

THE RIVER PEOPLE: Living and Working in Oona River

by Caroline Butler and Kenneth Campbell



Forests For the Future

University of British Columbia

The River People: Living and Working in Oona River
by Caroline Butler and Kenneth Campbell

Forests for the Future, Unit 6

© 2003 The University of British Columbia

This is one of a series of curriculum materials developed as part of the Forests for the Future project, funded by Forest Renewal BC Research Award PAR02002-23

Project Leader: Charles R. Menzies, Ph.D

Information about the project is available at www.ecoknow.ca

Design and Production: Half Moon Communications

Permission is granted for teachers to download and make copies for use in their own classrooms. Any other use requires permission of the Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC.

Acknowledgements:

The entire community of Oona River was extremely welcoming and helpful. We especially thank the following people who contributed to project:

Karl and Wendy Bergman

David and Tara Bergman

Johnny and Winnie Bergman

Peter and Elaine Brown

Lutz and Wendy Budde

Norm and Daisy Iverson

Mike and Jan Lemon

Freddie and Joanne Letts

Ralph Letts

Farrell Noel

Bart Proctor

Mark and Nicole Rudderham

Ken Simon and Beth Songhurst

Jake and Colleen Vanderheide

Ben and Shannon Vanderheide

The River People: Living and Working in Oona River

Introduction	page 4
Part 1: Early Settlement.....	page 4
Part 2: Living Oona River.....	page 9
Part 3: Forestry in Oona River.....	page 15
Part 4: Fishing in Oona River	page 22
Part 5: Boatbuilding	page 25
Part 6: Cedar and Salmon: Family Stories.....	page 27
Part 7. Conservation and Environmental Values...	page 30
Appendix: Boats built in Oona River	page 32

OONA RIVER

The community of Oona River is located on the eastern side of Porcher Island, south of Prince Rupert, BC. It is one of the few coastal communities which have managed to survive the changing economy and technological shifts which have occurred since their original settlement.

Oona River is within the traditional territories of the Gitxaa-a (Kitkatla) who live at Lach Klan on nearby Dolphin Island. The Gitxaa-a peoples used the river where the community now sits as a sum-

mer fishing camp. At low tide, the remains of over 50 stone fish traps are visible in the estuary of Oona River. The camp site itself has not been found, but the tidal action in the estuary has caused the shoreline to erode by 10 to 15 metres during last 100 years, resulting in the loss of much history to the ocean. The Gitxaa-a people also left their mark in the forest; there are many cultural modified trees up and down the valley surrounding the river.

PART 1: EARLY SETTLEMENT

The Rush to Settle

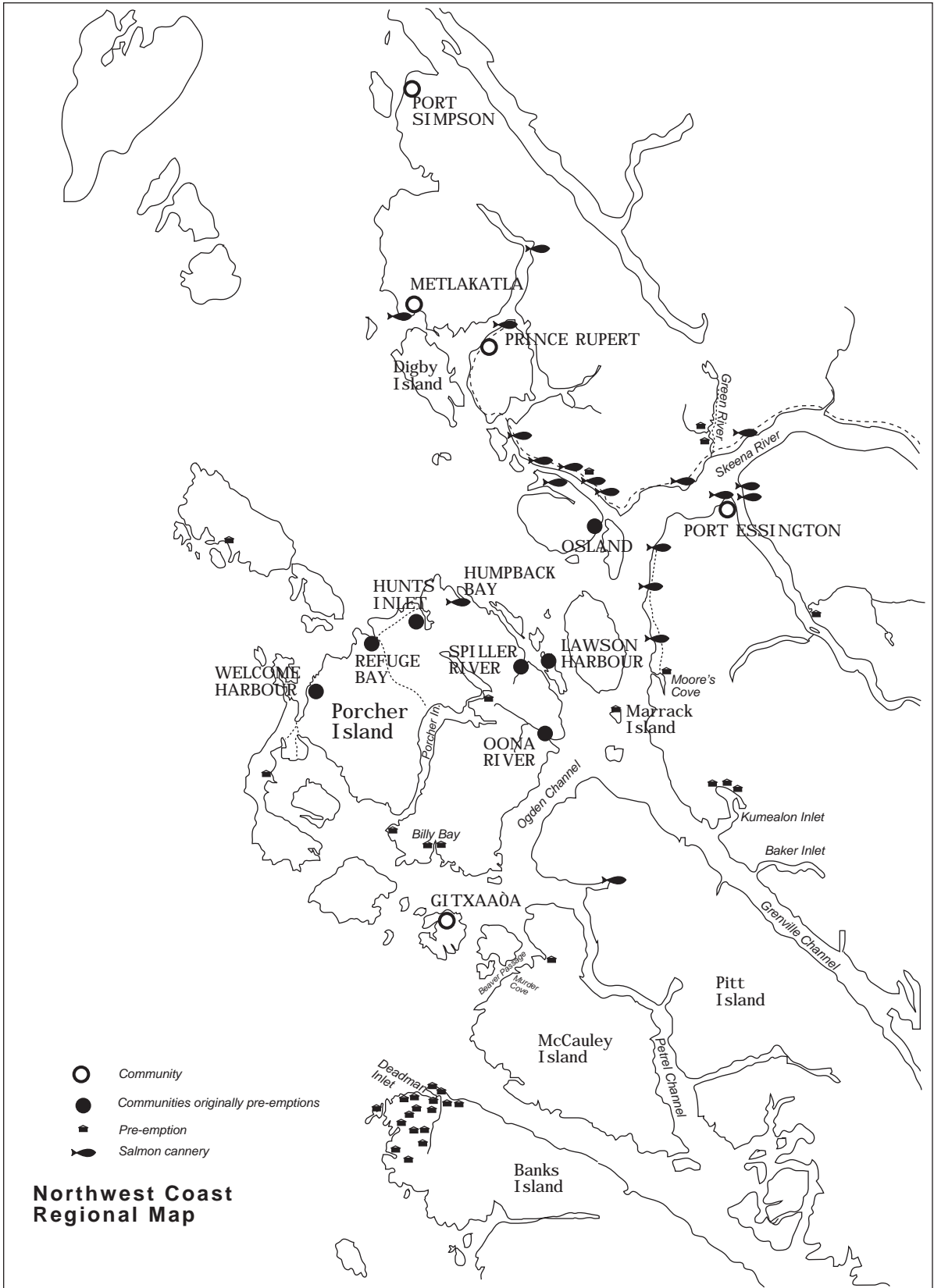
During the early decades of the Twentieth century, settlers from Canada, the United States and from Europe, especially Scandinavia, staked out lots in Oona River and the surrounding area, hoping to build a new life for themselves. The construction of Canada's second trans-continental railway, the Grand Trunk Pacific, beginning in 1906, spurred a flurry of settlement around Porcher Island and on nearby islands. As Prince Rupert developed into a major centre for commercial fishing, people who sought an independent lifestyle hoped they could combine fishing with other jobs to afford to occupy their own land.

At this time the governments of Canada and British Columbia were actively encouraging immigration into the west. If newcomers could not purchase a piece of land, they could acquire property by a process called **pre-emption**. Settlers were granted a chunk of land, usually 160 acres, on the condition that they made improvements, meaning clearing fields for agri-

culture and erecting a house and other buildings. Rules governing progress on the improvements were strict. Every so often an inspector visited to report on the improvements. If a pre-emptor wanted to leave the land for any length of time, such as taking a job elsewhere to earn a living, he had to get permission from the Lands inspector. Once the land was developed sufficiently, the pre-emptors were issued a Certificate of Improvement and they had title to the land.

Certain lands had been available for pre-emption since Confederation, but in 1914, the B.C. government opened up large tracts of Crown land for new settlers, including the islands and inlets around the mouth of the Skeena River. People flocked to Porcher Island, Banks Island and other nearby locations. It seemed like a dream come true: for a few years hard work and little else, they could own their own property.

Settlers, mainly single men, came from around the world in the years just before World War I. A family of Italian brothers took lots on the north end of Banks Island. Many people from



Northwest Coast Regional Map



Scandinavian countries arrived as well.

A number of Japanese men attempted to take out pre-emptions, but despite the fact that they were British subjects, they were denied permission to pre-empt. One Japanese man, remembered today as Billy, lived and developed property in a little inlet on the south shores of Porcher Island, living out most of his life there, but he was never given title to the land. However, the bay and river running into it were named after him.

The pre-emption regulations were based on an agricultural model: the settlers would clear land to become farmers or ranchers. However, the soggy landscape of the northwest coast is a hostile place for anyone trying to farm, as most of the pre-emptors discovered. Of all the pre-emptions taken out around the mouth of the Skeena River, only a handful stayed long enough to get their Certificate of Improvement. Some men left for the war and never came back, while others worked on and off into the 1920s until they had to give in to the muskeg and rain.

However, some of the earliest settlers on and

around Porcher Island did stay. The pre-emptions coalesced into a number of communities, including Refuge Bay, Welcome Harbour, Hunts Inlet, Spiller River, Lawson Harbour, and Oona River. The government built trails or corduroy roads linking different regions of Porcher. Government wharves at Refuge Bay and Spiller River allowed coastal steamers to stop to drop off mail, cargo and passengers.

Settling Oona River

The first settlers were men who came to Oona River from different places. Neil McCarthy was from Taylor Head, Nova Scotia and moved to the north coast after participating in the 1898 gold rush. Ed Johnson (later known as Oona River Johnson) was Swedish, Fred Ealich was American, Arne Barstad was Norwegian, and “Big” Chris Henderson was from Denmark. These men took pre-emptions stretching inland along the river from the mouth of the estuary.

After a few years, the first pioneers recognized the need for more settlers, especially fami-

A LAND OF PLENTY

A great many independent fishermen, owning their own small craft and gear, follow the halibut and salmon fishing. There are numbers of islands in the vicinity of Prince Rupert where there is good harbourage and shelter for their boats and ideal spots for homes. It is almost a certainty that as soon as the fishing industry becomes permanently established a percentage of the men engaged will be imbued with the idea of taking up a piece of land in order to have a home for themselves and their families.

When the fishing season is over, time may be profitably spent in clearing the ground and cultivating the soil. They have their own boats to carry out whatever necessaries are required, and, in time to come, to bring back to market the product of labour. Every inducement holds forth. The cost of living on a pre-emption, once the initial expense has been met, is very small compared with that of the city. Vegetables of all kinds may be raised, and chickens pay for themselves in a short time, and fish,

fresh, salted and smoked, are to be had for the catching and curing. House-rent, the cost of fuel and water is entirely abolished, and the expense attached to clothing is next to nothing. Add to this the fact that during the open season there is always the chance to get deer, ducks, geese and grouse. Wild berries grow in abundance. Couple all these with an amount of diligence and intelligent in the cultivation of the soil, and we have, figuratively, “a land of plenty.”

C.L. Cullin, Inspector of Pre-emptions. Report of the Minister of Lands, British Columbia, 1916

lies, in order for Oona River to become an active village. In 1911, brothers John and Adolph Bergman hiked across a portion of the island from Spiller River, looking for homestead land. They were met by Oona River Johnson, who fed the men boiled salmon bellies and encouraged them to settle in the new community. The Bergman brothers established homesteads down river. The pattern of recruitment continued, and Johnson brought the Hansen, Norberg, and Fossem families to the river between 1916 and 1918. Some of the homesteads were subdivided in order to provide families with plots of land.

The settlers made a deliberate choice to concentrate people in the Oona River estuary. They settled on smaller plots of land in order to create a larger community. Rather than farming or ranching on these smaller homesteads, as other settlers in the region were trying to do, Oona River pioneers combined small-scale farming with fishing, logging, trapping, and boat-building to live off the land in a sustainable way.

The early settlers worked hard to clear their homesteads of trees to build houses and gardens. In the later decades when people were not so reliant on livestock or huge gardens, residents allowed the forest to grow back around the houses. One early resident returned to Oona River in the 1990s when she was 85 to see where she grew up. She remembered how hard it was to clear the land. She was shocked when she saw that people had let the forest grow back.

World-wide events impacted the residents from the beginning. The influenza epidemic of 1918 spread throughout the globe, even reaching the small community of Oona River. As the settlers began to fall ill, efforts were made to preserve the health of the people, and also the homesteads. The bachelors living up higher on the hills moved down to the river to be nursed.

Everyone in Oona River became sick except one woman, Mrs. Fossem. A natural immunity to the influenza allowed Mrs. Fossem to take care of the entire community. During the epidemic, she rowed her skiff to every residence and administered a home remedy that smelled of sulphur and molasses. She milked every cow, fed every chicken, and generally kept things running in Oona River until her neighbors could resume their chores. Not one person died of the flu that year in Oona River.

The early settlers continued to encourage new families to move to Oona River from Prince Rupert, and from other outlying homesteads.

Oona River Population (selected dates)		
	Full-time Residents	Students
1905	approx. 6	0
1915-1922	approx 25	0
1923	n/a	13
1925	n/a	21
1927	72	n/a
1928	67	18
1929	67	n/a
1930	67	n/a
1931	57	n/a
1932	57	n/a
1934	79	11
1935	79	n/a
1940	74	0
1942	74	0
1943	37	0
1944	37	0
1945	40	0
1950	25	0
1987	n/a	5
1990	35	n/a
2003	22	0

Note: the population figures from 1927 to 1945 are from the Wrigley's BC Directories for those years and are not reliable. It is likely that where the figure stays the same from one year to the next, no updated population was determined.

Over the years, many families congregated in Oona River to enjoy the benefits of the community, such as the school and the comforts of companionship. The Letts family came from England to settle on an isolated pre-emption in Porcher Inlet. In 1924 George Letts began working as a fisheries patrolman, which took him away from his land for extended periods. So the family moved to Oona River. They loaded their cabin on a float and towed it to Oona River. Emil Quist visited the Iversons on MacCauley Island and convinced them to move into the village because it had a library.

In 1921 the first sawmill was established in Oona River. While the mill has changed hands and location several times, there has been an active sawmill in the village since that time. Oona River has provided lumber for canneries, house construction, and boat-building throughout the North Coast since 1921. The mill continues to be an important source of employment for Oona River residents.

Throughout the twentieth century, the population of Oona River fluctuated with the economy, and was impacted by major events like the two World Wars. Many left to fight in the wars and never returned. Homestead reverted back to the government or were sold in tax sales.

During the Depression in the 1930s the population of Oona River, and Porcher Island as whole, boomed. With no work in the cities and towns, many people moved out to live off the land. Families from Vancouver came to Oona River and were shocked at how well off the people seemed to be. There was no shortage of food because people could fish and hunt, and grow vegetables in their gardens. The forests provided free fuel for the wood stoves. At its peak, Oona River had over 100 residents and there were 1200 on Porcher Island.

During WW II there were many jobs available

again in town, and people moved away. The school was shut down during the war, which further encouraged families to move into town. The population dropped to approximately 25 after the war.

The 1960s and 1970s saw another influx of settlers who sought to escape the threats of the larger cities. The Vietnam War encouraged American pacifists to move to Canada. The threat of nuclear war loomed in the background and many 'ran away' to what they considered a safe haven in the more remote regions of North America. The "Back to the Land" movement resulted in many people leaving the conveniences of city life to try a more "pure" lifestyle fishing and farming.

Economic decline forced many families to leave Oona River steadily over the last 20 years. Changes in the fishing industry encouraged fishermen to sell their licenses and move into town. As the numbers of fishermen on the coast decreased, so did their need for new boats. Wooden boats were also being steadily replaced by steel and fiberglass vessels, and the boatsheds became quiet. Access to timber became more and more restricted for the small-scale loggers, and this much-needed supplement to fishing income was no longer available.

During the last 20 years, people have been joining the Oona River community as weekend or summer residents. A number of families who live in town have secondary residences or cottages in Oona River. The population swells on long weekends and during summer vacation. Oona is also attracting retirees. The homes left by people unable to work in the resource industries have been filled by new people who have finished their careers in town and who enjoy the quiet and beauty of a more remote location.

There are currently 22 full-time residents in Oona River, including two babies.

Part 2: LIVING IN OONA RIVER

Oona River is 40 km by boat from Prince Rupert, close enough to have access to requirements such as health care and shopping needs, but distant enough to ensure an independent lifestyle. There is no local government, and no local police force. The people work together to help each other and achieve their collective goals. Life in Oona River is governed by the tides, and some would say, by coffee time.

An Independent Life

In the past, people could really only travel between town and Oona River on their own boat. Today there is the option of a daily sea plane or a weekly ferry. However, most of the residents of Oona River do have their own boat, ranging from small aluminum speedboats to classic wooden fish boats.

In a fish boat, the trip to town takes about four hours. A strong southeast wind down Ogden Channel, at the mouth of the river, often makes it a rough ride. Closer to Prince Rupert, the mouth of the Skeena is another wavy stretch of water. During most of the last century, Oona River people would travel to town approximately once a month for supplies. The mail run was made every 2 weeks by one person, and that individual often took grocery orders for many people. Every spring and every fall each family would do a major shopping trip to buy the bulk of their supplies. Hundreds of pounds of staples such as flour, sugar, tea, and coffee would be purchased at this time. Most of the other foods came from the sea, forest and gardens.

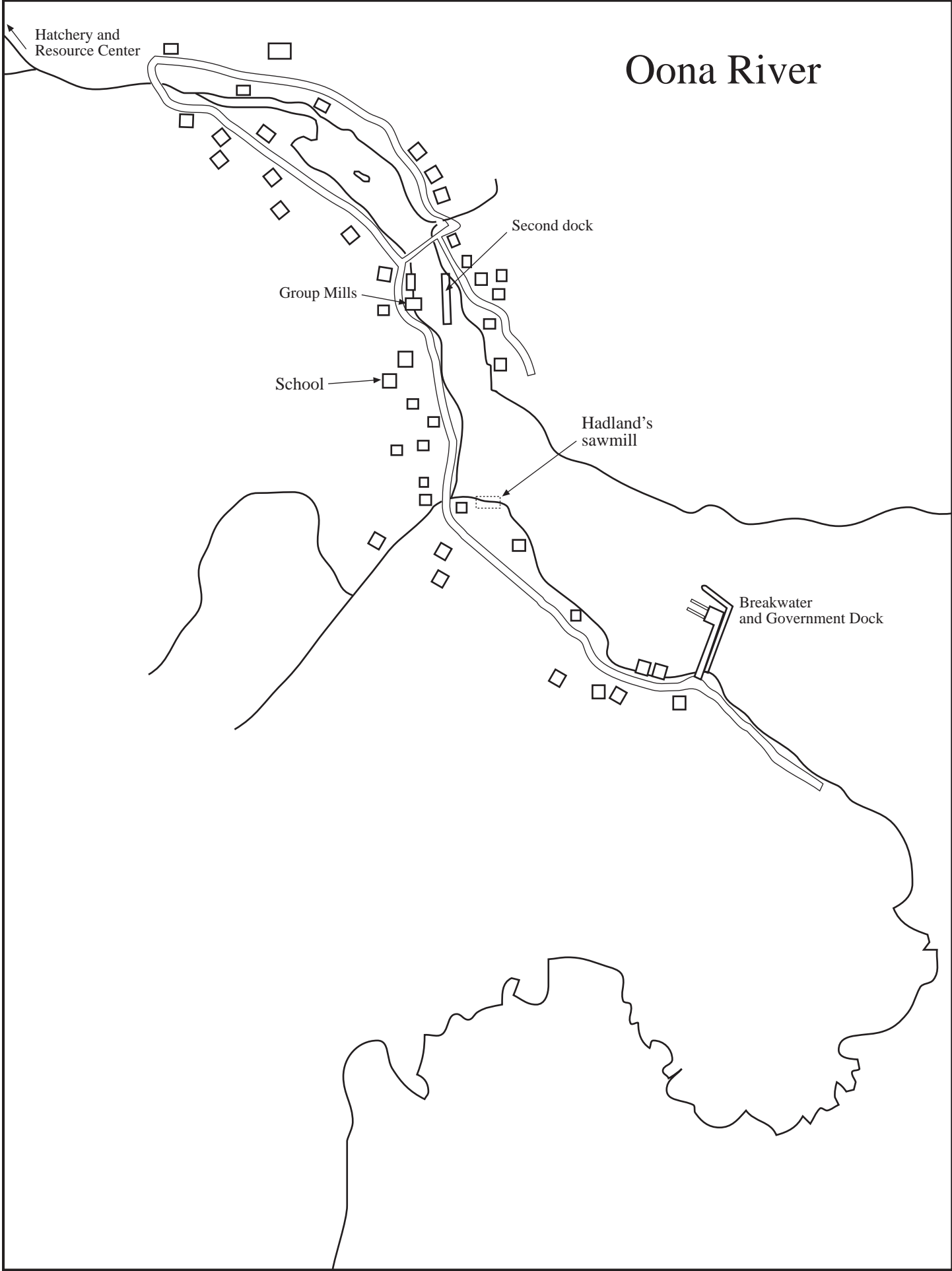
While many of the Oona River residents have been fishermen, all the settlers have used the resources of the sea to feed them. There is a fishing spot just outside of Oona River which resi-

dents refer to as “the Deep Freeze,” because when they want fish they can go there instead of the freezer. Jarred salmon has always been an important staple. Sockeye are filleted and stuffed into mason jars. The jars are boiled in water for four hours; today some people use pressure cookers which require less cooking time. Halibut was also jarred, although today it is usually frozen. Salmon and herring are salted and later pickled with onions and spices. Salmon has always been smoked in the autumn months. There are still two large smokehouses in Oona River. Clams and cockles are gathered during low tide in the autumn months, and crab pots continue to provide Dungeness crabs on a regular basis.

Seaweed and dead salmon carcasses are gathered from the river to fertilize the gardens of Oona River. The cold, wet climate of the north coast limits the crops of these gardens, but root vegetables thrive. Potatoes, carrots, onions, beets, turnips, cabbages, peas and rhubarb have been important harvests and are still grown. Past generations also had raspberries, currants, apples, and cherries. The fruit trees and bushes of Oona River are not as abundant as in past generations. Geese and deer have increased in population and have limited the berries. It is still possible to find some wild cranberries, lingonberries, salal berries, mossberries, huckleberries and blueberries. People have always had root cellars to store these harvests, and have jarred vegetables and fruits, and made jam.

The deer population on Porcher Island has fluctuated over the years. Ralph Letts remembers when he was a teenager in the 1970s there were very few to be found. Currently, there are many deer available and game meat is plentiful. Residents have always hunted deer when they

Oona River



were in abundance. In the past the meat was jarred; most of it is frozen today. Early pioneers also ate seal meat on occasion. Norm Iverson remembers trying boiled seal meat when homesteaders from Merrick Island came to visit Oona River.

Oona River settlers were never focused on livestock farming, but kept some animals for their own use. Some had cows and goats for milk, and chickens for eggs and meat. The late John Bergman was the last to have cows in Oona River; they were gone by the 1950s. Families kept chickens until very recently. During World War II when meat was rationed, the Iverson family raised giant Flemish rabbits for meat. They sold the rabbits to other homesteaders and to logging camps. There were never any horses in Oona River.

Fur farming and trapping were also a source of income to some of the community. During the 1930s there was a fox farm on Merrick Island, close by to Oona River. The late John Bergman had a mink farm on Porcher Island. When the price of fur dropped significantly, keeping mink became too expensive so John released the animals into the wild. These pure-bred mink began to breed with the local population and now Porcher Island mink have higher quality fur than mainland animals. The mink are larger and their fur is darker than wild stock. This has proven quite helpful for the trappers.

The late Fred Letts had a trapline on the lower portion of the river which is held today by his son Freddy. Johnny and Winnie Bergman, who each hold a trapline on either side of the Letts line, trap mink and weasel. During the 1950s trapping provided quite a good winter income and there were three fur buyers in Prince Rupert. A mink pelt was worth about \$40. In a good year, Johnny Bergman would trap 100

mink. However, during the last few decades the price of furs has steadily dropped in reaction to changing tastes and animal rights activism. A mink pelt is only worth \$10 to \$18. Oona River trappers continue to trap in order to keep their lines active, but it is no longer a lucrative activity. The furs are now mailed to a distant broker.

The self-sufficient pioneer lifestyle persisted in Oona River later than in other communities partly because there was no regular source of electricity until 1990. Wood stoves have always been the primary source of heat for homes. Most people only use electric heat when they are away from home for long periods of time. Each family uses approximately 10 m of wood per year to heat their home. Most of this wood is beach-combed, although some comes from fallen trees behind the houses.

There are many logs floating in the channels and resting on the beaches around Porcher Island. Oona River people have beachcombed these logs for decades. Some logs have escaped from booms being towed from logging camps to mills. Others have fallen into the water from landslides, or been lifted from distant beaches by wave and tidal action.

These logs are dragged from the beach using a chain and a rope, or hammered with a "dog", a stake that is attached to a line, and towed home. If the log is of high-quality, it can be sold to the sawmill. Lower quality wood is used for heat. After drying out, the log is sawn with a chainsaw, chopped with an axe, and piled under the house or in a woodshed.

Before the power line, Oona River was lit by generators and light plants. These were run on diesel fuel and were turned on for a few hours every night. The sound of the generators was a sound special to Oona River. One could walk from one house to the next without a light, fol-

lowing the hum of the generator.

Kerosene refrigerators provided cool storage for food. The tank was filled with kerosene every two weeks. A few homes used wind power. The windmills, along with many of the generators and fridges came to Oona River from the Prairies. When those communities received power, they sold their electricity-supplying equipment to remote BC communities without hydro lines. One resident in Oona River still uses a windmill to power his home.

When the BC hydro line reached Oona River in 1990, life became somewhat easier. Washing machines and electric stoves made many household chores much simpler. Deep freezers revolutionized food processing. Fish and meat could be frozen instead of jarred, salted or smoked. While people still jar, salt, and smoke food because they enjoy the taste and variety, food preservation was simplified.

Regular telephone service came to Oona River only as recently as 1999. Prior to that the community kept in contact with each other by VHF radio. Every home had the radio on all day. Neighbors could check in with each other, invite people over, and share news. The community bought a radio phone during the 1960s. The phone was installed in Johnny and Winnie Bergman's house. In order to provide some privacy, the phone was put in the bathroom. Johnny recalls that to express his displeasure with a price offered on some of his lumber, he placed the phone in the toilet and flushed it. Later, a radio phone was located at the schoolhouse. Now a satellite system provides full service including internet.

Oona River Customs

While Oona River was settled by people from a variety of different countries, the families that

"dug in their roots" in the middle of the century were primarily of Swedish descent. Norm Iverson's parents were Norwegian but as a young boy in the 1930s, he learned how to speak Swedish so that he could play with the other children in the village, like Johnny Bergman, who later became his business partner. Many of the customs that continue today in Oona River reflect this Swedish influence.

When people are working in the village, the day is structured around the social coffee breaks at 10 am and 3 pm. In these past, these breaks sometimes occurred at the sawmill or a boatshed and often just included a handful of men. The women of the village might meet separately, often with their sewing and quilting projects. Sometimes everyone gathered around the kitchen table of one of the homes, men, women, and children.

The three o'clock coffee break has been described as 'religion' in Oona River. These days, the coffee time is at Johnny and Winnie Bergman's house. Tea and coffee and a snack such as pickled fish or homemade cakes are served. The break is a chance for people to visit and get caught up on news. There are often intense debates about politics or government policy regarding fishing and logging. The problems of the world are often solved at three p.m. in Oona River. Jan Lemon suggests that coffee time is ingrained in Oona River people—at 3 p.m. your body tells you it's time for coffee! When Jan visited Sweden she noticed that everyone there stops for coffee at that time.

The Swedish tradition of celebrating Christmas on Christmas Eve is widely practiced in Oona River. There are a variety of foods that people enjoy that have been passed on through the generations from the Scandinavian immigrants.

One such food is pickled herring. This is a

popular food in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, and is made today in Oona River. Pacific herring are much smaller than those found in the North Sea, but the recipe is the same.

The herring are filleted and salted in a 100% brine. The fish can be kept this way for many months. When some pickled herring is desired, some of the fish are left to soak in fresh water for 24 hours. It is necessary to change the water a few times to remove the excess salt. The fish is then chopped into bite-size chunks. Onions are sliced, and the jars are prepared. Then the layering begins: Herring, onions, pickling spice. Herring, onions, pickling spice. When the jar is full, vinegar and salt are added to cover the herring. The mixture is left to pickle for 3 days. The pickled herring can last refrigerated for several weeks, but is usually eaten quickly!

During the last 30 years, Oona River became famous in the region for its May Sports Day. This custom evolved out of a mix of the English May Day celebrations, and the Swedish tradition of marking Midsummer. In the past there were numerous celebrations centered around school picnics, with May poles and informal sports competitions and games. During the 1970s this became formalized in the form of a Sports Day on the Victoria Day long weekend in May. Adults and children compete in a 50 m sprint (earlier a 100 yard dash), the long jump, standing broad jump, shot put, three-legged race, and boating events. The Oona River Sports Days have attracted people from all over the north coast.

For many years, Oona River was well-known for the community quilt which the women created each year. Through the winter they worked together to sew a unique quilt based on a theme, from flowers, to fish, to boatbuilding in Oona River. In the spring they displayed the quilt in Prince Rupert and sold raffle tickets to raise money for the community. The new quilt was

always highly anticipated, and tickets sold quickly. Today there are Oona River quilts displayed in homes all over the world. For a number of reasons, in recent years it has not been possible to continue this community project

The School

"The thing I liked about raising my kids in Oona River is, there's a freedom there they don't have in the cities. It's a great environment for kids. They can go boating, build rafts, beachcomb and there's lots of opportunity to do family things." Jan Lemon, quoted in the *Prince Rupert Daily News*, May 7, 1987.

One of the biggest challenges for families living in rural communities such as Oona River is providing an education for school-aged children. Parents are forced to weigh the importance of schooling against other qualities of life which they find in a small community. Often the decision is made when students are about to enter high school.

The situation is compounded when the population falls and there are not enough students to support a local school. Decisions about educational options such as home-schooling or moving



to an urban centre must be made when children are much younger.

The first school in Oona River was established in 1919, in a goat shed on land donated by Neil McCarthy. The community worked together to log and saw by hand the lumber required for a log cabin schoolhouse. The new school was opened in 1921 and Oona River children gathered there to learn until 1999.

In many ways, the school was, and still is, the social centre of Oona River. The teacher, as well as teaching daily classes, organized important community affairs such as the Christmas or Easter concert. The schoolhouse is much more than a classroom, serving as a multipurpose building used for meetings, dances, dinners and other celebrations. It has kitchen and a first aid clinic. The Ralph Edwards Memorial Library is also attached to the building.

A large gymnasium was constructed beside the school in 1976. Community members cooperatively logged the wood for the gym on a small timber claim. The logs were sawed at the mill and a dozen residents worked on the construction of the building.



Oona River School, 1991

The school was closed during WWII because there was no teacher available. The low population of the community after war resulted in the school remaining closed until 1953. There was a professional teacher running the school until the 1980s. The shrinking population meant that the Prince Rupert school board was no longer required to provide a teacher. Instead, the children started a correspondence program. They went to the school to work on the correspondence under the guidance of a tutor. The school board provided some funds to pay for a tutor. Parents contributed to the salary on a per child basis. At one point, community members beach-combed logs and sold them to raise money for the tutor's salary.

Families began to move into town so their children could attend school during the 1980s. Prior to this, Oona River children had often boarded in town for the later years of high school. With fewer kids in the community, and no professional teacher, some parents chose education in town for their children. For some families, this choice meant separation. For example, the men who worked at the sawmill remained in Oona River while their wives moved into Prince Rupert with the children. These families are reunited every few weekends. The closure of the school has had tremendous impact on the population of Oona River.

People have been logging in the Oona River area since first settlement. Early homesteaders felled and sawed the lumber for their houses. Many of the pioneers combined fishing and logging, using handlogging to provide winter income.

Part 3: FORESTRY IN OONA RIVER

The Mills

Sawmills went hand in hand with early settlement. One of the earliest mills in the region was at Murder Cove on McCauley Island. A Mr. Swedemark ran this mill into the 1920s, supplying box lumber to the canneries, and house lumber to homesteaders.

The first mill in Oona River was constructed by Julius Hadland in 1921 at the curve of the river. His family of thirteen children worked with him. The mill specialized in providing box lumber to the canneries. The wood was built into crates to hold the cans of salmon produced each year and shipped to England and Europe. Hadland bought logs from handloggers and logged some areas himself. Some of the Hadland children later moved to Toby Point on Digby Island and had a mill there. They provided lumber for the barracks that were built close by during World War II.

In 1924 John Group arrived from Sweden, where he had been a shoemaker. He bought the Hadland mill in 1936, but it burned down later that year. John Group moved it from its first location to further up the river. He didn't log himself, but bought all his material from handloggers. His primary markets were lumber for boatbuilding and heavy timbers for

the cannery docks. Group built a large boatshed beside the sawmill. He built almost 90 boats in Oona River until his return to Sweden in the 1950s.

During the Second World War, the mill was the economic centre of the community. There was a building boom in Prince Rupert with barracks, offices and military installations being constructed. The sawmill was exempt from the fuel restrictions in place during the war. Mills and fishermen were still able to access the rationed fuel.

Johnny Bergman and Norm Iverson worked for John Group at the mill and boatshed, and worked as independent loggers. They bought the mill in 1958 when John Group wanted to retire. Johnny and Norm combined logging and sawmilling, as well as buying logs from handloggers and beachcombers.

The sawmill kept us here at home. We liked that. Everyone had kids... At times we bought all our wood. We were really busy milling. One operation was A-frame logging in Baker inlet and we were saw-

Group Mills. This is the way the mill looked when Norm Iverson and Johnny Bergman bought it from John Group in 1958. The boat tied up in front is John Group's boat Viner.



ing all year long. He used to feed us logs the whole year. We did pretty much all the lumber that Philpott Evitt (a Prince Rupert lumber store) needed. We logged when it was necessary. When we couldn't meet the prices, or when we couldn't buy close enough to the margin, we logged our own wood.

The mill supplied a great deal of lumber to the local canneries. Rather than box lumber, they specialized in the larger lumber required for pilings, docks, net racks and buildings. Johnny Bergman remembers how things started to happen at the beginning of the fishing season:

Every year spring came along and everything started to hum. Mid-March the canneries started up the slough and at Humpback Bay. People came in from all over, the Indians from all the villages. The Japanese workers, until the war. You could literally feel it happening and you saw everyone, you know everyone. New floats were built or new net racks. The mill was busy.

During the last 30 years, the markets have changed. One by one the canneries closed as fish processing became centralized in Prince Rupert and Vancouver. There were not as many docks, not as many net racks. The size of the fishing fleet has been steadily reduced since the 1970s. The need for boatbuilding lumber has similarly declined. During the economic downturn in Prince Rupert caused by the fishing industry's decline and the local pulpmill's inconsistent employment opportunities, the housing lumber market shrunk. The mill used to do its largest cut in the early or late spring for construction lumber. People in town would be renovating their patios, fences etc. This market has steadily declined.

The mill equipment is essentially the same as

it was in the 1920s. It is a labour intensive mill that is designed for processing large logs. The newer sawmills that were established after World War II couldn't handle bigger timbers; the mass production mills are set up for certain standard sizes of logs and Group Mills has become known as a specialty mill for long timbers. For several decades the mill produced much of the local bridge timbers, the heavy cants for bridge building. More recently, the mill has provided specialty cuts for architectural designs using Northwest Coast First Nations such as the Museum of Northern BC in Prince Rupert.

In 1983 Johnny's two sons Karl and David bought Group Mills from Johnny and Norm. The availability of handlogging claims has steadily declined since the 1970s and therefore there is less independent wood available for the mill to purchase. Karl and David have had to log most of the timber for the mill themselves during the last two decades. The mill is much the same as it always was. When it is running, three to five men are working the machinery. This provides important jobs that keep people living in the community.

In the 1990s the availability of timber has been a growing issue. The mill used to run all winter long. There have been years recently when it hasn't run at all.

Logging

Handlogging was common all over the coast of British Columbia from the 1860s until the 1960s. Handloggers identified a stretch of coastline and applied to the Ministry of Forests for the right to log it. They paid the government a stumpage or royalty on the timber cut from that claim. A handlogging claim stretched 1.5 km along the shoreline, and 200 metres inland. One or two men would selectively log this area, falling

the trees with axes and whipsaws, later chain saws. They then slid or towed the logs into the water and towed them to a mill behind their boat. Handloggers sold to the many mills that dotted the coast of British Columbia, as well as using the lumber for their own needs, building homes and boats.

Johnny Bergman remembers how they would choose which trees to take:

We had a simple system during handlogging. We would reach around the trunk of the tree, and if our hands could touch on the other side, we wouldn't cut it. We would leave it to grow.

This type of logging allowed loggers to return to the same area several times their lifetimes. Johnny Bergman's sons have logged where he logged decades before.

They talk about Grenville Channel being 'pristine'. I have cut millions of board feet out of there, but you can't see it. Oona River has been logged three times in my lifetime. With selective logging we left the forest behind us. It filled itself back in, it seeded itself majestically

Small scale logging, such as handlogging was sustainable and low impact. In fact, there is evidence that in some circumstances the logging enhanced the environment. The late Fred Letts and Louis Locker had a small logging claim in Kumealon inlet in the 1950s. There had been a natural slide in the stream there decades before and due to the blockage of the creek, the salmon run disappeared. When they logged the area, Fred and Louis cleared the log jam. That year, fish appeared in the creek again.

Johnny Bergman emphasizes the skills that come from growing up logging:

I've been in the woods all my life, since I could walk. I've been watching it all the

time. You get very good at being in the woods. I know I can take wood out anywhere without making a mess of the forest.

In the 1950s Norm Iverson and Johnny Bergman invested in an A-frame to do machine-logging. Around that time Axel Hansen and Fred Letts also had an A-frame system and were logging larger timber sales. An A-frame was a frame built on a float with a block system suspended from it. A cable ran from the tree to the float and a "donkey" was used to yard the log into the water. The early donkeys were fueled by steam engines but by the 1950s they had diesel motors. They hauled in the cable, thus yarding the log mechanically from the forest. The A-frame system allowed small logging operators to log further up the hillside from the shoreline, increasing the size of the logging sales.

Machine logging was encouraged by the Ministry of Forests after World War II. However, during the early 1950s the stumpage rose rapidly from \$3-4/1000 board feet to \$17.50. This was no longer profitable for the small operators. Norm and Johnny sold their A-frame to a larger logging company and focused on handlogging and milling. Some of the other independent loggers stopped logging completely.

Johnny's sons David and Karl were handlogging in the 1980s after they took over the mill, but were encouraged by the Ministry of Forestry to switch over to machine-logging. They bought an A-frame and started logging slightly larger units in 1988. The Bergmans still focused on smaller blocks because they were milling their wood, not selling the logs to brokers. The policy shifted again in the 1995 and they were forced off the water completely. Forestry policy moved away from water-based logging due to concerns about aquatic impact and fisheries health. Since

1995 the loggers have been limited to land-based timber which requires extensive road-building and clear-cut logging.

Competitive stumpage rates have increased the cost of logging. The logs now need to be sent to the competitive market in order to meet those costs and are no longer supplying a local market. over the last 5 to 7 years, the Bergmans' wood have been moving further away from regional markets. More and more of the logs are being exported round (unprocessed) and less and less are going through the mill.

The loggers in Oona River attain access to timber through the Small Business Forest Enterprise Program (SBFEP) at the Ministry of Forests. This program provides a percentage of the province's annual allowable cut to smaller, independent operators. Access to timber has become a significant issue for the Group Mills loggers, and for other small operators. Handlogging sales are now practically non-existent. Timber can be accessed on a small scale through "Dead and Down Sales." The loggers can remove dead trees and those already fallen. They cannot fall green timber. These sales provide a small amount of timber.

The SBFEP has not been able to provide many timber sales that are the right size for Group Mills' needs. Many of the sales that become available are very large (15 000 cubic meters or more). The sales that do come up are subject to competitive bid and the stumpage or royalty rates are often extremely high. The cost per meter of wood makes it very difficult to log and mill for a profit that allows the Oona River people to make a living. For several years in the 1990s the mill was silent.

During the early 1990s Group Mills applied for a 'value added timber sale.' Access to the timber was dependent on processing the wood to a

greater degree. The mill purchased a remanufacturing mill which further processed the wood into high grade construction timber. The logging for this value-added sale was divided into three cut blocks, over three years. However, over the course of these years, the stumpage on the wood increased more than four-fold from \$12 per cubic metre to \$54. This stumpage rate was higher than the price of the finished lumber and therefore the logging was never finished. Stumpage had caused another shut-down for the Group Mills, just as it had in the 1950s.

Stumpage rates fluctuate with the market value of wood so that while an operator created a logging plan based on a certain stumpage rate, the rate can change before the logging is finished, drastically changing the profit margin.

In 1996 Johnny Bergman applied for a Woodlot License. The woodlot is a way to access a small amount of timber over 5 years. He applied for and was granted a 400 hectare plot of land that adjoined his property in Oona River. A road was built and two phases of logging have been completed.

In 1998 Group Mills participated in an Experimental Forest project with the Ministry of Forests. The project was designed to investigate sustainable logging and regeneration in areas of high sensitivity. The research involved water sampling, timber typing and targeted harvesting. They tried four different treatments at low productivity sites to determine the best regeneration methods.

Through the woodlot and research logging, the Bergmans are trying to access timber in creative ways, in order to keep the mill running. They now have road building equipment and land-based logging equipment. They run a high-lead operation for yarding the wood out of the cut. Karl works a high lead tower that is stabilized

with cables attached to 4 to 6 stumps surrounding the machine. David attaches a choker to each log, which runs to a cable in the tower. The tower then yanks the log up the hill and another worker releases the choker. A tractor then moves the log into a pile.

Karl and David run the Oona River mill and its logging operations very differently to the large forestry companies. They have made a deliberate choice to invest in labour instead of machinery. Their logging and milling operations are therefore much slower than other contemporary operations. They employ more men per cubic meter of timber than other companies. If they invested in labour-saving machinery, they would need to cut more trees to pay for that machinery. Instead, they log slowly and provide more jobs for community members.

Johnny compares a family-run, small-scale operation to the large forest companies:

The companies like Weyerhaeuser, the owners wouldn't know a tree from a halibut. They are just businessmen who have never entered the woods. They hire professional foresters. We're hands-on. If you have to rig a tree, you rig a tree. If you have to build a road...

Johnny would like to see more timber available to small operators like his sons. He would like to see small holdings of timber available to families and communities.

My wish is to enhance small scale forestry. We should look to Northern Europe—they have the opposite to what we have with the corporations owning everything. In Europe there are timber holdings in small farms. They are old countries and they still have trees. We are a young country but there is pressure that we're cutting faster than we're planting

Logging and the Environment

The traditional way to harvest trees in Oona River was selective cutting. Handloggers would cut down only 25-50% of the trees in their timber sale. Johnny Bergman described how they would only harvest the large trees, and the particular species for which there was a market at the time. In his view, this enhanced the forest by providing room for the smaller trees to grow. By thinning the forest, he was allowing light and nutrients to reach the saplings, and they would grow tall and strong to be harvested several decades later: "With small scale logging, the forest fills out by itself."

Forestry policy has shifted away from this kind of selective or partial logging because of fears of high-grading – that loggers are only taking the most valuable timber and leaving a less valuable forest behind them. There is also a focus on preserving old growth timber.

Johnny emphasizes that old growth trees have outworn their usefulness. He suggests that forcing loggers to log trees of secondary quality doesn't make any sense: "It's like telling a farmer he can't harvest full-grown potatoes because they look so pretty."

Similarly, Johnny's business partner Norm compares selective logging to farming: "If you grow a garden and you need carrots for dinner, you take the biggest and let the little ones be. They are better for being thinned out a bit."

In fact, Johnny and his sons feel that good forestry is quite a lot like farming. They envisioned the forests of the north coast like a farm of trees that they harvested several times over their lifetimes. Karl Bergman recalls, "We were taught to leave the smaller trees to grow so someone else can log it. You'll be back yourself in 30 years to log it again if you do it right..."

Karl and David returned during the 1980s to

areas that their father had logged before them, and they planned to go back to those areas again in a few decades. Karl described how they planned their future: "Whenever I logged, I always thought I would be back to log it later in my life. We made notes on charts about places 'good timber but a little small yet, come back in 20 years'. But that's impossible now." Since the early 1990s the Bergmans have been limited to land-based logging, and they are required to clearcut and then replant the areas they log. They are not permitted to selectively log.

While the way that they log has been changed by new forestry policies, the way that the Bergmans run their business continues to follow the Oona River practice of small-scale, low impact resource use. Karl explains that he and David have chosen to remain a small and slow operation. That way they employ more people and need to harvest less wood. Karl believes that the forest industry would be better if the pace of harvest was slowed down.

"If we want to make everything better, we should just slow down the logging. What's the hurry? Years ago, you had 6 to 10 people working for an operation with \$100 000 net worth. Now they're using grapple yarders worth millions and three guys are taking 600 metres of wood a day. It's the speed we've decided to deforest at that is the problem.

I can buy a million dollar grapple yarder, but I will have to give all the money to the bank. If we bought that equipment, we would need to log more to pay for it."

Place-based family logging is the way Johnny would like to see forestry done in the future:

"I hope it goes to smaller [operations]. If they want good stewardship in the woods, they need to put it in the hands

of people like us, families. We get ownership and we take pride in it.... They need to put it in the hands of families that can tend to the forest, like us. We are passing it along to our children."

Karl suggests that local logging by people who were committed to the area resulted in more sustainable harvests.

We've lost a lot of people who cared how they handlogged. Now a guy will just be a logger, he'll take what he can get. The old guys cared about the places because they knew they would come back to those places... The small loggers cared about the environment. You farmed it—you looked forward to coming back. It wouldn't feed you again if you didn't do it right.

Karl makes a distinction between big and small forestry operations:

Most people who are resource-based are not greedy, especially the individuals. Corporations are greedy—they are not hands-on. They want profit for their shareholders.

Resource harvesters in Oona River don't want to profit at the cost of the resources, but rather, want to harvest them sustainably and make a moderate living.

Where people are self-sufficient, we don't take more than we need. In fishing or logging. I don't want to log 100 000m a year. I just want to putter along and leave it so that after me someone else can do it. And I want to keep some guys working. We self-manage our resources.

Oona River residents tend to be critical of the urban-centered environmental movements focus on the 'pristine' forests of British Columbia. The Bergmans like to use Grenville Channel as an

example. This channel is the route for the ferries and cruise ships that move tourists up and down the Inside Passage, which is famous for its 'wilderness.' Yet the Bergmans and other Oona River loggers have removed millions of feet of timber from that channel. That particular forest has been a harvest site for the entire twentieth century, yet looks untouched to the tourist eye.

Karl suggests that there is a double standard about preserving the environment outside of the city.

From a logger's point of view, look at the road building. The earth is turned up, there are ditches, and it looks like a war zone. The environmentalists come and take pictures. But when you're in a city, developing subdivisions, it looks exactly the same. No one complains there. When I'm done in 20-30 years, you'll never know I've been there. But that Walmart will always be there.

Peter Brown suggests that the difference lies in a long term commitment to place:

We look at a tree and know that it will grow again. The environmentalists look at a barren landscape that was logged and think it's hopeless.

Jake Vanderheide is also concerned about the power of urban environmentalists to prevent even sustainable resource harvesting from being permitted.

The Johnny Bergmans of the world, those people are the environmentalists. The ones squawking are protectionists. The ones working in their environment know about it. The others are dangerous.

Jake also emphasizes the natural conservation that takes place in Oona River through need-based resource use:

We are conservationists by the aspects that we don't take a lot to live. We make a moderate livelihood. It's a lifestyle thing for us. Places like this are about lifestyle. Lifestyle doesn't require hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

David Bergman suggests a difference between environmentalists and conservationists.

Environmentalists want to preserve everything in entirety. They want to wrap it up in cellophane forever. Conservationists use the resources and if they can't sustain you, you stop using them.

While the Bergmans lament the end of selective handlogging, their participation in experimental forestry has proven to them that controlled clearcutting has its own ecological benefits. They are confident that they will be able to log the woodlot in Oona River sustainably and will develop a new forest on that site.

PART 4: FISHING IN OONA RIVER

Fishing Methods

People from Oona River have fished salmon, crabs, halibut and other ocean resources since the early part of the twentieth century. Most of the boats built in Oona River were gillnetters or trollers for fishing salmon.

Gillnetting occurs primarily in inside waters, at the mouth of the Skeena River, or in the channels and islands along the coast. A gillnet is rolled off of a drum at the back of the boat and it hangs like a curtain in the water. The individual meshes of the net are big enough for the salmon's head to pass through. The gills prevent the fish from backing out of the net. The gillnet is rolled back on and the fish are picked out one by one.

Trolling boats comb the outside waters, in Dixon Entrance and the west coast of the Queen Charlotte Islands, catching salmon with individual hooks. A troller has two wooden poles that are suspended from each side of the boat. There are three lines attached to each pole and each line has approximately 20 hooks suspended every 2 to 3 metres from the bottom. The lines are pulled into the boat using gurdies, and the salmon are removed one by one off the hooks. The salmon are lured onto the hooks by flashers which shimmer in the water, shiny brass spoons, and plastic hoochies which look like small fish, shrimp or squid.

Halibut and cod are caught by longline. A lead-weighted line is dropped to the bottom of the ocean, with buoyant line and buoys marking each end of the gear. On the leadline are large hooks baited with herring, salmon or squid. The line is hauled back onto the boat with a hydraulic drum and the halibut and cod are pulled onboard. The halibut are dressed and iced and brought to the fishplant. Some of the cod are sold live.

Crabs are caught by attaching large traps to longline, or by dropping individual traps to the bottom, with a buoyant line and line marking each spot. The traps are baited with salmon heads or other bait. The crabs crawl in to eat the bait but the trap door does not allow them to escape. They are brought live to the fishplant.

Changing Policies

The salmon fishing season used to stretch from May until October during the 1950s, with fishermen working five days a week. The fishermen would be away from the village for long periods of time. The areas and times when salmon can be harvested have steadily decreased since that era. The fishing season has been steadily shortened in order to conserve wild salmon stocks. Now the gillnet season is only a few weeks of the summer, with less than 24 hour openings. The size of the fishing fleet has also been reduced.

Most of the men in Oona River and some of the women fished commercially at some point in their career. Prior to the 1970s the fisheries were effectively open to anyone. A young man could build a boat and buy a \$10 license and go fish salmon for the summer. If he needed to, he could fish crabs or prawns during the winter. When Freddy Letts and his father built the *Oona Maid*, the boat cost less than \$8000 to build. When Johnny Bergman built the *Linnea* in the early 1950s he only spent \$700.

The government became concerned about the size of the salmon fleet and in 1968 implemented license limitation under the "Davis Plan." The goal was to reduce production costs and increase efficiency by weeding out the part-time fishermen from the salmon fleet. The fishery

became closed to new participants, unless they bought the license from an existing fisherman. Immediately the prices of boats increased and within one year the value of the fleet had risen 10% overall. A commission established to study the industry in the early 1970s encouraged further reduction and the government initiated license buybacks to remove more fishermen from the industry. Fishing license increased steadily in value. It became harder and harder for new fishermen to buy themselves a job. Today, to buy a boat and one salmon license would cost approximately \$200 000.

Further changes in fisheries policy have made it harder to make a living catching fish. In the 1970s a salmon license also gave a fisherman the right to catch a number of other species: halibut, crab, prawns, shrimp, cod and others. After salmon season, if the fisherman had not made enough to carry him through the winter, he could fish for other species. Gradually, each of these fisheries became removed from the salmon license and required a separate 'tab'. Halibut license limitation came in 1978; some Oona River fishermen did not have enough history of halibut harvests to qualify for a license and they were excluded from the fishery.

Crab fishing had long been a winter supplement for Oona River fishermen. If the salmon season was poor, they spent the winter hauling crab pots from the sheltered bays and channels close to the village. The price was low, but it kept families fed and warm until the salmon season, or until the weather was good enough for handlogging. Oona River fishermen only fished crab if they needed to. If the salmon season provided them with enough income to get by, they tied up their boats. They did not try to get rich fishing. When license limitation came to the crab fishery, the government granted licenses to boats with a

certain harvest level over a three year period, 1983-1985. While some Oona River fishermen had fished thousands of pounds of crabs over the years, they did not qualify for crab licenses because they had left the crabs alone after good salmon seasons. Fishermen who had used crab fishing to supplement their income when necessary were left without access to this fishery.

During the 1990s salmon fishing became more complicated and less successful. In 1996 the Department of Fisheries and Oceans implemented two major policy changes that encouraged many fishermen to leave the industry. First, fishermen were no longer allowed to troll and gillnet, they had to choose one gear type. Many fishermen trolled in the spring and fall and gillnetted in the summer, to take advantage of different runs of fish. They were no longer permitted this flexibility. As well, a salmon license had been valid for the entire coast of British Columbia. In an effort to spread out the fleet the government divided the coast into 3 areas and fishermen were forced to choose one area to fish. If they wanted to fish more than one area, they had to buy another license (costing by this time \$100 000).

A series of government buybacks continued to reduce the fishing fleet. The government bought fishing licenses and retired them. Many Oona River fishermen sold their licenses to the buybacks and moved away. At the beginning of the 1990s there were still a dozen fishing boats in Oona River. In 2003 there are only two full-time resident fishing boats, employing three people.

The decline in fishing severely impacted Oona River. As a remote community, residents need to be self-employed or work in one of the primary resource industries in order to be able to live in the village. When fishermen sold out of the fishing industry, they moved away from the community to find other work opportunities.

Oona River Hatchery

By 1980 some of the trollers living in Oona River had observed that coho salmon stocks had declined. Fred Letts knew that when his father George came to Oona River in the 1920s he could walk across the river on the backs of the salmon. George Letts worked as a fisheries patrolman during the 1920s and 30s, protecting fish runs throughout the north coast. Fred was determined to do something to combat coho stock depletion.

The Department of Fisheries implemented a program to encourage public involvement in salmonid enhancement on the north coast. The Department provided funding for building materials and the community provided volunteer labour to build a small salmon hatchery. They did a preliminary assessment, built a waterline and an incubation and rearing box. In 1981 they took the first brood stock. There were not many coho in the river. It took the volunteers daily walks along the creek for two months to find the 5 females and 10 males they used to build the run. But early efforts proved successful and during the next cycle they were able to double the brood stock. The river now has 500 to 1000 salmon returning annually and this year the volunteers caught 15 females in half an hour for eggs.

The first small hatchery at Oona River was so successful that the community received funding to build a larger facility. In 1999 they relocated up river to a new hatchery and resource centre complex. The centre boasts a salmon hatchery and saltwater shellfish rearing facility. In addition, it has a wet and dry lab complex, computer facilities, a conference area, and apartment with kitchen and bathroom to accommodate seminars, workshops and field schools.

The research and resource centre is poised to support mariculture, salmonid enhancement, eco-education, and forestry related projects.

The Oona River Stream Enhancement Program of 1997-98 involved the assessment and enhancement of 15 streams in the area. Coho density and creek carrying capacity were measured, habitat values were summarized, and general stream inventories were done.

The non-profit society Oona River Resources Association (ORRA) was created in 2000 to deal with the community's conservation and resource-related activities. One objective is to obtain a lease for an oyster farm. Mariculture, the farming of shellfish, is a growing industry and foreshore tenures for oysters and other species will soon be available on the North Coast. A pilot study in 1997 proved that oyster farming is viable on the beaches around Oona River. It is hoped that mariculture may provide some local jobs in the future.

There are also plans to install a fish counting fence at Oona River in the near future. This will enumerate coho, pink salmon and steelhead as they return to the river. This will establish Oona River as an indicator system and reference river for salmon productivity in the region.

ORRA is also pursuing the development of eco-tourism on Porcher Island. Trail-building programs have begun to establish the infrastructure for hiking and kayaking. Several community members already participate in sports fishing charters and there are further opportunities in that industry. Fishermen and former fishermen are now using their boats to transport tourists to the fishing grounds to catch salmon and halibut.

PART 5: BOATBUILDING

Boatbuilding combines knowledge and skills from both the fishing and lumber industries, and it is no surprise that fishing boats were built in Oona River right from the beginning. People need them to earn a living, and also depend on them for transportation. Constructing boats for the Skeena River canneries and for independent fishermen generated an income for a number of residents. Approximately 130 boats have been launched from Oona River boatsheds over the years.

One of the first boatbuilders was Emil Quist, who built the double-ender *Anna* in his boatshed in the slough in 1916. He cut the planks with a 3 h.p. Wee-McGregor drag saw equipped with a rip-saw blade. This was a small portable gasoline-powered saw that was a pre-cursor to the chain saw. Later he bought red and yellow cedar from the Hadland sawmill. After he had fished a boat for a few years, Emil would sell it and build a larger or improved boat for himself.



John Group who built nearly 90 fishing vessels in Oona River.

The busiest boat builder was John Group, who built close to 90 wooden trollers and gillnetters in the thirty years he lived in Oona River. Many of those were built for Skeena River salmon canneries. In the 1930s, it is remembered, he was paid \$150 per boat. After emigrating to Canada from Sweden, he came to the north coast to fish. Though he wasn't a trained shipwright, he decided he would build himself a better boat. "In October, 1927," he wrote, "I came to Oona with small boat, 23 feet, after fishing, and started to build the boat *Amor*, 30 feet. It was a happy time them days."

Another busy boatshed was Iverson's. After arriving from McCauley Island, Krist Iverson built the *King* with hand-sawn lumber that he and Erik Enrew had whipsawed from behind the house. Later he built a large shed and built other vessels. In 1936 he built the *Silverado* which is still owned by an Oona River family and transports them back and forth to town.

In 1940 Fred Letts build the *Hevenor* with Julius Hadland. They handlogged the lumber and had it sawn at John Group's mill. Fred went on to build the *Petrel C*, his own fishing boat. It was named after the Petrel Channel where he handlogged the yellow cedar for the ribs and keel. In 1964 he and his son Freddie built the *Oona Maid* for Fred to fish salmon. They logged the cedar from the top of MacCauley Island. They started building the keel in January and Fred was fishing by June. In 1966 Fred built the *Equinox*, a west coast troller with his son-in-law Mike Lemon.

Oona River boat builders worked from half models. The model was made from wood and was one-half of the boat, constructed at a scale of one inch to one foot. Making the model, they decided the length of the boat, and its beam, or

width. Most Oona River boats were 30 to 45 ft long. The model was then cut into four pieces, and those pieces were used to guide the construction of the frame.

Most of the frame was built from yellow cedar: the ribs, bowstem, keel, keelson, shaftlog, horn timbers, stern post, ring timber. The planks were made from red cedar which lasts well and is easy to bend. The planks were steamed in order to bend them around the battens. Each boatshed had a boiler that was piped into a steam box. The box measured 18 inches by 12 inches by 26 feet. Each plank was steamed for 30 to 45 minutes.

The most difficult timber to find was the crooks for the bow and stern stems. A crook is a natural wood brace that forms an L-shape. This wood is found at the junction of the trunk and the roots of a tree. The prime crooks for boatbuilding are 35 years old or more. Norm Iverson remembers going crook hunting when his father was building boats. They would have to dig out big chunks of sod to get at the roots of the trees.

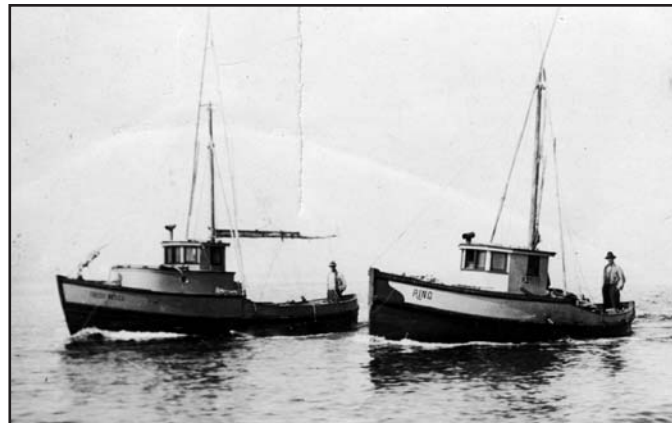
When John Group was building boats in the 1930s and 40s the young boys of Oona River learned the art of boatbuilding by hanging around the boatshed. His philosophy was, "If you're going to stand around you might as well

do something." He put the boys to work mixing putty for the seams. The putty was mixed out of red lead, ground chalk, linseed oil and white lead. The boy who mixed a full tub was rewarded with a handful of putty to use on his toy boats.

Norm Iverson logged, milled and fished, but also built boats until the 1980s. He built the halibut and salmon boat the *Alpha Bay* with his son Krist in Dodge Cove, BC. He remembers learning about boatbuilding from his father:

"When I started working with my Dad he would have me put the floor into the boat, and putty the nail holes, and seaming. I did that for a while but it seemed to me like my life was standing still. I went to John Group and asked him for a job. He asked my father and my father said I could go and work for John instead. But he suggested that John Group have me do the floors and putty. So I was doing the same work again. I swore I wouldn't be a boatbuilder."

While no new boats have been constructed since the 1980s, the boatsheds still stand along the river bank and they continue to be used for repairs and maintenance.



Part 6: Cedar and Salmon: Family Stories

People in Oona River have made a living from the natural resources of the area for almost a century. They have used these resources in a sustainable way by only taking what they need, and integrating several activities in order to create a livelihood. By drawing on different resources at different times of the year, and at different points in their working lives, they have maintained a sustainable livelihood based on the harvest and processing of wood and fish.

Most of the men in Oona River moved between the ocean and the forest on a regular basis during the middle part of the twentieth century. They would fish in the summer and log or beachcomb over the fall and winter months. Some used the wood to build boats for themselves and others. While many fishermen may not have logged every winter, most of them spent some time harvesting trees from handlogging claims along the inside waters. The men who spent most of their careers in the woods at least dabbled in the fishing industry, either as a deckhand on someone else's boat, or as a part-time fisherman, crabbing or gillnetting.

Resource-based work has always had its ups and downs, its booms and busts. Living in Oona River allowed people to move between industries, taking advantages of opportunities in fishing if the logging or milling was not as profitable, and vice versa. If the salmon season was poor, a man could find work at the sawmill, or provide logs to the sawmill by handlogging. Later, beachcombing and crabbing supplemented salmon incomes. After the spring rush for the timber, the sawmill saw a quiet period in the summer and men could move onto the boats for some different work.

The following three family work histories pro-

vide three similar but different examples of way in which Oona River people have used the resources and resource industries to support themselves. The family histories show a shift from a very integrated livelihood using both fish and trees to the younger generations who have been driven towards one industry. The generations of today are focused on either fishing or forestry, as the opportunities to successfully combine the two have declined.

The Bergman Family

Johnny Bergman's work history is a prime example of the kind of integrated livelihood that people in Oona River have enjoyed. As a young man in the late 1940s, Johnnie moved between John Group's sawmill, handlogging claims, and commercial fishing. He fished halibut during the late 1940s with a group of Oona River men on his boat, the *Anna No.1*. He also worked on a fish packer for a cannery. Before he and Norm Iverson bought Group Mills in 1958 they ran a machine-logging operation, as well as doing quite a bit of handlogging. Johnny logged all over the north coast, harvesting trees from almost every stretch of coastline within 160 km of Oona River. Every winter he and his wife Winnie would trap mink and during the 1950s that was a major source of income for the family. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Johnny ran the mill and logged small timber claims to supply the mill. As his sons took over the mill operation, he went back to fishing. He and Winnie crab fished during the 1980s and continued to trap on a smaller scale.

Like their father, Karl and David Bergman have both fished, logged and milled. David worked on a salmon and halibut boat as a deckhand during the 1970s and early 1980s. During

the 1980s Karl had a crab boat. They worked with their father handlogging and in the sawmill. Since taking over the mill in 1983 the Bergmans have had to focus more and more on logging. With no handloggers left to supply the mill, the brothers have had to log almost all the wood that goes through the sawmill. They have had to move from handlogging to A-framing, and now to road building and high-lead logging as forestry policy has shifted. Their livelihoods have become solely dependent on forestry, and increasingly towards logging rather than milling. Changes in the market and in stumpage rates mean that more and more of the logs are sold on the market rather than processed.

The Letts Family

The Letts family also has a multi-generational history of integrated resource work, and a strong tradition of conservation. George Letts homesteaded in Porcher Inlet and later became a fisheries patrolman in 1924 when he moved his family to Oona River. He travelled the north coast region monitoring fish stocks and commercial harvests. His son Fred Letts grew up in Oona River logging, fishing and boatbuilding. He began his career in Louie Locker's logging camp and moved on to independent handlogging. He and his partner Axel Hansen expanded the operation to machine-logging with an A-frame and logged large timber sales. Fred and Axel logged the lumber to build several boats, and Fred fished salmon commercially for most of his life. In 1980 he was instrumental in establishing the first hatchery in Oona River. He spent the last decade of his life actively learning about fish conservation and enhancement, and rebuilding the coho run in the river. Fred was always busy either on deck, in the shed, or in the forest. He also maintained a trapline which he passed on to his son Freddy.

Freddy has focused on fishing for most of his

career. He has gillnetted salmon, longlined halibut and fished for crabs. He has also kept the Letts boatshed active and is well-known throughout the north coast for his work on wooden boats. There are few people left in the region with the skill to repair and rebuild wooden fishing boats and Freddy's skills are in high demand. With the decline in the fishing industry, Freddy has integrated sports fishing charters into his work. When he is not catching salmon with a gillnet during a commercial fishery, he takes both locals and tourists out to catch salmon and halibut with a rod and reel. The experience of catching a fish with a *bona fide* west coast fisherman is cherished by American and European visitors. Freddy's son Andrew has recently completed a degree in coastal resource management; his career will be resource-focused in a different way.

Freddy's sister Jan has also fished and actively continues her father's legacy in conservation. Jan fished for two decades with her husband Mike Lemon on their troller the *Equinox*. She braved bad weather and a male-dominated industry to make a living as a fish harvester. Later, her daughter Pam took her place on deck catching spring salmon and coho. Mike continues to fish and beachcomb for a living. Jan has been actively working to preserve coho runs since 1980. She worked with her father Fred on the first hatchery and is now the Program Coordinator of the Oona River Resources Association. She runs the new hatchery and actively pursues other conservation and enhancement projects.

The Vanderheid family

The Vanderheid family has switched from fishing to forestry in one generation. Jake and Colleen Vanderheid family moved to Oona River 18 years ago. Before that, they and their two kids had been living on their fishing boat. Jake and

Colleen fished for cod and crabs all along the coast of British Columbia and decided that Oona River would be a good home base. They fish the inside waters for crab from Oona River south to Camaano Sound. They also fish for live rockcod and have recently added halibut to their fisheries. Colleen is one of a few scuba divers on the north coast who harvest octopus. She wrestles these tentacled creatures out of their hiding places in the rocks and reefs along the coast.

Jake and Colleen took their children fishing with them for many years. Their son Ben learned how to fish with his parents and then as a teenager went on a halibut boat as a deckhand. But when Ben was 11 he started logging with the Bergman family and fell in love with the woods. Since the age of 15 he has made his living falling and moving trees.

Ben's fishing history and mariner skills have allowed him to establish himself in the booming and towing business. He bought his first tugboat as a teenager and now owns two tugs and a large live-aboard barge. He beachcombed for several years on the Skeena River, collected lost logs and booming them to town. He has also worked on contract for several large logging operations, booming and towing their logs from the camp to the market.

Ben's wife Shannon also works with him and the logging camp workers are shocked to see a young woman running a tugboat and jumping along log booms in her corkboots. Ben and Shannon and another Oona River couple spent a whole summer beachcombing on the outside of Banks Island, using several boats to collect a great deal of wood. Ben works with the Bergmans falling and sawmilling when they need another man. Ben has been logging his own small Dead and Down Timber Sale just outside of Oona River between contract booming jobs. He uses his tugboat to yard dead logs out of the forest and into the water. He and Shannon have purchased a

small, portable sawmill which they plan to transport to logging camps and other small communities for temporary milling jobs. Ben has thus positioned himself to participate in almost every aspect of the forestry industry from falling to milling to booming and towing. He works both independently and on contract with larger operators. In an average year, Ben might move between five different forestry jobs, taking advantage of the short-term opportunities that arise. He is thus able to continue as a small independent operator in an industry that has become dominated by large companies.

The histories of these three Oona River families show the changing patterns of work over time. Up until the 1980s many people combined fishing and forestry work in an integrated livelihood. During the last twenty years, changes in both forestry and fishing have limited the opportunities for movement between the two industries. Buying into the fishing industry has become so expensive due to license limitation and fleet reduction, fishermen must fish steadily and in several different fisheries in order to make a living. It is no longer economically viable to keep a fish boat solely to fish salmon. Fleet reduction has also meant that there are less deckhand jobs available. Finding a casual summer job in the fishing industry for a few months is no longer a widespread option.

Handlogging opportunities are essentially non-existent now for independent operators and winter loggers. Beachcombing and 'dead and down' sales are available but do not provide the same level of income for independent operators. Reduced access to timber for Group Mills means less jobs in the sawmill. The mill and its logging operation keep four to five men working on and off throughout the year, but can no longer support extra people such as the fishermen looking for winter work.

Part 7. Conservation and Environmental Values

The relationship between the people of Oona River and their environment reflects a century of sustainable resource use. Community members have a strong respect for the environment and a confidence in the ability of nature to restore itself when used properly. The key to sustainable resource use is emphasized by all residents to mean limiting harvesting to what one needs to survive. Trying to get rich from the resources contributes to resource decline. Drawing a moderate livelihood from the ocean and the forest results in a healthy balance between human and ecological needs.

Norm Iverson says this environmental ethic was taught by the previous generation of settlers:

You inherit that from your parents. We don't want to be rich, just make a comfortable living. You were taught: don't take any more than you really need. None of the old timers would rape the country for monetary gain. They just wanted to make a living. You know what's enough.... The people of Oona River are environmentalists, in the true sense. They don't take any more than they want or use or need. What good is an armored car behind your hearse? There is no competition for things. People want to have a few luxuries in life but it's not necessary to be rich. They want enough to get by on. The way I was taught, if you can make life easier for yourself, you have become rich.

Jan Lemon learned the same things from her parents.

The main things we were taught in my family was to only take what you need

and not to waste it. You ate what you hunted. If you had more than you could use, you shared it. That theme came from the pioneer families that valued everything and who knew that to waste it was a luxury that they couldn't afford. If you wasted a resource, it wouldn't be there when you needed it. They valued everything to the point that they buried the salmon carcasses around their rhubarb plants.

Jan explains that Oona River people have never used the resources to get rich, because they knew that wealth was not the greatest goal:

They had a drive to live off the resources of the land. And they never pushed it—when they had enough money then that was good enough they would be happy to settle back into community life around the river. They equated the richness of life to a lifestyle, not materialism. Once you had a happy family, good food and a comfortable house to live in, you didn't need a half a million dollars in the bank. There was a belief in sharing and not in accumulating.

Jan's family has always been actively involved in conservation and enhancement. This too, is related to a general approach to life and to the land in Oona River:

If you are connected to the land you know that you need to look after the land so it will take care of you. My father always said not to destroy the goose that lays the golden egg.

Elaine Brown describes what she learned from her parents, Johnny and Winnie Bergman, while growing up in Oona River:

I learned that if you go somewhere and leave your garbage, it will still be there later. If you respect Nature, it will take care of you. We need to live in balance with it, it doesn't accommodate us... You can take trees, but you don't go in and mow them all down. You just take what you need. You don't get rich, you just make a living. We were taught that once your family was fed and clothed, you don't need much more.

This ethic has at times conflicted with the way the resource industries are managed by the government. When limited entry was introduced

in the crab fishery, several long-time crab fishermen from Oona River did not qualify for licenses. They did not harvest enough crab in the qualifying years to receive a license. During those years, Oona River fishermen had fished very little crab because the salmon seasons were good. They had made enough money in the summer and did not keep fishing to accumulate more money than they needed to survive.

The phrase "just take what you need" is repeated like a refrain in Oona River. From the very first generation that settled there to the newest generation of resource harvesters, people in Oona River have strived to make a living from the resources around them, without depleting the fish or the trees.



Appendix: Some Boats Built in Oona River

Builder	years of operation	Boat name	Boat details
Emil Quist	1916-1930	Anna Brant Eider Brant II Alp Naied	All were 30-32 ft double ended read cedar planked fish boats.
Krist Iverson	1925-	King (1925) Frolic Silverado (1936) Rehab (1944) Spar (1948) Rowboats	30' double-ender fishing boat 31 ft. fishing boat 35' double-end troller [fishing boat?] 33' fishing boat Carvell-built
Rasmus Tysse	1930s-	Freelance Old Chum Gurd Island	(rebuilt ex Linnea) 43' troller with seine boat style stern troller built from hull by Ole Rosang
Ole Wick		Linnea Lapaloma Lancing	40 ft.
Letts Boatshop	1932-	Hevenor Petrel C (1959) Oona Maid (1961) Fearless (1964) Diamentina (1970) Edgewater (1972)	32' double-end troller 36' gillnetter 36' logging workboat East-Coast style halibut & crab boat Simlilar to Dimentina with western wheelhouse
Hanson Boatshop	1947-1973	Blaze Oona R Jan Michele (1966) Equinox (1968) El Nino (1973)	47 1/2' troller 56' longliner/packer 40' combination troller/gillnetter 40' troller 45' East-coast style
Ole Rosang	1958-	Newfield (1958) Gin Isle Nalle (1964) Lobo Gurd Island hull	36' gillnetter 36' gillnetter 37' logging/workboat 34' [gillnetter?] gillnet hull

Builder	years of operation	Boat name	Boat details
John Group	1927-1959	87 boats in total	
	1927-1939 upriver boat shed	9 boats for Inverness Cannery Melina (Malen) Crescent Jupiter (for Harold Jensen) Hermod (for Sven Urdquist) Western Standard (for Charlie Urdquist) Sterling Ilona Everready (for Freestad) Brutus Astrid (for J P Hansen) Havel Whitewater Depend (for Emil Quist) Jock (for Emil's brother Gust) Ailleen O. (for Oscar Olsen) 6 Cannery boats (Nelson Bros?)	24' sail/gillnetters 35' 32' 37' 33' 40' 37' 34' 29' 32' 32' 31' 32' 32' 33' 37' 30'
	1940-1959 larger shed near old harbour	Anna I (for Johnny Bergman) Trim Shirlu (for Web Pierce) Vironica H (for Tony Hnilcha) Stravanger (for Julius Hadland) Connie (for Julius Hadland) Melba (for Tory Axelson) YoYo Ingrid Elaine (for Knut Rystaad) 9 sail boats for Inverness Cannery 30 cannery boats for Inverness Lola	37' 44' 45' 38' 40' 37' 34' 34' 43' pleasure craft



The River People: Living and Working in
Oona River
by Caroline Butler and Kenneth Campbell

One of a series of curriculum materials
developed as part of the Forests for the
Future project funded by Forest Renewal BC
Research Award

www.ecoknow.ca