

Historic mine railway grade would make another great Cowichan trail

By T.W. Paterson, Special to The Citizen
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An engineering marvel in its day, it has been all but forgotten. This, despite the fact that much of it still exists. With today's phenomenal growth in community hiking trails, it's a potential gold mine for the Municipality of North Cowichan.

But, first, a little background. As I've written in previous Chronicles over the years, when Henry Croft took charge of a rich copper mine, the Lenora on Mount Sicker, he had to ship his ore to a Tacoma smelter via Ladysmith and the E&N Railway at the foot of Little Sicker Mountain.

The fact that his brother-in-law James Dunsmuir owned the E&N didn't cut him any slack when it came to freight rates. So Henry, stuck with growing piles of second-grade ore that weren't sufficiently profitable after shipping costs, decided to build his own narrow gauge railway to tidewater. It would run from the Lenora on Big Sicker Mountain, down the east side of Little Sicker to Mount Sicker Siding, cross the E&N by means of an overpass, then cross the Westholme Valley flats and wind its way up and around the western face of Mount Richards to his future deep-sea port and townsite, Crofton.

(As I've noted before, Henry Croft, who immediately expanded his horizons to building a smelter, was never one to think in small terms.)

In their classic Shays on the Switchback, Elwood White and the late David Wilkie described the resulting six-mile-long railway, with its 75-degree horseshoe curve over Nugget Creek, its 700-foot drop in less than a mile, and its four switchbacks on Mount Richards, as "unbelievable." So steep and curving was the Lenora, Mt. Sicker Railway, in fact, that, after riding it from the mine to Crofton, an awed Colonist reporter ended his article, "The thought occurred to everyone in the party, if the brakes had failed or become unmanageable, what a terrible trip they would have taken into eternity."

Its total cost of \$57,699 is deceptively cheap by today's standards even when multiplied by 20 to put it closer to today's values.

There's so much more to the story, of course: Of Croft's legal fight with Dunsmuir for the right to cross the E&N right-of-way, of Croft's dream to make Crofton a major seaport, of, within just a few years, the Lenora Mine's descent into receivership and Henry's personal ruin. But I've already told all this in these pages and in my book on the history of the Mount Sicker copper stampede, Riches to Ruin.

When Shays was published in 1963, there were still ties on the former railway grade on Mount Richards. These (although you can still see their imprints here and there) have since disappeared, as have the trestles, and further logging has occurred. But the best stretches of the Lenora, Mt. Sicker Railway survive and are easily navigable by foot via a circuitous and unmarked trail that begins at the Crofton Water Board building on Roberts Street. Of particular interest to those who are historically minded are three examples of rock cribbing. Done by Chinese labour without use of mortar or concrete to bind them, these reinforced embankments are as sound as the day they were built. And worthy of a visit in themselves, as are the switchbacks.

Not to mention the gorgeous view of the Westholme Valley and Mounts Sicker and Brenton from Mount Richards.

Several stretches of the former railway grade are now roadways. Because considerable logging had been done here over the years, and Crofton Lake was the former watershed, some stretches of the grade have been bypassed and allowed to overgrow. Although the small trestles that linked the switchbacks long ago rotted away, this isn't a problem for hikers.

In short, the view and the history make for a spectacular combination that can be enjoyed by most hikers in an afternoon. The fact that most of the land in question is owned by the Municipality of North Cowichan offers outstanding potential for development as a heritage public trail. We've already seen the various levels of government join in development of the Trans Canada and Cowichan Valley Trails, with the result that the crown jewel, the spectacular Kinsol Trestle has been reincarnated as a footbridge.

My suggestion to North Cowichan, unsolicited, is that council give serious consideration to another potential winner: The Lenora, Mt. Sicker Railway Trail. It would, in my humble opinion, be another winner.