

# The Pentlatch People of Denman Island

By John Millen

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## *abstract*

*In 1923 the name of Village Point on the west side of Denman Island was changed officially to Denman Point. The first name had been in place since the Royal Navy put it on their chart in 1862. At the time of the Navy's survey a substantial village of the Pentlatch people occupied the point. An early white visitor, Pidcock, described it as it was in 1862, just after it had been depopulated as a result of the smallpox epidemic that swept up the coast from Victoria that year. Robert Brown of the Vancouver Island Exploring expedition also described the village when he camped there in 1864. In her classic account of the pioneer settlers of Denman Island, *My Ain Folk* (1976), Winnifred Isbister wrote that Denman Island was used as a 'summer home' by the Indians who came to the Island on 'hunting trips'. She nowhere acknowledges the permanent nature of their settlement that was recorded by the first white visitors. This oversight could simply be attributed to the lack of availability, thirty years ago, of the early European accounts, but it does reflect the attitudes of the time towards the First Nations. It is also consistent with the experience of the settlers who first arrived on the Island in the 1870s when the nearest settlement of First Nations people was at Comox, where the remnant of the Pentlatch people from Denman had retreated in 1862. It has been convenient for our western civilization to believe that the first people whom we have displaced didn't really occupy this land, but were somehow merely 'summer visitors'.*

In 1923 the name of Village Point on the west side of Denman Island was changed officially to Denman Point. The first of these names had been in place since the Royal Navy put it on their chart, published in 1862. At the time of the Navy's survey in 1860 a substantial village of the Pentlatch people occupied the point. Undoubtedly, these people had their own name for the village. With the extinction of the Pentlatch language this name has been lost.

Lieutenant R.C. Mayne of *H.M.S Plumper* stated in a report to Captain George Richards concerning his April, 1860, exploration of the Comox area, "In the winter there is an Indian village at the entrance of the river, but it is now deserted, the Indians having gone to the spit – Henry Bay."<sup>1</sup> The *Plumper* was anchored in Henry Bay while Mayne explored the land around the Courtenay River.<sup>2</sup>

In his Journal Mayne wrote:<sup>3</sup>

"13<sup>th</sup> (April 1860) ....anchored in Henry Bay, Denman Island.

"18<sup>th</sup>

Blowing fresh from the SE all day (5 - 7) with occasional showers - Capt. managed to get sights however - About noon the Romish Priest arrived in a canoe, his arrival causing the greatest excitement among the Indians who rushed onshore from the ship, crying out "Le Pretre" "Le Pretre". I forgot to mention, by the bye, that since we came nearly all the Indians have shifted the village from No. 5 to this spit - they change about with the seasons. When we were here last year, Oct. they were all at the entrance of the Courtenay and in another

month or two will go there again for the salmon & berries. Now they live down here for the clams. This is the case with the Indians everywhere about the coast..."

The reference to No 5 is tantalizing as it is likely a temporary survey station on a prominent part of the coast and it is tempting to speculate that it may have been located at Village Point, a logical place for a survey station and still the site of a Land Survey Monument.

Arriving as a settler in September 1862, Reginald Pidcock noted the deserted Village Point as he passed by. Pidcock later wrote: "It has large quantities of cedar trees on it & the Comox Indians make a great number of their canoes here. They used to live on it [until] some few months ago but the small pox which broke out in 1862 carried some of them off & they have never returned to it since."<sup>4</sup>

In March of that year an epidemic of smallpox had broken out in Victoria.<sup>5</sup> The disease spread rapidly among the Indian population living on the northwest shores of the harbour. Large numbers of Indians had come down the coast in canoes from as far away as the Queen Charlotte Islands and stayed, camped on the Indian Reserve, the Songhees lands. Many of the white citizens of Victoria had for years been agitating for the removal of the Indians from this prime area of real estate. Governor Douglas had resisted these pressures, insisting that the Indians had the right, by a treaty (which Douglas himself had signed), to live on those lands.

However the emergency created by the smallpox epidemic demanded action. The Police Commissioner ordered the many Indians who were camped on the Songhees land to return to their villages up the coast. Infected houses were ordered burnt.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately many of those Indians who left, to return to their homes, were already infected with smallpox. They carried the disease with them spreading smallpox up the coast and even into the interior along native trade routes. Wilson Duff described the 1862 smallpox as: "The most terrible single calamity to befall the Indians of British Columbia..."<sup>7</sup> And he estimated that it killed about a third of them.

Robert Brown of the Vancouver Island Exploring expedition described the village when he camped there in 1864.<sup>8</sup> The following extracts are from his Journal, published by UBC (1989) in an edition well-annotated by John Hayman.

**"Friday August 19th, 1864**

Judging that we could not make Comoucs before dark, camped on village point of Denman Island, on the deserted Village of the Comoucs. It still retained traces of its former grandeur - pickets, carved images, &c, & massive hewn cedar frames. These carvings are all much of the same nature, some of them very obscene, their women and children being represented *in partibus Naturalibus*. Others of their figures refer to their Mythology & the figure of the owl occurs frequently. ..."

"The Village where we camped (No.33) must once have been very extensive but is now quite deserted & nothing but the frames stand. After a long search found their water in a wood where none but an Indian could have found it. This village has a history. Once upon a time (my informant is Eyees, a Nanaimo, and his eyes glisten as he tells it) the Eucletaws threatened the total annihilation of the Comoucs, who then lived nearly wholly at this Village. An

old Seer foretold this. So the Comoucs fortified their Village and asked the help of their quondam enemies the Nanaimos, who, however they bitterly disliked, the Comoucs happened just hated the Euclataws, the terror of the coast (as they are yet), still worse. So they came in force & lay as a reserve in the woods. The Euclataws' Canoes hove in sight but suspecting strategem they considered prudence the better part of valor and concluded to retire. So the Camp of the Comoucs was safe and a great "Potlach" was given to the Nanaimos. The site of the old Village from the quantity of manure was covered with rich grass."

**"Saturday August 20th 1864.**

Up at 6 a.m.- cold & chilly with heavy dew on the ground. The heavy dews commence about this time. This day last year I was sleeping on a gravel bar on the banks of the Snoqualami in Washington territory - & then for the first time I began to think it too late in the year to sleep in the open. I think so now too. Still, fair wind through Baynes Sound. Beautiful scenery on North - the snow peaks of the Beaufort range (5431 feet, 4861 ft., 4903 ft. 4829 ft. & 4426 ft.) - on the right the little sound dotted with canoes & the shore all along merry with smoking fish [and] "clamming" camps of Comoucs.

We entered Port Augusta (Comox Harbor) about 11 a.m. with a large convoy of canoes returning from fishing...."

Later in his journal Brown wrote:

**"INDIANS:** The Puntledges [Pentlatch] were the original inhabitants of the Comoucs Valley and their Village was about one mile up the river of the same name called [blank in transcript]-now deserted & the site occupied by Potato patches. The Puntledges were very powerful, and lived in peace and plenty until the Comoucs speaking a different language came from further north and settled at the mouth of the river on their present site and on Denmans Island. War ensued and many were killed on either side but it soon happened, to use the simple but expressive language of my informant, an old Puntledge, "The Great Chief above became angry with the Puntledge and killed many, viz many of them by Small pox, until what with disease and war, the Puntledge became very few indeed & sought the friendship and alliance of their old Enemies the Comoucs for mutual protection & defence: & from that day they lived together." The Comoucs had broke or seceded from a tribe called the Ey-exen but God in time became angry with the Ey-exen and joined camp with the Comoucs.

The Saatlaam or Qualicomms lived at Saatlam (the place of green leaves) but they too became so thin by war and pestilence that they were glad to ask to throw in their lots with their former enemies & ever since they have been one people-composed of 4 tribes all under the name of Comoucs"<sup>9</sup>

All sources of information describe the Pentlatch people who lived on Denman Island in summer, moving to the area around the junction of the Puntledge and Tsolum Rivers for the winter. Except for Mayne's observations, quoted above, I have not found any record that identifies the timing of their seasonal movements. My assessment is that they would have moved to the Puntledge River village site in late August or in September when the major salmon runs began: Coho and then Chums. They would then move back to their fishing locations on Denman Island in February or March in time for the herring-spawning fishery and for clamming. However there is sufficient evidence of substantial

house structures on Denman to challenge the assumption that such an annual movement was always the pattern of use.

The Pentlatch land at the junction of the Tsolum and Puntledge rivers remained in use by the Comox and Pentlatch people. This location was also known in the 1860's as the 'potato lands' and was used by the Comox natives for growing potatoes.<sup>10</sup> It is still identified as the Puntledge Indian Reserve IR2.

In the 1870s William Duncan hired surveyor George Drabble to survey the Pentlatch land at the river junction with the intention of claiming it for his own use. Duncan was one of the original 1862 settlers in the Comox Valley. Drabble also knew that it was Indian land and should not be pre-empted but he surveyed it anyway. Indian Commissioners Archibald McKinlay and Gilbert Sproat visited Comox in 1878 and reported that Duncan, though he knew it should be reserved for the Indians, "nevertheless for some reason employed Mr Drabble of Comox to survey this piece of land, but Mr Drabble, knowing it to be an Indian settlement, so marked it on a sketch attached to his field notes." The land was not granted to Duncan.<sup>11</sup>

The land around Village Point on Denman Island was claimed by Jim McCoy and he sold his pre-emption to Alex McMillan. In 1875, surveyor George Drabble came across from Comox to survey the property for McMillan.<sup>12</sup>

Wilson Duff mapped the territory of the Pentlatch as stretching along the Vancouver Island shore from north of Cape Lazo down to Qualicum Beach.<sup>13</sup> He noted that they are now extinct but before 1850 they had comprised three groups living on Comox Harbour, Denman Island and Englishman River.<sup>14</sup>

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Pentlatch were reduced by warfare with their neighbours. From the north the Lekwiltok (also called Eucletaws), a Kwakiutl people, invaded from Johnstone Strait and eventually became dominant as far south as Comox. The classic story of repelling a Lekwiltok raid is retold by Brown, above. Comox is a Kwakiutl word, as usual it is in the language of the victors that history is told.

On their southern flank the Pentlatch fought with Nootka tribes from the Port Alberni area. Stories from the Opitchesah people of that area, quoted by Jan Peterson,<sup>15</sup> tell of raids in both directions. The route between the two territories was likely that used by the Hudson's Bay trader from Nanaimo who, in the 1850s made an annual trading trip to the Port Alberni area by way of the Qualicum River, Horne Lake and a steep trail over the intervening ridge and down to the Somas River.<sup>16</sup> In the 1860s and 70s Nanaimo and Cowichan people took over the Pentlatch fishing site on the Qualicum River.<sup>17</sup>

As well as the 'extensive village' best described in the 1860s by Brown, at that time intensive use was being made of Henry Bay and the adjacent spit by both Pentlatch and Comox people. The archaeological evidence of long and continuous use of that area was described by C. E. Borden in 1956 as shell middens originally covering an area of 10 hectares, running parallel to the shore for nearly a mile and up to 15 feet deep. The midden comprised mainly clam shells with bones of deer, seals and whales also present. Borden concluded from the midden's size that it must have been a village site although "evidence of habitation was no longer discernable". By the time of his visit much of the midden had been destroyed by a commercial shell extraction operation that had operated there for the North West Clamshell Plant of New Westminster beginning in 1945 and winding up in the early fifties. In 1949 a total of 3000 tons of shell was shipped.<sup>18</sup>

In the same 1956 survey Borden also recorded a probable village site located in and to the south of the present Fillongly Provincial Park where a series of oblong depressions were visible on terraces above the beach, separated by high shell mounds. Borden also noted oblong depressions, which he thought were the remains of plank houses, in the middens he recorded at Metcalf Bay and around Repulse Point, though he noted that trees growing in the depressions could be 200 to 300 or more years old. Repulse Point was one of the Pentlatch village sites identified to Kennedy and Bouchard by Comox people in recent times.<sup>19</sup>

The Pentlatch and Comox houses differed from those of the southern Coast Salish by having a sunken floor, excavated down about half a meter below ground level.<sup>20</sup> Their rectangular houses were usually built with the long side facing the beach. The Southern Coast Salish, which included the Nanaimo people, were known to have permanent house frames at both their winter and summer village sites and they moved the planks for roof and walls between the sites.<sup>21</sup> Similar practices were common among the Northern Coast Salish, some of whom had fully built houses at both summer and winter sites and merely moved their household goods in their twice a year migrations.<sup>22</sup>

An archaeological survey of Denman Island in 1975 identified 33 sites judged to be worth recording.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the Denman Island sites Pentlatch people formerly occupied sites on the west side of Baynes Sound including Union Bay and Deep Bay.<sup>24</sup> Other archaeological sites on the nearby shores of Vancouver Island, at Buckley Bay and Tsuble River, show evidence of earlier occupation by Coast Salish people, presumed to be Pentlatch.<sup>25</sup>

More evidence of long occupation of Denman Island by aboriginal people is the petroglyphs on Chrome Island, under the lighthouse, that Isbister says depict “a great battle fought with the mainland Indians”.

At the southern end of Denman Island, an archaeological site recorded in 1956 by C.E. Borden is a trench cutting across the island about 150 meters inland from Boyle Point. Isbister (quoted below) referred to this excavation, along with another at the northern end of the Island as defence works although other residents have reported that they believed the Boyle Point trench was used as a deer trap. Deer could be driven into the trench where they might be impaled on sharpened stakes or shot with a bow and arrow. The Coast Salish, as well as hunting them with bow and arrow took deer, along with Bears and Elk, in pitfalls. However it seems to me more likely that, considering its location, the trench is the remains of a fortification.

There are other examples of the considerable effort made by Pentlatch people to build large-scale structures for the capture of food. At Deep Bay there is a fish trap created in a natural depression on the beach in which herring are impounded during their spawning season and may easily be captured. It has also been suggested that predator species following the herring including salmon and sea lions may have been captured here. The rock walls that form the trap total about 250 meters in length.<sup>26</sup>

While the Pentlatch people from Denman Island merged with the Comox in the 1860s they did maintain their stories and distinct language for generations. The last known person with knowledge of the language was Joe Nimmim who died in 1940.<sup>27</sup> Some present day members of the Comox and Qualicum bands can trace their ancestry to Pentlatch forbears.<sup>28</sup>

In her classic account of the pioneer settlers of Denman Island, *My Ain Folk* (1976), Winnifred Isbister wrote that Denman Island was used as a 'summer home' by the Indians who came to the Island on 'hunting trips' and stayed in 'huts'. She nowhere acknowledges the permanent nature of their earlier settlement that was recorded by the first white visitors.

She wrote:<sup>29</sup>

### *"Indians*

Denman Island was used as a summer home by the Indians of the Puntledge tribe, whose winter homes were at Comox on Vancouver Island. They spoke the Chinook language and lived in primitive shacks or huts composed of slabs of cedar with a small door or small openings. Sometimes a large barnlike house was built in which three or four families lived. Their sleeping quarters were raised platforms portioned off by skins and bark. In the long middle passage fires were lit and meals were cooked.

While on their hunting trips to Denman the Indians lived in huts. They also fished and dug clams. The remains of many clam beds camps and middens are still found at Henry Bay and Metcalfe Bay and many other camping spots around the shoreline. The tribes people ate fresh and dried salmon, oolican oil, deermeat and berries. Their clothing was chiefly blankets thrown loosely around them, and they used skins and furs for bedding and moccasins and garments. With cedar barks they made mats and rope. By adding hair a rough cloth was made. Canoes and totem poles were fashioned from cedar trees.

Often these Indians would have a deer drive. The braves formed a line across a narrow part of the island, let out their war whoops and drove the deer before them into the salt water where braves in canoes knocked the deer on the head with clubs. Enough food would be obtained to last for some time. Two such drives took place on the island after the white man came.

Some vigorous battles were fought among the local tribes. A noted one was held several years before 1850 and raged all day. Remains of the conflict are still to be found by those ambitious enough to search the wilds of northern Denman.

If we visit Yellow Rock today, we can find writings recording a great battle fought with the mainland Indians; it is not known who won the battle. The dead, in early days were disposed of by being placed in boxes and put high in the limbs of a large tree. In later times they began to bury their dead as white people do, in their own cemetery.

In contrast to the records of their warlike nature, these Indians were noted for their honesty and friendly attitude towards the white man.

The women were more dependable than men as hired help. They were fond of music and readily picked up common tunes. Early white women settlers were somewhat nervous of the Indians who often came and sat near the doors of the cabins, usually from curiosity, but if the women offered them food they would leave.

Gradually, as the island became settled by the white man, the Indians spent less time at their summer homes and none have resided here since the turn of the century.

Excellent collections of Indian relics have been found here during the years; namely - arrow heads, hammers, paints, gambling rocks, anchors, necklaces, grinding stones and mixing bowls. When land at Metcalfe Bay was bulldozed an Indian camp was revealed with remnants of cod fish scales, teeth from an

unknown animal, pipes and mixing bowls. Indian graves were found on the Beadnell property. Middens have been found in various bays around the coastline and what appear to be manmade trenches, eight feet high and thirty feet wide are still visible at the extreme ends of Denman. Few people recognize their significance but it is believed the Indians had dug them for defence.”

I’m not trying to say that Winnifred Isbister is mistaken in her account. In fact I think she accurately sets down the prevailing views and knowledge of the First Nations people that was held in her time among the descendents of the pioneer settlers. She does say ‘sometimes a large barn-like house was built’ in which three or four families lived. Isbister’s understanding could simply be attributed to her lack of access, thirty years ago, to the early European records. Her account is consistent with the experience of the settlers who first arrived on the Island about 1874 when the nearest settlement of First Nations people was at Comox, where the remnant of the Pentlatch people from Denman had retreated in 1862. But she also clearly reflects the attitudes of those times towards the First Nations.

There had been a distinct change in attitude towards the First Nations people in the administration of the Colony in 1864 when Governor James Douglas retired and Joseph Trutch was appointed as Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works. Douglas, having spent his career in the fur trade respected those he called ‘Native Indians’ and had made fourteen treaties with native residents of Vancouver Island areas that were needed for settlement by Europeans in the 1850s. The last of these was for the land at Nanaimo, made in 1854. The Supreme Court of Canada finally recognized it as valid in 1965.<sup>30</sup> After 1858, however, the Colonial administration would not provide funds for any further purchase of land.<sup>31</sup>

Trutch came to British Columbia in 1859 after 8 years in the ‘Territory’ south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel and brought with him the prevailing attitudes from that American Frontier. He believed that Indians should not be allowed to stand in the way of ‘progress’. Commenting on an 1865 proposal to reduce Indian Reserves in the Thompson River area he wrote: “I am satisfied from my own observation that the claims of Indians over tracts of land, on which they assume to exercise ownership, but of which they make no real use, operate very materially to prevent settlement and cultivation...”<sup>32</sup>

Views of the First Nations held by the settlers, reflecting their self-interest, generally paralleled those expressed freely by Trutch. Many settlers, and Gilbert Sproat is a good example, believed that Europeans were inherently superior to the native ‘savages’.<sup>33</sup> Policies that supported settlers occupying the best land and confining natives to small village areas were pursued in the Colony up until Confederation with Canada in 1871 and were continued after that by Trutch in his role of Lieutenant Governor of the new Province. Not until the Supreme Court began to rule on First Nations rights in the 1960s and 70s were changes begun that have legitimized First Nations assertions that they occupied the land and had never agreed to relinquish their rights to it.

In many of the narratives that comprise our local histories we still find a pattern in which, as described by Furniss, “Aboriginal people are assigned secondary roles that reflect and enhance the identities of the colonizers as paternal benefactors while commemorating colonization as the progress of Western civilization.”<sup>34</sup>

Winnifred Isbister wrote about the McMillan family property at Village Point:

“Alex McMillan was a native of Argyleshire, Scotland, and after spending some years in New Zealand he came to British Columbia in the early 1870s. On the advice of Alex Urquhart, whom he met on the boat coming across from New Westminster, he stopped off to visit the district and while so doing secured the work of constructing the first Comox wharf. In 1874 he visited Denman Island where he bought out Jim McCoy who had pre-empted a 320-acre holding on the west side of the island with its half mile of beach frontage by Village Point...”<sup>35</sup>

The property was sold in May 1952 to Gordon Wright (recently deceased) who named it "Lone Pine Farm."

The name change in 1923, from Village Point to Denman Point was justified by the Chief Geographer of BC “to avoid confusion with numerous other ‘Village Point’ features along the coast.” As of 2004 there are only two locations officially named “Village Point” in BC, one in Blackfish Sound and one on the Northwest tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands. A third such name, on the West Coast of Vancouver Island north of Kyuquot, has been rescinded.<sup>36</sup>

The name ‘Village Point’ continued in common use on the Island, however. In her book, *My Ain Folk* (1976), Winnifred Isbister uses that name in her account of the wreck of the navy’s cruiser *H.M.S. Flora* on the reef just north of the point.<sup>37</sup>

It has been convenient for our western civilization to believe that the first peoples, whom we have displaced, didn’t really occupy this land, but were somehow merely ‘summer visitors’.

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- <sup>1</sup> Mayne, *Journal* quoted in Isenor et al: *Land of Plenty* P. 27
- <sup>2</sup> Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia* P. 173
- <sup>3</sup> Mayne, *Journal* P. 83
- <sup>4</sup> Pidcock, *Adventures on Vancouver Island* quoted in Mackie P. 47
- <sup>5</sup> Fisher, 1992, Pages 115- 116; *British Colonist*, 26 March 1862 and 1 May 1862
- <sup>6</sup> *British Colonist*, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1862
- <sup>7</sup> Duff, 1964 P. 42
- <sup>8</sup> Brown, P. 108
- <sup>9</sup> Brown, P. 122
- <sup>10</sup> Letter from J. Cave Brown Cave to Franklin, Stipendary (sic) Magistrate of Nanaimo letter quoted in Isenor et al P. 72
- <sup>11</sup> McKinlay and Sproat to Attorney General, 11 January 1878, Herald Street Collection, quoted in Mackie, *Wilderness Profound* P.97-98.
- <sup>12</sup> Isenor et al P. 115
- <sup>13</sup> Duff, 1964 P. 14
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*, P. 25
- <sup>15</sup> Peterson, Pages10 – 12; also Kennedy and Bouchard, 1990 P. 443
- <sup>16</sup> Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia* P. 166
- <sup>17</sup> Kennedy and Bouchard, 1990 P. 443
- <sup>18</sup> Isbister, P. 157
- <sup>19</sup> Kennedy and Bouchard, 1990 P. 443
- <sup>20</sup> Bernick, P. 172 quoting Barnett, 1955.
- <sup>21</sup> Bernick, P. 173; Brown, P. 110
- <sup>22</sup> Kennedy and Bouchard, 1990 P. 446
- <sup>23</sup> Murton and Foster
- <sup>24</sup> Kennedy and Bouchard, 1990 P. 452
- <sup>25</sup> Keen
- <sup>26</sup> Monks
- <sup>27</sup> *Comox Argus*, April 11, 1940 referenced in Kennedy and Bouchard 2002
- <sup>28</sup> Kennedy and Bouchard, 2002, note P. 237
- <sup>29</sup> Isbister, P. 7
- <sup>30</sup> Berger, P. 106
- <sup>31</sup> Fisher, 1981
- <sup>32</sup> Trutch to Colonial Secretary 20 Sept. 1865. Quoted in Fisher, 1992 P. 162
- <sup>33</sup> Sproat
- <sup>34</sup> Furniss, P. 76
- <sup>35</sup> Isbister, P. 29
- <sup>36</sup> Government of British Columbia web site: [www.gov.bc.ca/bcnames/](http://www.gov.bc.ca/bcnames/)
- <sup>37</sup> Isbister, P. 72

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