

Britannia - The Story of a Mine

by Bruce Ramsay

Extract from book about the route between Britannia Beach and Mount Sheer (Townsite), before the road was built between them

Everything came up the winding trail. Pack horses brought in the heavy boxes of powder and everything which was too heavy to pack on the backs of humans; Japanese laborers hauled most of the supplies, and nobody, but nobody ever returned from the Beach to the mines empty handed. It was a good three hour hike, in either direction, so nobody took an "excursion" to the Beach lightly. As time went on, easier methods of communication were devised: the incline railway being the most important, but the aerial tramway, for freight only, and in some cases the surface and mine railways, served the most isolated, more or less bachelor communities.

The incline, or as it was more commonly - and affectionately - called "the skip," was the lifeline between the Beach and the Townsite, and it was one of Britannia's most famous tourist attractions. Passengers on the boats would get off and stay over until the boat came back from Squamish and Woodfibre, a matter of a couple hours. With great excitement they would gaily walk across the Beach Townsite to The Steps, and pause to think of the foolishness going somewhere to get nowhere. Was it worth it? Before boarding the skip at the power house level, a long flight of steps had to be faced, and whether or not they realized it, there were exactly 347 steps to take up, and therefore, 347 steps to come down. The faint hearted and the non-adventurer, gave up and returned to the dock to patiently await the return of the boat.

The skip was raised and lowered by a hoist situated at the head of the incline. One speed only - dead slow. (The official speed was 7½ miles per hour.) Two bare wires paralleled the track and these could be "shorted" by the brake to signal the hoistman. Gravity powered sleds were also used for one way, single rider, trips by service workmen, the Doctor on emergency, small boys when undiscovered. Manual brakes controlled the speed and their use or non use could result in terrifying bursts of speed.

Surprisingly enough, there were very few accidents on the skip, in fact, only two of any consequence, and there were no fatalities in either of

them. In the late 1930s an empty skip went wild, and came hurtling down the track at an incredible rate of speed, narrowly missed a group of children and then crashed into the mill. Again, lady luck was ruling Britannia that day, for some men who had been working at the very spot the skip crashed into, had left minutes before for lunch. For a while it was thought that one of the youngsters had been killed by the rampaging skip, but after the camp had been alerted of the "tragedy" and a search was made for his body, he was found, fast asleep, at home. The other occasion was when an operator, who was not familiar with the skip, having been a train man, used up all his air in the first few minutes of the trip, and as he got up speed found the brakes wouldn't work. Before the wayward skip was brought under control, several of the passengers leaped from the vehicle, and some received severe injuries, but those who stayed with it, panic stricken as they were, came out of the ordeal with nothing more than a severe case of fright.

From the top of the incline, the next step was to hop the narrow gauge mine train which passed right through the centre of the townsite, in fact, the tracks were the Main Street. Besides passengers the train carried freight, such as firewood and groceries, which were left at the nearest point to the consignee's house. In the case of the firewood, the pieces of cordwood would be too heavy to carry, so they were rolled down the hill, an operation which could be quite tricky. For instance: suppose a big log, rolling down the hill got out of control and went pell-mell on its way, what was to stop it from ploughing through flower gardens, vegetable patches and basement windows? Oh, it happened all right, but the canny townsiteers soon took good care to see that this didn't happen very often. They put up little "wing dams" which altered the rolling logs down the paths and as a result seldom had difficulty. But when the logs did go off the beaten path, the ensuing mayhem was often unspeakable.