



THE NAMING OF DEAD MAN'S ISLAND

Surveyors laying out a route for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway encountered a daunting obstacle when they reached Burns Lake during the first decade of the 20th century.

Approximately three kilometers east of the present municipality, a massive rock bluff blocked construction. There was no obvious way to bypass the rock face, so the decision was made to cut through it.

Fifteen hundred men were employed in what became known as the "Big Cut" – the heaviest piece of rock work on the entire Grand Trunk line. Blasting powder and steel for the job were hauled 200 miles from Hazelton. Four and six horse teams ran both ways carrying men and supplies to the site.

Men worked three to eight-hour shifts night and day on the project for two years in appalling conditions. Although the railway did employ two small steam shovels and a tiny train of the type generally used for hauling coal, much of the work was done by hand.

Rock cleared from the bluff was used to fill 300 yards of bay at its base. The lake was so deep there that many of the men -- some of whom had previously worked on the Panama Canal -- were convinced they would never find bottom.

Near the end of the project, men worked steadily in two shifts for three months straight blasting rock from the side of the hill. For what they hoped would be the final blast, the crews made short tunnels (known as 'coyotes') into the rock face and filled the passageways with what was calculated to be enough dynamite to bring the entire cliff face down.

Allegedly, the powder monkey responsible for scheduling that final blast got thirsty and went to the nearest 'watering hole' for a drink.

Someone dropped a cigarette in his absence.

The subsequent explosion blew men and thousands of tons of rock into the lake. The company doctor, halfway across the water in a borrowed canoe, was flung onto the shore. He survived by clinging to trees as massive waves rolled back and forth across the lake.

Fifteen other men who had been enjoying a brief respite from their work on a nearby island weren't so lucky. The blast killed them and they were buried nearby.

Dead Man's Island in Burns Lake, located a few hundred yards from the Big Cut, is named in their honor. Today, it's the smallest Provincial Park in BC.

Courtesy of Michael Riis - Christianson and the Lakes District Museum Society

