

Historian ponders past of post office

By James Clarke

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To a lot of people, the Sidney post office is just an unassuming pile of weathered red brick, but one local historian says the heritage building, constructed on the corner of Fourth Street and Beacon Avenue in 1936, is also the edifice of a truly heroic story.

With Canada Post's decision to put the building up for sale — they're asking \$850,000 — and relocate down the road, Don Robb says the history-steeped structure should be turned over to the Town of Sidney.

Robb is quick to concede the chances of that happening are slim at best, but he wonders aloud how many people know the history behind the building.

"Not too many people in Sidney are familiar with the name Cy Peck, which is a shame," the 75-year-old said Friday. "This man was not only a hero of the First World War, he was able to get the post office built during a time of great depression."

A recipient of the Victoria Cross, Peck is remembered for the tireless volunteer spirit he displayed upon returning to his Sidney home after the war.

Described as a large, friendly man — he was over



Former MP Cy Peck, inset, was instrumental in bringing a post office to Sidney.

six-foot-tall and weighed around 250 pounds — Peck was a member of Parliament for years, and was highly-regarded by area farmers and townfolk alike. What is lost to many, says Robb, is that in the earliest days of the Great Depression Gulf Island and Salt-spring Island farmers struggled to find ways of getting their products to market.

That is until local MP Cy Peck persuaded the government of the day to start up a ferry from Saltspring to Swartz Bay, one which a grate-

ful public immediately named after him.

And it was during the Depression that Peck really proved to be a people's politician for Peninsula residents.

In 1932, Sidney Mill, the largest employer in the village, closed its doors. The Sidney Railway pulled up stakes, the roofing factory burnt down and the Bazan Bay brickyard closed.

After years of growth and prosperity, locals were struggling to put food on their tables.

Enter Cy Peck.

MP Peck saw potential in the empty lot on Beacon Avenue, located next to what was then known as Chinatown.

No easy task, it would take all of Peck's persuasion and persistence to convince Ottawa to bring a post office to Sidney. The make-work project was eventually given the green light, and in the fall of 1936, horses pulling a scoop, called a "Fresno," dug out a basement for the new postal outlet.

Winter rains filled the hole, but construction commenced the following spring.

"Cy Peck brought that post office to Sidney. The heritage designation of the brick structure reflects the heroic struggles of little Sidney back then, and it remains a symbol of the strong hearts that had the courage to survive hard times," says Robb. "My point is that it belongs to the town of Sidney, not Canada Post, and it should be given back to the people of the Peninsula."

Local businessman and former Saanich North and the Islands MLA Clive Tanner points out Canada Post is a Crown corporation and has an obligation to make money. The post office, adds Tanner, sits on the most valuable piece of property in Sidney proper, pretty much putting it out of reach at a local level.

Given municipal heritage status in 1992, the building no longer meets the needs of Sidney's streamlined postal requirements. And while Canada Post is expected to resurface at the old Island Furniture store down the street, the fate of the old post office still hangs in the balance.

The idea of a micro-brewery has been floated, and the restaurant chain Earl's has been looking into the location, but so far no takers.

"The post office would make a great lot of things," Tanner said of the building kitty-corner to his bookstore, adding that in a perfect world, the property would be purchased, the extension and parking lot removed and the original structure turned into a community centre complete with green space.