

A Brief History of the Church on Vancouver Island

In Illinois by 1845 rumours were widespread that the persecuted Mormons "had chosen Vancouver Island as their future home, the metropolis to be situated at Nootka." The church's president at the time was Brigham Young. He wrote a letter, published November 1, 1845, inviting members of the church worldwide to gather at Nauvoo, Illinois, in preparation for a westward migration to an as yet undesignated site. A postscript added: "There are said to be many good locations for settlement on the Pacific, especially Vancouver's Island."

Steps were taken by members in England in the form of a petition to Queen Victoria and members of the British Parliament for a grant of land and financial assistance in transporting 20,000 settlers to "Vancouver's Island." It seems the petition was never directly acted upon and in January 1849, a Royal Charter turned Vancouver Island over to the Hudson's Bay Company, thus determining any colonizations would be performed under auspices of the trading company. By this time the Church had settled in Utah. In 1858 the HBC was opposed to granting rights of occupation to a large group of Church members. Smaller groups of individuals or families were, however, welcome, provided they would "submit themselves entirely to the laws of England."

It was not until 1875 that William Francis Copley^{*}, his wife Maria Judson Copley and their three children arrived in Victoria from Utah via the Nevada silver mines and San Francisco, becoming the first members of the Church to reside on the Island. About 1890, a niece of Maria Copley arrived to assist her aunt who now had a family of nine children. She met and married John Raymond, remaining for her lifetime. The Mason family are descendants of this couple.*

The first upper Island conversion was the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Comox, Anthony Maitland Stenhouse, in 1887. He later resigned his legislative seat and moved to Cardston.

By 1918, with the ending of World War I, there were five families comprising 21 members in Victoria. The first Latter-Day Saint Sunday School on Vancouver Island was then organized. During this period, Church progress was slow. Missionaries were withdrawn and many Church members either moved away or lost official contact except during brief and unconnected periods of missionary activity. Four lady missionaries, charged to labour on the Island, were reported to be in Victoria in December, 1930. The Great Depression resulted in no missionaries assigned between 1931 and 1937.

However, the Church did grow on the Island and on August 2, 1959 the Victoria District was established. On February 9, 1975, the Victoria District became the Victoria Stake comprised of nine wards and branches on Vancouver Island and one branch in Powell River. In March 1986, the Victoria Stake was divided into the Victoria Stake and the Courtenay District. Today, October 26, 1997, the Nanaimo British Columbia Stake is being organized, comprised of the two wards in Nanaimo and the six branches in the Courtenay District with a combined membership exceeding 1900.

The Church in Nanaimo

While the Victoria Branch was growing, members were also moving into the Nanaimo area. Percy Perrett moved to Nanaimo in 1940, followed by his son Mac Perrett in 1941. Mac's bride-to-be, Rae Romeril, arrived in 1942 and she was followed by her married sister Millie Dyson in approximately 1944. Sam Dyson arrived after the war concluded. In time, other families moved to Nanaimo including Blaxall, Romeril, Sabey, Steed and Whittaker.

Hearing of this group of Saints in Nanaimo, the Mission President sent Elder Joe Keeler, a missionary serving in Vancouver, to organize a home Sunday School in 1946 with Melvin Lane as Presiding Elder. At this time, the Oviatt family arrived from Ucluelet. Members first met in various homes then, when financially able, met in the Forrester Hall. A Branch was formally organized on May 5, 1948 with Sam Dyson as President.

A chapel was planned and funds were raised by various means. Brother Steed carved a model of a chapel and took it to church meetings and asked for donations from members and visitors. Ike Sabey organized the finances and sod was turned in 1951 for the first LDS chapel on Vancouver Island. The building was completed in less than two years and dedicated May 27, 1953 by Elder John Longdon, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve Apostles, and became the centre of Church activity on the Island.

Members of the Mason family visited the thriving branch during the early 1950s and they moved from Lasqueti Island to Nanaimo in 1955. The present building was completed in 1978 and the ward was divided into Mt. Benson and Nanaimo Wards in May 1992.

The Church in Campbell River

The first organization in Campbell River was in August of 1953, when a Sunday School and Primary were established. Both of these dissolved early in 1954 when the Emery H. Willes family, which had provided the backbone, moved to Utah.

Near the end of 1974, the Campbell River dependent Sunday School was organized, with members attending Sacrament Meeting in Courtenay. There were about 20 members attending at this time. In March of 1975, the Sunday School moved to the Eagles Hall. In May of 1976, the Campbell River Branch was organized, and continued to meet in the Eagles Hall. The first branch President was Jack W. Creaser (1976-1979).

In 1980, the present Church building was purchased from the Pentecostal Church. Countless hours were donated during the 1980s by John (Woody) Green as the interior of this building was completely renovated. At that time, the branch president was Thomas B. Roulstone (1979-1984).

Subsequent Branch Presidents are:

Marvin F. Mason (1984-1989)

Edwin Britton (1989-1995)

Noel Smith (1995 - present)

The Church in Courtenay

From approximately 1953 until Campbell River became an independent branch in 1976, the investigators and members from the surrounding areas worshipped together. Sunday School was held in private homes in Campbell River in 1953 and in Courtenay in 1954. By 1956, Priesthood Meetings were also being held. The Odd Fellows Hall in Cumberland was used for a short time, then the Fallen Alders Community Hall.

The Comox Branch, under the Victoria District, was formed January 14th, 1962. Julian Symchych was called as the 1st President, Bob Vonarx as the 1st counsellor and Robert W. Mitchell as 2nd counsellor. Lee Symchych was called as the Relief Society President. By May there were 31 families on the roll with 90 members. The 4.8 acres of land which belong to the church was bought in 1965, primarily with money earned from delivering flyers on a weekly basis, selling firewood, and the usual bake sales. Later, the Knights of Pythias Hall in Comox was used until the new chapel was opened in 1974, and the name changed to the Courtenay Branch. The chapel was dedicated in 1976.

By 1980 we became a ward under the Victoria Stake. In 1981 the 2nd phase was started and opened in June of 1982. Later, in 1986, we were again a branch, the centre of the Courtenay District under the Canada Vancouver Mission. A chapel extension in 1989 added two District offices, a Relief Society Room, and a Genealogy Library.

The first missionary to be sent out was Ronald Berg in 1967 to Hawaii. Since this time, approximately 27 missionaries have served from our area, the last one to return in May of 1996 was Robert McLean. It is to be noted that Canadian and American service personnel stationed at Canadian Forces Base Comox greatly strengthen our little branch. Of course, our long time faithful members still in the area have certainly helped to anchor it. Some of the first: Beth Britton baptized 1957, Cora Hansen 1959, Bob and Mary Vonarx 1962, Ann Jordan 1959.

The Church in the North Island

The Church became established in the North Island in July of 1976 when Robert J. Smith and family moved to Port McNeill. In September of 1976, he was appointed Branch President of a dependent branch (Courtenay), which was made an independent branch January 30, 1977.

The branch grew over the next eight years to a membership of 112. During this time, the Saints met in a number of places, including member homes, the high school mezzanine and a basement banquet room. Sacrament meetings were held in Port Alice, Port Hardy, Port McNeill and Sointula. In February of 1984, satellite meetings were held in Alert Bay.

In January of 1977, the site for the chapel in Port McNeill was selected. After much prayer and negotiation, the land was obtained and the church was constructed. The first meeting was held there on August 17, 1980. Closing of Utah Mines in 1995 resulted in many members moving from the area. However, the Branch continues as a strong unit of faithful Saints.

The Church in Port Alberni

The Clason family moved into the valley about 1927 and this was the start of the church's roots. In 1947, the first missionaries came into the Alberni Valley. Meetings were held in members' homes. By the time 1955 rolled around, a branch of the church was organized and with the growth in membership, a hall was rented for services. As the community hall was used for city dances on Saturday night, the priesthood had to clean up early Sunday morning. Cleaning out beer bottles, cigarettes and airing out the hall was the order of the day.

Port Alberni was part of the Western Canada Mission out of Alberta and District speakers came from Vancouver and then from Nanaimo. Relief Society sisters had bazaars, bake sales and rummage sales to raise budget money.

With the tidal wave of 1964, we lost our hall so we moved to Sproat Lake Hall for a short time. During this time, our first phase meeting house was being built by building missionaries and the members. About 20 years later, the second phase was completed and 12 years later, the third phase. A school gym for a number of months and a hall in the Catholic Church for eight months served the Saints while they anxiously awaited the various phases to be completed.

Gone are the days of honey, shake and seed cone projects for budget assessments but constant are the values, principles and faith that found their way into everyone who embraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ then and now.

The Church in Powell River

During the late 1950s, missionaries came to Powell River from North Vancouver looking for people who were members of the Church. They found the Lou and Janet Hawk family and a Sunday School was established with around 10 people attending each week, including neighborhood children. In the spring of 1967, Powell River became an independent branch with Louis G. Hawk as the first Branch President.

Some of the notes from Relief Society 1967-68 read, "We started off the year on an excellent note with the visit of Mavis Roegele, District Relief Society President, and Muriel Sutton, District Homemaking Counsellor. They came from Victoria to attend our Social Relations meeting on October 17, 1967. They were served supper at Sister Anne Moore's before returning on the 5 p.m. ferry. Their visit was both a pleasure and an inspiration to us all."

The newly chartered Scout troop, February 24, 1972, the Powell River 12th, was sponsored by the Church with Scout Masters Walter Perry (also Branch President) and Duane Smith and six Boy Scouts. Before moving into the present building with its own font, baptisms were performed in the sea, lake and even in a member's fish pond. There have been 17 full time missionaries serving from the Powell River Branch including, at this time, Brian Higgin, Theresa Higgin, Belinda Norris and John Higgin going in December. Average attendance at Sacrament meeting is now 82.

The Sesquicentennial celebrations are being enjoyed this year along with our Anniversary of 30 years as a branch, culminating in November with an evening of recognition of our seven Branch Presidents, hopefully with all of them present.

The Church in Qualicum

In 1962, Karen Brenton and her family moved to the Island from Magrath, Alberta. Shortly afterwards, Art and Ruby Johannesen came to Errington from Port Alberni and a Home Sunday School was established, meeting in the Little Qualicum Women's Institute Hall. By 1984, the first chapel was constructed on Arbutus St., Qualicum. Michael K. Murphy became the first Branch President. As more members moved to the area and with the annual influx of summer visitors, the little chapel was frequently over approved occupancy. The Fire Department heard of this and then Branch President Dean Tolley was informed a larger building was necessary. In 1990, an expansion was approved and completed in 1992.