

Looking Back: Battle over moving Whonnock school



Fifteen years ago, in 1999, the Whonnock and Ruskin elementary schools consolidated into a new building on 112th Avenue.

That move would have amused the pioneers of north Whonnock who, about a century earlier, almost succeeded in moving the school there from the shore of the Fraser River.

The history of Whonnock elementary starts in 1885 with a small one-room school at “the front” of Whonnock, serving mainly the children of settlers living close to the Fraser River, north and south.

The school district also included the backlands of north Whonnock and the Ruskin area, but the miles-long trek to the school and back home was too much for regular school attendance by these children, so they did not get the schooling they needed.

In 1893, settlers south of the Fraser opened a school of their own: the Glen Valley school.

The Whonnock settlers living at the Fraser River realized that, to keep their school, they needed the children of the settlers living in the interior, while those in the interior saw a chance to move the existing Whonnock riverside school closer to their farms.

To make that happen, they presented, in May 1893, two different petitions, dated a day apart, to the superintendent of education in Victoria. Some pragmatic settlers signed both petitions.

The first petition requested the creation of a new school district, including Webster's Corners, and north Whonnock.

This school district would have been roughly the area north of 104th Avenue between 256th Street and Whonnock Creek. The school would be built on land near Kanaka Creek on 112th Avenue.

The other petitioners wanted to move the school from the shore of the Fraser to 104th Ave. and 276th Street, roughly halfway between the river than 112th Ave.

Moving the school to 104th seemed to be a forgone conclusion when a special school meeting was called for June 22, 1894, to formally decide on the move of the school.

However, the Norwegian fishermen from 272nd St. and 112th unexpectedly turned up at the meeting and, with their help, the "north" managed to force and win a surprise vote to move the school to 112th rather than to 104th.

Perhaps the Norwegians came home for the vote, but it is also plausible that in the immediate aftermath of the big flood of 1894, they had not left yet to go fishing and were, thus, able to participate in the vote.

Informing the superintendent of education in Victoria of the results of the meeting, Noble Oliver, secretary of the school board, asked for “compassion” and not to move the school to a place “... where it will do duty only to a few Norwegian settlers.”

The superintendent did nothing to change the status quo, and for many more years the Whonnock schoolhouse remained where it was: at the front between the railway tracks and the Fraser River.

Meanwhile, in the years immediately following the meeting, families with children living in north Whonnock, including the Norwegians, relocated to properties closer to the river and the school.

– *Fred Braches, a local historian who lives in Whonnock.*