

Drawing of the peat barns on McTavish Road in Pitt Meadows.

The Peat Barns on McTavish Road

BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR the Alouette Peat Company in Pitt Meadows harvested peat for shipment to the United States for use as bedding for horses, cattle, pigs, and chickens. The litter peat, springy and durable, was capable of absorbing 5 to 15 times as much water as straw, which made it an ideal choice for farmers. It had an additional feature: it had disinfectant qualities. The peat was also in great demand for the packing, storage, and shipment of plants and vegetables. Meat, eggs, fish, fresh fruit, and vegetables were packed in peat because it prevented decomposition and destroyed bacteria. The peat was also an excellent insulator against frost for the shipping of flowers and shrubs to colder destinations.

During the Second World War the Western Peat Company in Surrey let out a subcontract to the Alouette Peat Company in Pitt Meadows for boxcar loads of baled peat. Despite newspaper articles of the day claiming that the peat was being

shipped south to the US to be used as bedding material for chickens and cattle, the real use was something quite different and sinister.

Three huge barns were built on McTavish Road for the storage and processing of peat during the fall and winter months. These barns were each 690 feet long by 50 feet wide. The money for these buildings came indirectly from the US military.

Labourers delineated trenches by cutting vertically to a depth of about three feet into the peat using chain saws. Peat blocks, each 12" by 14" square and 6" deep were then hand-cut with shovels that left three-foot deep trenches. The water table was kept as low as possible by digging ditches to drain the water out of the peat. The blocks were stacked or stoked in the field, much like sheaves of grain but on wooden platforms, and left to dry in the hot sun during the summer months. Once the drying process was complete, the blocks of peat were transported in from the fields on a narrow-gauge railway to elevators that conveyed them into the barns.

During the winter months labourers forked the blocks of peat from a loft down a chute into a thrashing machine. It came out soft, fluffy, and bulky. The next phase was the baling process. The fluffy peat would be forked into a baling machine that produced 2'-by-2'-by-4' bales of peat. A plunger would squeeze these bales, then they were cinched up really tight and wired into compact 75- to 100-pound bales. These bales were then loaded onto trucks that transported them to boxcars sitting on a Canadian Pacific Railway spur line immediately to the east of Harris Road and south of the Pitt Meadows Co-operative store. The loaded boxcars then travelled south to Henderson (near Reno), Nevada, for the making of magnesium incendiary bombs for the war effort against Germany and Japan. The US munitions production required 700,000 to 1,000,000 bales (about 800 boxcars) of sphagnum peat per year for the war effort.

Once the war was over the peat bogs were used for the growing of blueberry and cranberry crops.

The Bog

Oscar Arne Austring, a former Mayor of Pitt Meadows, recalled this industry in a 2004 interview:

My dad needed a truck driver to haul the bales of peat from McTavish Road to load them into railway cars during the war. The bales were loaded into the rail cars near the co-op for shipment to the United States. The peat company was called Alouette Peat Company. My father was the foreman running the operation and I was one of dad's employees. He had quite a few employees working in the summertime digging up peat and stacking it up in the fields to dry before hauling it into big barns. They stored the peat in these barns after it was dry. They used a thrashing machine like the ones they have on the prairies with the big teeth sticking out of them. They'd get the blocks of peat during the summer months and store them in the barns until wintertime. These are what they'd thrash up during the winter months. I think the barns were 50 feet wide by 690 feet long. They thrashed the peat in the barns and baled it in the shed. There was a factory at the end of the shed.

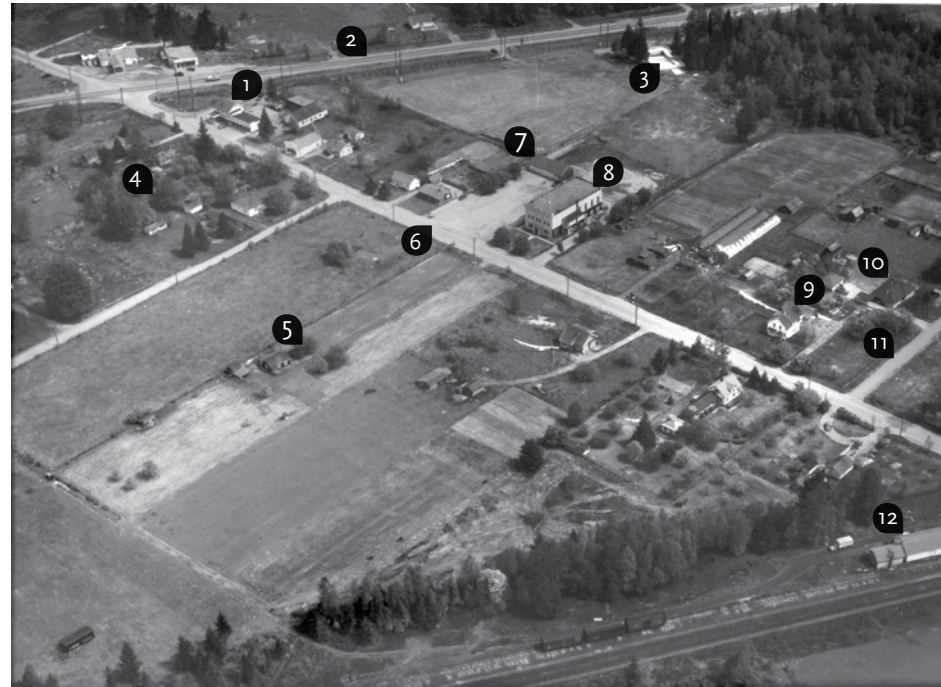
My job was bailing peat at the peat company. They had a hay bailer and they would fill it up with loose peat and they would have a plunger come down and you'd have to put wires around it. We would be digging in dry areas. We didn't run out. That's where the blueberry farms and cranberry farms are now. We went down three feet and that's it. The peat got a little browner and heavier then and they wanted soft moss and what they used it for I'm not sure but we were told it was for incendiary bombs. I worked for them for five years. There were at least 50 men employed. My father was in charge of the peat factory. There was a man before him but he left for some reason or another and my dad took it over and ran it. My dad ran it for 10 years.

As soon as the war was over there was no more demand for peat except for the chicken farmers using a lot of it in the States for bedding. I think the last barn was taken down in 1960.


Pitt Meadows circa 1950 looking northeast.

Legend

- 1 Schlick Hardware Store
- 2 Lougheed Highway
- 3 Pool
- 4 Post Office
- 5 McMyn Road
- 6 Harris Road
- 7 Public Works Yard
- 8 Municipal & Recreational Hall
- 9 Frank Harris Residence
- 10 John Austring Residence
- 11 Davison Road
- 12 Co-op




Pitt Meadows core circa 1956 looking north.




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Pitt Meadows, 2005.
Taken toward the northeast with the Golden Ears as a backdrop, the image clearly shows the development that has taken place around Harris Road and the Lougheed Highway in recent years. In the top left are Sheridan Hill, Pitt Polder, Pitt Lake, and the Pitt Range.