A History of Camosun Bog: Restoration Efforts

and the People Involved

Report prepared at the request of the Camosun Bog Restoration Group in partial fulfillment of

UBC Geog 429: Research in Historical Geography for Dr. David Brownstein

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Geog 429

April 2nd, 2013
Camosun Bog is one of Vancouver’s most diverse habitats. Since its recognition as a landmark that deserves protection and restoration in the twentieth century there have been many groups that sought to do just that. The U.B.C. Technical Committee and the Vancouver Natural History Society played vital roles in raising public awareness, studying, restoring and protecting the Camosun Bog. In the early 1990s there were big steps made with large amounts of funding to restore the bog. These efforts came to an abrupt stop however circa 1992 potentially due to either expiration of granted funds, loss of interest from groups associated with the restoration or public aversion to the required restorative activities. Now the bog stands as an almost completely restored bog habitat. None of these successes however could have been possible without the abundance of support and involvement of the GVRD Parks department.

The Camosun Bog is located within Vancouver, British Columbia’s Pacific Spirit Regional Park on its easternmost edge. Since its discovery it has experienced drastic change through various mediums and at present stands as a near completely restored bog habitat. There have been numerous groups that have dedicated large efforts to the protection and restoration of the Camosun Bog and it is their stories I intend to explore below. There has been and continues to be large amounts of research done by, and in collaboration with these groups and because of their endeavors the bog has not only added to the scientific community but has grown into a cultural landmark in Vancouver serving as an educational tool for schools in the region and an excellent reminder of the biological diversity found in British Columbia’s Lower Mainland.¹

As mentioned above, there has been a notable amount of work done on factors such as the biodiversity within Camosun Bog, recommendations for its restoration, and summary reports on the current standing of Camosun Bog’s health. There have been many groups formed to aid in these recommendations for the bog as well as the rest of what is now known as Pacific Spirit Park. The U.B.C. Technical Committee on the Endowment Lands is one that played a large role in the vitality and study of Camosun Bog and the Park. Followed by its current stewards, the Camosun Bog Restoration Group (CBRG) focuses strictly on Camosun Bog and quite recently, as the completion of the restoration is in sight, other bog habitats in the Vancouver area\(^2\). The founder of the Vancouver Natural History Society (VNHS), John Davidson, was one who recognized the importance of the bog’s survival and his work was continued through the VNHS. The U.B.C. Technical Committee and the VNHS worked in close collaboration with the Greater Vancouver Regional District Parks (GVRD Parks) and it is through these collaborative efforts that the GVRD Parks can be recognized as the greatest contributor to the Camosun Bog’s restorative processes prior to the involvement of the CBRG. These groups along with many other individuals have supported the restoration and protection of Camosun Bog. Groups and individuals who acted for its survival are an integral part of Camosun Bog’s history and their early contact and political and social stories are ones that deserve documentation.

The history of Camosun Bog its near destruction and eventual restoration is a lengthy one that dates back thousands of years. Though interesting, the narrative of the bog is not the

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\(^2\) CBRG Annual Meeting, January 26\(^{th}\), 2013
intention of this paper rather, my focus here is the narrative of the people, political and social aspects surrounding the bog and its restoration. There is an abundance of literature that has beautifully captured the bog’s story. Reflections on the Nature of an Urban Bog by Sally Hermansen and Graeme Wynn takes the reader on an exploration of the bog’s infancy during the last ice age up to the most recent restoration efforts. Since the early nineteen-eighties the groups aforementioned have published numerous reports regarding recommendations for the Bog’s restoration and studies documenting the effect of the physical actions taken to restore the bog. Notable contributions include Pearson and Watmough’s Camosun Bog Restoration Summary Report: Pacific Spirit Regional Park (exact date unknown) and Audrey Pearson’s Ecology of Camosun Bog and Recommendations for Restoration: Technical Paper #3 (1985), to name a few.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time of earliest human contact with the bog. There are logging records and documents from the late nineteenth century that describe the bog and the different species that could be seen there³. However, it was not until early in the twentieth century that the bog was recognized as something more than a resource for timber, peat or as a landfill site. On May 8th, 1918, an organization formerly known as the Arbor Day association dissolved and formed into the Vancouver Natural History Society with John Davidson as president⁴. In the VNHS’s application in 1989 to the Environmental Partners Fund (to be discussed below) the VNHS claims that “Almost since our Society was established in 1918, our


⁴ City of Vancouver Archives. Vancouver Natural History Society fonds. 565-8-6.
members have visited and conducted field trips to this unique area.”

In the VNHS minutes as well as their ‘Bulletin’ however, the earliest mention of the bog was not until May 5th, 1956:

“Dr. Taylor led approximately 30 VNHS members to Camosun Bog where they observed many different plant species and had tea with Mr. and Mrs. Wootton and their nearby residence.”

This of course is not the very first human contact with the bog, but it was the first that acknowledges it as a landmark that deserves respect. There were fires that raged through the area in the early twentieth century and briefly drew attention to the bog in local newspapers.

There were other ‘catastrophes’ such as a small polio outbreak that took place in its vicinity and were blamed on the bog as it was seen as a dirty infested area.

Early contact with the bog was undertaken mostly though the VNHS. V.C. “Bert” Brink and Allen Reed Wootton were executive members of the society for most of the duration of their memberships holding chair positions that included Camp Director (Brink), Conservation (Brink), Special Committees (Brink), Entomology (Wootton), Junior Section (Wootton), and Junior Naturalist (Wootton). The two held presidency of the society at points throughout their memberships and were also VNHS representatives in many other Vancouver organizations such as the Aquarium and the Mountain Parks Committee.

From the early 1960’s onwards, Wootton led many “nature ramblings” for VNHS members which departed from his residence

5 City of Vancouver Archives. Vancouver Natural History Society fonds. 610-B-7 Folder 1: “VNHS Minutes-Book#7”

6 University of British Columbia Rare Books and Special Collections. Vancouver Natural History Society “Bulletin” HR/QH1/D472. No. 1-100 (1943-’56).


only minutes away from Camosun Bog. Though not specifically mentioned, it is likely that these excursions included trips through the bog. Contrary to common belief, John Davidson himself did not lead many, if any trips to the bog. The local field trips he most commonly hosted were to the Musqueam Meadow area south of the bog.\textsuperscript{10} This early contact with the bog surely enticed other groups to frequent the space however, the VNHS was the first group with documented evidence of their presence in the bog with the intention of its protection, preservation, appreciation and possible restoration.

Brink completed his MSc at UBC in 1936 and later taught at the school as a professor in the Department of Agronomy. Brink talks of John Davidson and Allan Wootton fondly in a book titled\textsuperscript{11} “Camping with the Vancouver Natural History Society” in which he documented in detail the many excursions he led and the people he met through the VNHS. The following two quotes are excerpts from this book in which he briefly describes his interactions with these two men.

“John Davidson and C.F. Connor were botanists; both took their religious faiths seriously and sometimes argued heatedly about matters botanical or religious. Both were capable teachers but were not universally liked, partly, I think, because of their considerable inflexibility; I would hasten to add that I liked and respected both men greatly. In many camps both were “pillars” with John as the director and Connor as the man who ran the physical regime of camp—from cutting wood to

\textsuperscript{10} U.B.C. Special Collections. Vancouver Natural History Society “Bulletin” No. 1-100.
\textsuperscript{11} U.B.C. Archives. Vernon C. Brink fonds. “Camping with the Vancouver Natural history Society” pg49 unpublished, date unknown. Box 3-5
tent erection; Connor was physically strong. I cannot really say enough or say it satisfactorily here about their contribution to my life-long interest in plants; it was not the only influence (my family had strong roots in farming) but it was a major influence.”

“Allen Wootton headed the entomology section of the Society; he was a good amateur entomologist; he earned his living as a commercial artist; his constant sketching in camp and on field trips fascinated me but it was his interest in amenity development such as parks and museums which opened my eyes to the needs in a community for selfless interest in the community itself. I came to know Allen first in Scouting; he was a Scouter associated with one of the oldest Scout troops in Vancouver when I was a cub, a Scout, and a Rover. Allen’s father had been an engineer for the City of Vancouver and, among other things, was superintendent of parks; his residence was adjacent to Stanley Park. As I grew older Allen drew me into his interest as a naturalist and into his interest in park, public garden, zoo, aquarium, scouting and VNHS camps.”

Bert Brink is held in high esteem by those associated with the bog due to his immense passion, knowledge and long years of service to its protection and restoration. Other literature

12 U.B.C. Archives. Vernon C. Brink fonds. “Camping with the Vancouver Natural history Society” pg49 unpublished, date unknown. Box 3-5
13 U.B.C. Archives. Vernon C. Brink fonds. “Camping with the Vancouver Natural history Society” pg49 unpublished, date unknown. Box 3-5
has shown his early involvement with its protection back as far as the 1970’s when he was able to stop it from being used as a dump site for the excavated fill from U.B.C.’s Sedgewick Library.\textsuperscript{14} Bev Ramey reminisced in a story told by Bert of his children going ice skating on the Camosun pond across from his residence which had a view of the Bog. She said that Bert loved to convey his knowledge to anybody who was interested and, like an encyclopedia, was a wealth of information especially related to the bog.\textsuperscript{15} Brink’s involvement with the bog goes beyond his involvement with the VNHS; he was also an active member of the U.B.C. Technical Committee.

The U.B.C. Technical Committee on the Endowment Lands was formed in 1981 with a variety of U.B.C. faculty as well as a number of non-university staff. A sub-committee was created to deal strictly with Camosun Bog comprised of the following members: Dr. Hamish Kimmins, UBC Forestry and Study team Chairman, Dr. Glenn Rouse, UBC Botany/Geology, Dr. Bart Van Der Kamp, UBC Forestry, Dr. Richard Hebda, Provincial Museum, Dr. Rolf Matthews, SFU Biology Sciences and Dr. V.C. Brink.\textsuperscript{16} Since their formation, the Technical Committee undertook many studies surrounding the bog. There are no official documents of all the members of the Committee though throughout the minutes and annual reports there appears to have been a continuous though minimal membership turnover. Later, during the time that Geographer, Margaret North was chairperson of the Committee, from the January 29\textsuperscript{th}, ’91 minutes it was decided that the “Committee should be flexible to add and drop members of the

\textsuperscript{14} Wynn, G., Hermansen, S., ”Reflections on the Nature of an Urban Bog”, Urban History Review: 34, 2 pg 19.
\textsuperscript{15} “Oral History interview with Bev Ramey on Restoration Efforts in the Camosun Bog.” Conducted March 13\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.
committee as technical issues arise.”\textsuperscript{17} The minutes from the numerous Committee meetings and annual reports illustrate the Committee’s immense involvement with the bog, and it is in these minutes that the subtle but vital involvement of the GVRD with the bog first becomes apparent.

In the 1981/82 Technical Committee ‘Progress Report’ it was recorded that the Camosun Bog Study Team directed two research projects with funding from the GVRD Parks: a continuation of measurement of water levels and chemistry and peat stratigraphy, pollen analysis and radio-carbon dating of select species.\textsuperscript{18} Some time between the Technical Committee’s formation and mid-1983, two GVRD Parks dept. staff were made members of the Committee, Rick Hankin and Bev Ramey. These two names made frequent appearances throughout the happenings of the Technical Committee, and in Hankin’s case the VNHS as well, as he corresponded frequently with the VNHS. In 1984 a brochure was released to the public written by Audrey Pearson, designed by GVRD Parks Dept. staff member Rose Wong, for which the funding was found by Bev Ramey through a grant she obtained from the Public Conservation Assistance fund.\textsuperscript{19} The brochure aimed to educate the public on the processes through which the bog was formed and the diversity it offers. It also described three options of what could be done to the bog from a complete restoration, through to a complete negation of involvement leaving it to the processes of the forest. In that same year, a public open-house was held in the Dunbar area intended to educate people on the happenings of the University

\textsuperscript{17} U.B.C. Archives. UBC Technical Committee on the Endowment Lands fonds. Folder 1-2 (1990-’91).
\textsuperscript{18} U.B.C. Archives. UBC Technical Committee on the Endowment Lands fonds. Folder 1-1 (1980-’89).
\textsuperscript{19} U.B.C. Archives. UBC Technical Committee on the Endowment Lands fonds. Folder 1-1 (1980-’89).
Endowment Lands. Per the suggestion of Rick Hankin, the open-house was to have a large section dedicated to the bog and the studies done there in recent months.

Throughout the eighties the U.B.C. Technical Committee conducted many experiments, such as the one mentioned above, monitoring the water levels of the Bog and hypothesizing ways in which it could be restored to its previous bog habitat. They also raised public awareness with the aid of the GVRD Parks and made attempts at restoration such as obtaining support from the Federal NEEDS programme to clear garbage from the Bog. In this same period there were many University trips to the bog; as documented in the ‘Survey of Education and Research use of the University Endowment Lands” (April 1983) prepared for GVRD Parks dept. by Art Klassen, 2077 students, 5.2% of all student trips from U.B.C., were conducted to the bog. While all of these studies and restoration efforts are notable however, it was not until 1989 that the metaphorical restoration ball really started rolling.

On August 28th 1989, following the recently dedicated Pacific Spirit Regional Park, the VNHS applied for a grant from the Environmental Partners Fund to restore the “oldest Sphagnum bog in the Lower Mainland.” Two days previously to this Rick Hankin wrote the VNHS reiterating the GVRD Parks’ support for all the work done with the Camosun Bog and the VNHS’s application to the Environmental Partner Fund. Hankin writes that “GVRD supports being a major partner in this project and will contribute $120,000 for labour, materials and equipment and a further $10,000 in kind for construction supervision and coordination of this

important project.” In an interview with Bev Ramey, she stressed that this amount of funding from the GVRD Parks would have had to have gone through a large authorization process including approval through the Parks Committee. The application included notes of anticipation of working not only with GVRD Parks but with the U.B.C. Technical Committee as well as the Environmental Youth Corps of British Columbia.

According to the application, the total project value was estimated at $340,000 of which $170,000 had already been supplied from monetary and in-kind donations from GVRD Parks ($130,000), U.B.C. ($5,000), VNHS ($5,000) and the Province of B.C., Environmental Youth Corp. ($30,000). The VNHS application, written by a future VNHS president and supporter of the Bog Val Schaefer, asked for the remaining $170,000 from the Environmental Partner Fund. The total amount asked for however was not granted. In approximately June 1990 the VNHS was granted $60,936, less than half of the asked for amount, to support the restoration of the bog. This grant was conditional, subject to positive changes after the first phase of the Bog’s restoration.

The first phase of bog restoration was to take place in the winter of 1990/91. This phase was a large removal of hemlock trees that were in and surrounding the bog. There were four options for the safest way to remove these trees and it was decided that they would be removed by helicopter when the ground was frozen. Prior to this removal however, the VNHS sought to inform the public about why this large number of trees were to be removed as they

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23 City of Vancouver Archives. Vancouver Natural History Society fonds. 610-B-7 Folder 1: “VNHS Minutes-Book#7”
anticipated some public distress in regards to the logging. It was decided that a half page insert in the Vancouver Courier ($210) would be appropriate.\textsuperscript{26} This was approved by the VNHS and shortly thereafter the logging commenced.

In January 1991 Approximately 180 Hemlock and a few of other tree species were cut and removed via helicopter from the Bog. During the summer of the same year, the bog restoration was looking to enter its second phase of restoration as the tree removal appeared to have been producing positive results in the restoration. At this same time, Jack Husted had resigned as coordinator for the project and Daphne Solecki (the then current VNHS president) sought Val Schaefer to take the position, who agreed to take on the project. In the September 1991 “Report the Executive” VNHS letter, the Environmental Partner Fund had allowed the second phase to begin.\textsuperscript{27}

At this point, the paper trail of what exactly was happening towards the bog’s restoration becomes thin. In early 1992, Daphne Solecki passed on presidency of the VNHS to Val Schaefer. A hold was placed on phase two, which included further tree removal as it was feared that the bog may be turning into a marsh rather than a bog: meaning a variation in the biotic life, less peat and fewer mosses. However, during an interview with Val Schaefer, he was under the impression that the public was opposed to further tree removal and this is why there was a halt to the restoration.\textsuperscript{28} Audrey Pearson also recalled there being some public concern over the mass removal of trees from the bog. This public aversion was raised in the mid 1980’s

\textsuperscript{26} City of Vancouver Archives. Vancouver Natural History Society fonds. 610-B-7 Folder 1: “VNHS Minutes-Book#7”
\textsuperscript{27} City of Vancouver Archives. Vancouver Natural History Society fonds. 610-B-7 Folder 1: “VNHS Minutes-Book#7”
\textsuperscript{28} Phone contact with Val Schaefer March 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.
to the small amount of GVRD supported tree removal from the bog.\textsuperscript{29} To further complicate this puzzle of the slowed restoration, the VNHS minutes and other documents are not available past the year of 1992 in Vancouver’s archives. Worse still, the U.B.C. Technical Committee has little to no information regarding the bog past 1992 as the Committee’s interest appears to turn towards other university issues such as the erection of Hampton Place and the issue of tree removal for the building project.\textsuperscript{30}

In 1992 there were a large number of people that left the U.B.C. Technical Committee. Bert Brink was already unassociated with the group and at this time, of the six departed members two are of notable mention: Dr. Hamish Kimmins and Audrey Pearson.\textsuperscript{31} These two people are important to note as they were vital players in the bog’s restoration. Pearson, having written multiple reports on the bog and conducted many studies herself, was leaving the city to pursue her PhD at the University of Washington in Seattle.\textsuperscript{32} Hamish Kimmins held the U.B.C. Technical Committee chair position from 1985 until a date that is unknown and his reasons for leaving the committee are unknown though Pearson suggests it was due to an over abundance of commitments. The final mention of the Bog that was at all associated with the U.B.C. Technical Committee was in February 1993 from the “List of Potential Opportunities for Investigation and Research in Pacific Spirit Regional Park.” It stated that water monitoring of

\textsuperscript{29} “Oral History interview with Audrey Pearson on Restoration Efforts in the Camosun Bog.” Conducted March 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.


\textsuperscript{31} U.B.C. Archives. UBC Technical Committee on the Endowment Lands fonds. Folder 1-3 (1992-’94).

\textsuperscript{32} “Oral History interview with Audrey Pearson on Restoration Efforts in the Camosun Bog.” Conducted March 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.
the bog was being undertaken by the Ecoleaders through the VNHS and GVRD Parks and that the funding for this work would not be available past the fall of 1993.\textsuperscript{33}

At this point the paper trail of the bog’s restoration is nonexistent, leaving three potential reasons for the halt of the restoration process. First, the loss of important U.B.C. Technical Committee members. The departed members were both integral parts of the bog’s restoration, and it is likely that without their continued involvement the Committee would have begun to look at other issues relevant to U.B.C. as the bog was only one of many items of which they were in charge. Second, there is sufficient evidence to show that the three year Environmental Partner Fund grant had expired. This however is farfetched as the amount granted by the Environmental Partner Fund was only half of that of the GVRD Parks’ donation. This money however could have already been used or also limited on the same time restrictions as the Environmental Partner Fund grant. Finally, the third possibility that restoration activities were stopped is that, as reported by Val Schaefer, the public opinion against additional tree removal was quite great.

Throughout all of the history of Camosun Bog’s restoration there have been a number of organizations that aimed to protect, restore, and inform the public on the bog. Two of these most prominent groups were the U.B.C. Technical Committee and its Sub-Committee for Camosun Bog, as well as the Vancouver Natural History Society. These groups however would not have been able to accomplish what they did for Camosun Bog without the continual support and involvement of the GVRD Parks department. During interviews with Audrey

Pearson, Bev Ramey and Val Schaefer, the GVRD Parks involvement was stressed and praised by all three. It was also said that the VNHS was frequently used by the GVRD Parks as a way of obtaining additional funding for projects due to their non-profit organization status. Most of the funding for restoration and public awareness projects were either monetary or in-kind donations from the GVRD Parks or obtained through grants that were mostly made by GVRD Parks staff. GVRD Parks still plays a vital role in the ongoing restoration efforts of the Bog. They are now reaping the fruits of their years of dedication to the project as they’ve worked in collaboration with the Camosun Bog Restoration Group in recent years and succeeded in almost completely restoring the bog. Without the continual aid of the GVRD Parks it is unlikely that Camosun Bog would be the success story it is today, providing an incredibly diverse bog habitat for study and public enjoyment.

The above essay aims to delve into the restoration efforts and the people involved with Camosun Bog. Though many areas of its history has been covered in this paper, further research into certain areas of Camosun Bog would undoubtedly shed a wider beam of light onto the exact reasons for the stop of restoration activities in the early ‘90s. An interview with Rick Hankin of the GVRD Parks dept., now retired, would be critical to further research. Exploration of the GVRD Parks financial records would unveil the processes behind obtaining such a large grant for Camosun Bog in 1989 as well as how, when and where these funds were allocated to the project.

34 Phone contact with Val Schaefer March 14th, 2013.
Secondary Sources:


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Telephone communication with Val Schaefer, March 14th, 2013.