

# Peat bog turned into prime agricultural land by Chinese

Burnaby's largest historic district encompasses the broad flat peat bog bordering the north arm of the Fraser River.

Its flat landscape is separated from the rest of Burnaby by the steep south slope. In 1861 when the first trail penetrated the area, it was designed to twist and turn along the base of the slope and avoid the bog.

The Royal Engineers contracted Hugh McRoberts to complete the trail route to connect New Westminster with the river's mouth. Paid for the work in land script McRoberts chose to farm at Sea Island at the trail's end.

Completed in 1862 the government hoped that the "North Arm Trail" would encourage agricultural production along the river bank and also provide another means of travel for residents should the Fraser ever be blocked by ice.

The Burnaby bog lands were divided into district lots and sold at an auction in 1862 and provided the best opportunity for agricultural production in the entire municipality.

As Nicolai Schou reported in 1894 "Burnaby is not and never will be a district of large farms, the only ones of moderate size being situated in the low-lying district near the Fraser." It was in this area that Schou reported that the Woodward and Wiggins holdings occupied together about 500 acres of which 50 acres were under cultivation for root crops and hay in addition to some adjoining grazing lands for dairy cattle.

It was estimated that 800 acres of river-side marsh land would never be farmed without a

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system of dyking. This was a public works scheme the municipality was reluctant to undertake ever since an initial scheme had cost Burnaby some \$1,500 due to faulty engineering and litigation by an irate land holder.

Chinese farmers were attracted to the North Arm District in the 1890s leasing land from white owners to operate small market gardens. When selling their produce on New Westminster streets some enterprising Chinese peddlers proved to be fierce competitors despite widespread discrimination against them.

The Whitling Brothers vegetable cart would be followed around town by competing Chinese firms who would endeavour to undersell to any potential customers which approached the Whitlings' wagon. Although these peddlers were attacked in the white press, their ancient farming methods always provided

fascination for residents trained in western methods.

In 1894 some north arm Chinese farmers placed about 100 pigs of all sizes in a run of four acres of "bush-grown mossy land" and proved that small areas could be both cleared of vegetation and "abundantly fertilized"! By 1912, even that most conservative of local newspapers - The British Columbian - was forced to admit that Burnaby's Chinese farmers had turned "what was little better than a cranberry marsh into a richly productive area which is one of the most valuable assets to the municipality."

**For more information on Burnaby's community heritage commission please call 294-7215.**