

The battle for Sidney's post office

By Jennifer Slegg

THE POST OFFICE building in Sidney has hit the headlines once again, in a far less glamorous way than the last time it was in the news. In 1992, the brick building was celebrated for becoming Sidney's first heritage designated building.

The post office, which has graced heritage calendars and even a B.C. Transit bus pass, is about to be vacated by the people who constructed her. Canada Post has decided to sell the historic building, with a price of \$850,000.

While rumors fly on what will become of the building, few realize the town had to work hard to get Ottawa to build the post office in the first place. Or that this project was perhaps the only time that almost one hundred per cent of Sidney's business community backed a project.

Sidney's post office was established Jan. 6, 1892, and opened June 1 of the same year. It was established when rural mail delivery became necessary, ultimately closing the First North Saanich Post Office, run since the early 1880s by the Wain family.

Lionel Dickinson, a Victoria resident, became the first postmaster in Sidney, serving 1892-1903. His deputy postmaster, Alexander Anderson, departed Sidney for the Klondike gold rush in 1898, and James Critchley took over.

James Johnston White, who was also Sidney's first village chairman and customs officer, was postmaster from 1903 through 1912. He was one of Sidney's notable residents and also owned Sidney's Canning Company.

On August 1, 1913, Critchley was promoted to postmaster from the deputy position he had held for 15 years. He still holds the record for long service.

In those days, the post office moved on the whim of the postmaster. It was almost guaranteed that the business the post office was located in would prosper, so the postmaster would ensure his own business would benefit. With only rural delivery

service at the time, residents of Sidney had to go to the post office for their mail, passing by the merchandise conveniently placed inside the store.

Dickinson located the post office during his term on the site of what would become the Sidney Canning Company on Beacon Avenue, now part of the Hotel Sidney parking lot. When White became postmaster, he moved the post office to the Sidney Trading Company, Sidney's main retail outlet at the time. Sidney Trading Company still survives as Sidney Super Foods.

When Critchley became postmaster in 1913, he moved the post office to a lean-to attached to the side of Critchley's General Store. Critchley purchased this building from Dickinson, Sidney's first postmaster. The site would eventually become the Gem Theatre, notable for its round roof.

In September 1914, the Dominion Government purchased a site at the corner of Beacon Avenue and Fourth Street for the new postal building, and construction appeared imminent. Chinese proprietor Quong Lee Yuen, whose business was located on the site, was given 30 days to vacate the property. He relocated just two doors down on Beacon Avenue, at considerable personal expense.

But nothing happened after Yuen relocated. The site sat vacant. But with the First World War raging, Ottawa's attention focused more on world events than a new post office at the far end of the country.

Twenty years passed before rumors began to circulate again about construction on the long awaited building.

In those 20 years, the look and feel of the village of Sidney had changed. Not

only did it have a much larger population, but telephone service — both local and long distance — had arrived, and Beacon Avenue had transformed from a bumpy gravel road for horses to a paved one more suited to automobiles. Sidney needed a permanent postal structure — not a lean-to on the side of a general store.

In February 1935, members of the Sidney Businessmen's Association decided to petition Member of Parliament C.H. Dickie for their new post office. Forty Sidney business people signed the petition, almost the entire business population in Sidney. Oddly, one member of the Sidney Businessmen's Association refused to give his support to the project. Sidney awaited a response.

The absence of that one signature did not hurt. Five months later, Dickie received a wire from federal Public Works, stating that money had been appropriated for the new building, rumored to be \$12,000.

A delegation from the North Saanich Conservative Association travelled to Duncan later in July to interview Dickie. The group was assured that Ottawa was not planning to relocate the post office or to delay further the construction, despite rampant rumors. This was likely one of Dickie's last actions as an MP. Elected as a Conservative in 1921, his lengthy term ended in 1935, when J. S. Taylor won the seat.

While Sidney anxiously awaited further official word on the appropriation, a call for a new postmaster was announced. James Critchley, who had been postmaster when the future post office site was purchased in 1914, died Aug. 6, 1935. Critchley had been a common sight in Sidney,



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particularly when delivering the rural mail in his 1921 Ford. Assistant postmaster William Whiting acted in the position until a replacement could be found.

Two months later in September 1935, the Department of Public Works put out a call for tenders on the building. Plans called for postal services on the main floor, while the second floor was designated for customs officials, with additional living quarters for a caretaker. A hot water heating system was planned for the basement. The planned brick and stone structure appealed to the eye of Sidney's residents.

In January, Public Works awarded the contract to Knott & Jones, of Victoria, in the amount of \$17,955. Knott & Jones hired local workers, which helped ease Sidney's unemployment. That same month, H. E. Kennedy was appointed postmaster, with Whiting resuming the role of assistant postmaster.

Monday, Feb. 3, 1936 saw construction start. Excavation for the basement was begun by two horse teams and scrapers, and was complete less than two weeks later.

Residents closely followed the construction of the post office until Friday, Dec. 11, 1936, when the brand new post office building opened for service. A crowd of Sidney's citizens, proud of their long-awaited post office, was on hand for the festivities while congratulations were offered to Sidney's business community for their successful petition to Ottawa.

The Saanich Peninsula & Gulf Island Review covered the grand opening event in the Dec. 16, 1936 edition, and the writer summed up the essence of the brand new brick post office in Sidney.

"The Post Office in any town governs, to a great extent, the first impressions gathered when entering a city, town, or village, and it would be nice to know that the impressions gathered when entering our town will in future be nothing behind in this respect."

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