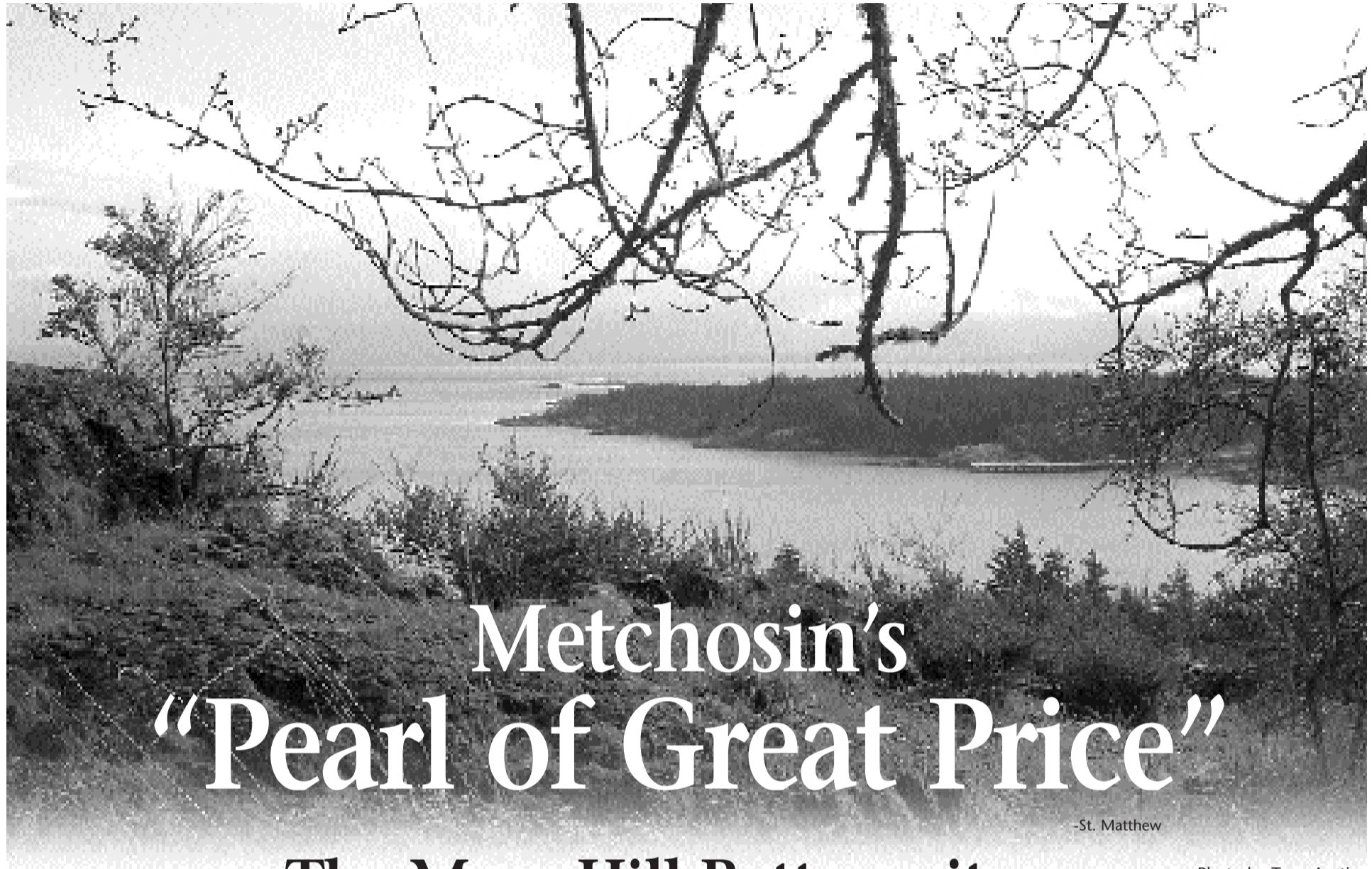


Metchosin Muse

A N O N - P R O F I T C O M M U N I T Y P U B L I C A T I O N



Metchosin's "Pearl of Great Price"

-St. Matthew

The Mary Hill Battery site —

Photo by Tony Austin

May Soon be Surplus to Military Needs

By Chris Pratt

This story deserves to be told in greater detail, as it could easily run to several chapters. Metchosin since its earliest times has had a close association with governments, both Colonial and Dominion/Federal. Just to mention our present connections, they include National Defence properties at Albert Head, Rocky Point and Mary Hill, Corrections Canada property at William Head, and Ministry of Transport property at Mt. Helmcken and at Race Rocks.

Both Albert Head (first), and William Head (later), served at one time as Dominion Quarantine Stations, where inbound ships from foreign ports were examined by medical staff before being allowed to proceed. Hospitals and fumigation plants were there to deal with ships that were detained.

During the First World War, William Head was also used as a staging point for Chinese troops who were sent on to France to clean up and restore the battlefields. As many as 10,000 troops were held there at any one time, for a total of some 80,000 who passed through. Nearby

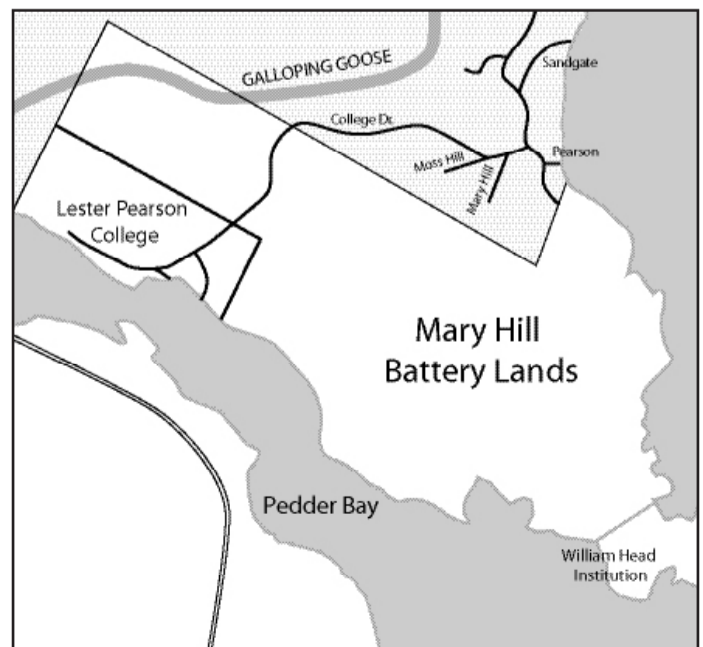
Bentinck Island was used as a leprosy isolation colony for many years, supervised by the medical staff at William Head.

The Second World War saw heightened military activity when coastal defence batteries were established at Albert Head, Mary Hill and Christopher Point and a system of searchlights was installed at several sites along the coastline. Saturday night dances at Metchosin Community Hall were lively places in those days!

Rocky Point came into use as an armament depot during the 1950's when the munitions magazine at Colwood was closed.

Each of these places has an interesting story to tell, but one of them is of immediate importance, since it may soon become surplus to military needs. And it is a pearl of great price. The Mary Hill Battery site, which includes the Pearson College campus, consists of something over 200 hectares of varied terrain: original old growth forest, oak groves, hilltops and rocky outcrops and more than two kilometres of shoreline.

Above: The view from Mary Hill Battery Lands looking across Pedder Bay. Below: Map of Mary Hill Battery Lands



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Chris Pratt standing under a branch of a giant tree on the Mary Hill Battery Lands Photo by Tony Austin

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There's plenty of evidence of First Nations use, in the way of camas meadows and burial cairns. It also forms part of the original Weir family lands, which at one time extended to more than 1,000 acres. In those days their sheep and cattle could range freely from Parry Bay to Matheson Lake, as there were no fences and no broom or blackberries or underbrush to impede the way. When the army took it over it had never been logged, and it remains very nearly in its original state today. Concrete gun emplacements at the top of the hill are all that remains of its military history, and a few rutted tracks that are now overgrown; but its natural history is impressive. It is virtually the only undisturbed "system of ecosystems" remaining in the Coastal Rain Shadow climatic zone, and it abounds in rare and endangered flora and fauna, as well as all the more common varieties. For instance, the Sharp-tailed Snake, an innocent and reclusive little critter, is found here and on only a few other sites in Canada. It is "Red Listed" as an endangered species, as is the Townsend's Big Eared Bat. As for flora, Macoun's Meadowfoam, an inconspicuous little late winter wetland plant exists here and on only a very few other sites on the Island, and nowhere else in the world.

When the Victoria Natural History Society conducted a survey and inventory of the site four years ago, their report said:

"This area is the most nearly pristine of all the ecosystems the Victoria Natural History Society has examined in the Greater Victoria area, and as such should be regarded as highly valuable ecologically. This site contains at least 7% of the remaining world supply of this rare old growth forest type."

The type of forest being referred to is, of course, the Coastal Douglas Fir climax growth, the so-called keystone species that once dominated the southern and eastern sides of Vancouver Island, and was so much

coveted by the lumber barons; which is why so little of the original cover remains today.

While we may well be grateful to DND for preserving this jewel in our midst, that time may soon be coming to an end. The militia and army cadets use the site for training exercises only occasionally now, and there are signs that the land may soon be declared surplus. For instance, an appraiser asked our Municipal staff recently what our bylaws are concerning logging, as he had been engaged to appraise the Mary Hill site. There have been other indications.

This now raises the obvious question of what's to become of Mary Hill. Its greatest value is the integrity and the variety of its collective ecosystems, from the octopus in its rocky lair along the shore to the eagle nesting in the giant forest fir, as well as its connection to other wild areas beyond. Fragmentation would compromise its value. It really should be designated as an ecological conservation area, with strong covenants in place to protect its future. The purpose of this article is to make Metchosinites aware of this treasure and to ensure community support when word comes that the site is indeed surplus to DND needs.

The Mary Hill site is closed, except with an official permit, and ringed with "No Trespassing" signs — as much for the protection of the public as for any other reason. For one thing, a certain amount of unexploded ordnance is thought to be lying about, and then there is always the risk of personal injury from other causes. On top of that, the Natural History Society found a patch of (rare hereabouts) poison oak growing on the hillside! The grounds and trails of the Pearson College campus are open to the public however, and they are fairly representative of the larger area.

Stay tuned. We may well be hearing more about Mary Hill in the months ahead.