

Macdonald hunts down Trestle treasure trove

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When the rehabilitation of the Kinsol Trestle finally looked like it would get the green light, Gord Macdonald, the timber specialist contractor for the project, started to gather all the historical information about Canada's tallest free-standing wooden trestle that he could find.

"I knew that the railway had handled the maintenance of the Kinsol for all those years and I figured they must have lots of records and documentation. Somewhere there had to be a treasure trove of tests and assessments and records of inspection. But the question was what dusty desk were they stored in and could we find them?" says Gord.

Gord's company, Macdonald & Lawrence Timber Framing, is the timber specialist contractor on the rehabilitation of the historic Kinsol Trestle, which began earlier this month.

The Trestle had been decommissioned after the last train ran across it in 1979 and no one at CN Rail knew what had become of the original records. But finally, he was told to talk to Ralph Morris, a retired senior engineer living in Edmonton, who knew what Gord was looking for.

"Oh the Kinsol Trestle! I remember it well. It was always my favourite," Ralph said when Gord started explaining what he was looking for. "But you don't know what happened, do you?"

It turns out that when Ralph retired, he came across all the old records about his favourite bridge and he realized that they were likely just going to sit in some dusty storage bin somewhere. "Well, that seemed like a real shame, so I -- um -- borrowed them all," he explained.

"Needless to say, I was pretty excited," says Gord, while telling this story. "That's fantastic Ralph!" I told him. "Can I come over to see them?"

"Oh no, no," Ralph told him. "I got rid of them years ago." But as Gord's heart sank, Ralph added, "I gave them to your local archives."

Sure enough, when Gord contacted Kathryn Gagnon at the Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives he discovered the boxes of stuff that one Ralph Morris had dropped off a couple of years previously were now stored in archival boxes and map cases.

"When I saw them, there were all the original construction drawings, notes sent by telegraph back to head office on the original onion skin. The whole shebang. We had all the paper from the earliest days of the Trestle -- heck, we found notes from the surveyors who figured that the thing should be built two miles downstream from where it is now. It's an amazing resource."

Gagnon says she was delighted when the Ralph Morris records arrived, having just completed researching and designing an exhibit about the trestle in 2006.

"It was like Christmas at the archives! It was exciting to have primary source material about the Kinsol Trestle donated to the collection. It has become a valuable source of knowledge about the history of the Trestle and because these records are now housed in our archives, they have been preserved for the future and made accessible to the public."

Since his donation, Morris has continued to be involved with the Kinsol Trestle rehabilitation, serving as one of the consultants hired by Gord Macdonald.

"Ralph is an amazing resource for us. He spent pretty much all of his career with the railroad dealing with bridges throughout the west and he knows as much about the Trestle as anyone. We wouldn't be where we are today without his contribution," says Gord.