struck. On January 22, 1949 a new company was formed, East Asiatic holding fifty-one per cent and Gibson Brothers holding forty-nine per cent of the total shares. The new company was named Tahsis Company Ltd. Gibson Mills assigned all its timber licenses to the Tahsis Company while the East Asiatic Company advanced

money to rebuild the new mill in Tahsis.

By March 1949, the new mill was in operation. Tahsis now had a strong financial basis. Good homes were being built for the employees as well as more roads with black top. Gordon Gibson made a deal with the government to build houses; they would pay eighty per cent of the cost and he would give preference to returned veterans. By this time flush toilets and running water had been put into all the homes. There was a school with three rooms and a large recreation hall for dancing and social affairs, plus a small restaurant that ran twenty-four hours a day for the off-shift crews and their families.

East Asiatic was considering building a pulp mill that would cost close to \$100 million dollars and would take twenty years to show profit. The operations

were becoming too complex and the Gibson Brothers were not prepared to run such large plants. They were paid out in cheques that made each one of them a millionaire in his own right.

The history between then and now is quite sketchy due to a fire that burnt



View from the Lookout down Tahsis Inlet, looking towards Nootka Island (right)

down the old village office including all the papers of the history in the mid 1980's. Tahsis became incorporated in 1972. From what I have learned from some of the old families the first Mayor and Council all came from the mill. The election must have been a bit wonky because one of them told me "five of them decided they could do it and they were the first council".

This forestry community started as a floating logging camp in the 1940s, which later became a permanent on-shore camp. In the 1950s Tahsis expanded, and a bustling village took shape. The road from Tahsis to Gold River was opened to the public in 1972, attracting new families.

In Tahsis's heyday the population was roughly 2500. With the softwood lumber issues and the Japanese not buying lumber, the population is at the lowest level ever. There are perhaps 600 permanent residents in Tahsis.

— Article by Sylvia McNeil