



A floating dredge used in the attempted reclamation of the north Pitt Meadows around the turn of the century.

## Pitt Polder

THE DUTCH WORD *POLDER* describes a low-lying parcel of reclaimed land surrounded by dikes and having a controlled water table. Pitt Polder encompasses 7,000 acres of land bordered on the east by mountains, on the southeast and south by the north Alouette River, on the north by Pitt Lake, and on the west by the lower Pitt River.

As early as 1888 the British Columbia Drainage and Dyking Company, headed by Vancouver mayor-elect David Oppenheimer, obtained large land holdings in north Pitt Meadows for the sole purpose of reclaiming the marshland and selling it at a profit. The federal government granted Oppenheimer and his partners, one of whom was Edward Mohun, the land for \$5.75 an acre payable upon successful reclamation. David and his brother Isaac had been entrepreneurs with storefronts in both Yale and Barkerville during the Cariboo gold rush period and with the profits from those ventures had purchased the Hastings Sawmill Company with its vast holdings in what became downtown Vancouver. The two

brothers were also involved in transportation companies and the British Columbia Sugar Refining Company.

The 7,000 acres of land the Oppenheimer brothers sought was the northern two-thirds of Pitt Meadows all the way to Pitt Lake. The huge holding had originally been a part of the railway reserve. Western Dredging, a company owned by Abel Smart, a BCDD shareholder, took what turned out to be a four-year contract to build primitive dikes with flood boxes with one-way gates and pumphouses for the purpose of reclaiming the land. The company used a floating dredge that used excavated materials from dug ditches to form the dikes, but unfortunately the narrowness at their tops, seldom more than six feet across, made them useless for maintenance during periods of high water or flooding, and their design made them prime targets for muskrats and beaver. In the end, the high floods of 1894, the very year the project was completed, spelt the doom for the entrepreneurs with the result that in 1906 the lands reverted back to crown ownership. The land speculators had gambled with Mother Nature and lost. The dikes had been built too low, the pumping station was inadequate, and the costs of reclamation were much higher than expected.

In 1909, William A. Rannie, better known as Big Bill, and J. W. Pyke, both of Vancouver, obtained an agreement from the Dominion Government to construct dikes and a pump station in a four-year time frame. Apparently they employed Chinese labour to assist in the building of some of the dikes. By the spring of 1913 the work of reclamation was completed, allowing Mr. Rannie to devote his time to the building of roads. He brought in a \$15,000 “Buckeye” ditcher that was equipped with buckets, or scoops, each capable of lifting half a ton of earth at one scoop that cut a perfectly sloped ditch nine feet wide on top, two-and-a-half feet at the bottom, and some five to six feet deep. This huge machine, operated by three men, was capable of doing half a mile of ditching in a 10-hour day. Wherever main roads were required, the excavating ditcher threw dirt to either side, forming the sub-grade for an 18-foot roadway. The ditcher constructed over 70 miles of open drains in a single year. In the spring of 1914 Rannie installed a pumping plant powered by electricity from the Western Canada Power Company and capable of removing 25,000 gallons of water per minute from inside the diked area during peak months of high water.

A Dutch waltz.





Lammert Westerhof's horse pulls a cart along a narrow-gauge track. The cart contained a cubic yard of building material that was dumped in order to build up the dike at the Deep Slough. The horses used in the project were an effective means of compacting the soil. 1951.

**Top Right**

The rail cars were 6 feet long by 4 feet wide and 4 feet deep and took only a cubic yard of material. The cars, made locally, had sliding side doors that opened for dumping the material. An Insley dragline, owned by Alexander Connelly of Surrey, fills the cars.

**Bottom Right**

The men used a log and a long plank to create a fulcrum effect to raise the narrow-gauge railway as the dike was raised.

Since the area was only a two-hour drive from the city, Big Bill wanted to sell 500 market garden plots to Vancouverites. He built a huge barn with stalls for 40 horses and a storage area for hay and had expectations of selling the hay to logging camps along the west coast. Scows were brought in to barge the hay up the coast. This venture petered out after bulldozers came into the logging industry. The area soon came to be known as the rainy Rannie Ranch, and his venture failed.

In the 1930s a group of Mennonites from Russia settled on the north side of Sturgeon Slough. They lived in deplorable conditions because of the seasonal flooding.

The next entrepreneurs to tackle the swamp-like land north of Pitt Meadows were Leon Ladner, a prominent Vancouver lawyer, and Walter Koerner, a lumber baron. Koerner had come out from Czechoslovakia in the mid-1930s and had started Alaska Pine in New Westminster. The two men formed Pitt Meadows Development Limited, and when their reclamation project failed, they invited Earle Finning of Finning Tractor to join the company and turn the area into a duck hunting reserve. According to folklore, the PMDL opened their floodgates to raise the water level for duck hunting and flooded out the Mennonites, with the result that most of them left to go to South America.





**Sandy Connolley's dragline being used on the 1951-1952 dike.**

In the spring of 1948 unusually high waters breached the Deep Slough dike at the south end of Pitt Lake. The flooding caused a decline in the duck population, and as a result the PMDL were anxious to sell.

In 1949 Jan Blom, a Dutch lawyer from the Hague, the Netherlands, arrived in Vancouver for the purpose of investing Dutch money in projects targeted at getting Dutch emigrant employment in Canada. His initial purpose for the trip was to oversee the sale of lands that had been acquired by the Dutch-owned Transatlantic Mortgage Company with the strategy of buying properties that had gone into receivership due to the depression following World War II. Blom talked with Ladner, who persuaded him to visit the duck hunting reserve north of Pitt Meadows to see the potential for farmlands, because both knew that Dutch engineers had the ingenuity at dike construction to reclaim the lands. Blom returned to Holland and managed to convince wealthy Dutch investors, who had lost large investments in Indonesia following the war, to gamble what was left of their fortunes in this new venture.

The Dutch dike builders, under the supervision of Mr. Biezefeld, a civil engineer from the Netherlands, set about repairing a 300-foot section of dike at the south end of Pitt Lake at the Deep Slough. The constant pounding from waves coming down Pitt Lake during stormy weather had broken the dike not only in 1948 but again in 1950, thus flooding the reclaimed lands. Biezefeld's plan was to build the dike to 14 feet above sea level. Ten to twelve men started on the project in July 1951 and worked until early October.

The men built a primitive railroad and used 6' long by 4' wide by 4' deep dump carts that each took a cubic yard of material. Richard Koopman, a blacksmith in Pitt Meadows, built these carts. Alexander Connelly from Surrey provided a dragline and bucket to fill the carts, which were then hauled by horses along the railroad to the break in

**A floating suction dredge was used to pipe a 90% water and 10% sand mixture to build the 1958-1959 dike. Note the flying of the Union Jack and the Dutch flag.**





**South End of Pitt Lake showing the massive reclamation endeavours of the Dutch in Pitt Polder.**

- 1 The 1958-1959 dike from the boat launch ramp
- 2 East to the mountains
- 3 1948 break and 1950 repair Deep Slough

the dike. That fall the married men then returned to their wives, but the single men stayed on and added brush, called matting, to the dike as a preliminary breakwater.

The following spring the ingenious Dutchmen hauled gravel on a scow from Mary Hill in Port Coquitlam. Once at the site, the gravel was mixed into cement, and the men put down 8' by 12' by 4" thick slabs all along the lakeside of the dike as a deterrent to wave action from Pitt Lake and burrowing by beaver and muskrat. They didn't stop with just these safeguards. At the southern end of Pitt Lake the company installed 8"-diameter pilings as a buffer against the 6-foot and greater waves coming from the lake. Then log booms were tied to the piles to help in slowing down the wave action.



Between 1959 and 1961, the Pitt Polder Limited built a second one mile long dike north of the original Deep Slough dike as added precautionary insurance. The company brought in a suction dredge and pumped a mixture of 10 % sand and 90 % water from the bottom of Pitt Lake through long pipes onto the top of the mudflats. The water drained back into the lake on one side and into the Deep Slough on the other, and the sand remained to slowly form a shallow 30 feet wide by one-mile long dike to the mountains. A dragline, sitting on a wooden platform, piled sand from the center of the lengthy shallow to either side and slowly a dike began to rise up across the mudflats. The dragline operator moved forward and backwards by placing wooden pallets either ahead or behind his machine. The trench left in the middle of the dike was then filled with the sand and water mixture and over time the dike began to rise. This dike was built up so that it was 32 feet wide when 16 feet above sea level. Rock, quarried from the Gilley quarry on the Port Coquitlam side of Pitt River, was used in place of cement on

**In 1959 Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands (husband of Queen Juliana) visited the Pitt Polder. Left to right: The Prince, Dr. Jan Blom, Lieutenant-Governor Frank M. Ross, and Pitt Meadows Reeve Harold Sutton.**

**Following Pages**

**Diking Area #2 (Fenton) and #1 (Alouette) with diking Area #4 (Pitt Polder) showing today's cranberry and blueberry fields. The Lower Pitt River is to the left of the photo coming out of Pitt Lake. The Swan-e-set Bay Resort & Country Club reaches the shoreline of the lake, while the Golden Eagle Golf Club is nestled up against the mountains.**



the lakeside of this dike. A wall of 12"- to 16"-diameter pilings was constructed on the lakeside of this dike to which log booms were chained.

The company built two large pumphouses that were easily capable of pumping the excess rainwater coming off the mountains and into their ditches through the floodgates and back into the Pitt River. It took three years for the Dutch to rebuild the dikes and install pumphouses that were large enough to keep the water on the riverside of the dikes.

In 1955 the Pitt Polder Limited board of directors decided to take on a Canadian partner and raise the necessary capital to help finance the upgrading of the dikes. From the corner of Sturgeon Slough going in a northerly direction another dike needed to be reinforced due to the constant erosion caused by the run of the lower Pitt River plus the twice-daily tides running in and out around Addington Point. The repair to the one-and-a-half miles of this dike occurred between 1959 and 1961. The dike was built to 14 feet above sea level with a 12-foot top. Sieb Swierstra, the dragline operator, estimated that 72,000 cubic yards were moved to construct this dike. Ironically, Dr. Blom sold shares to Ladner and Koerner, the same two principals involved in the original sale to Blom and his Dutch investors. The reclaimed acreage was used for dairy farming and blueberry crops. Pitt Polder Limited leased ten dairy farms, each comprising approximately 100 acres, to Dutch farmers who shipped milk to dairies in Vancouver.

At the confluence of the north and south Alouette Rivers the dike builders dug up Hudson's Bay Company bottles that had been used for trading with either the First Nations people or some of the earliest settlers.

Once the Pitt Polder project was under control, Dr. Blom founded Canadian British Associates, an engineering firm based out of New Westminster, and took contracts for the building of dams and bridges throughout the province. His company took the contract to build the Port Mann Bridge over the Fraser River. The bridge, more than a mile long, opened in June 1964 and at the

time of its construction was the most expensive piece of highway in Canada.

Upon learning that Dr. Blom and his associates in Holland were interested in selling the Pitt Polder, Dr. Marco Terweil, a Maple Ridge physician, introduced entrepreneur Gordon Robson to Blom in 1980. Robson acted quickly and began bringing together partners to evaluate the land's potential. Robson and neophyte realtor Stan Pavlov managed to broker a deal and sell a huge portion of the Pitt Polder to Luigi Aquilini, who turned the Pitt Polder into a giant cranberry operation.

Emile Menton, one of the original investors, split away from the others and his property was called Ellendale Farms. Pavlov later that same year managed to sell Menton's 1,000 acres to Japanese investors, who turned the property into Swan-e-set Bay Resort and Country Club. Pavlov, although a rookie realtor, managed to sell more acreage in Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge in his first year than all the other realtors in those two municipalities combined.



Queen Juliana chats with Klazina and Martin Faber, 24 May 1967.

## Queen Juliana's Visit to the Pitt Polder

By Peter J. Langbroek

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The Dutch and Canadian flags waved in the wind on either side of the small wooden bridge that led to the small green and white farmhouse. The crowd stood aback gazing behind the white fence. Mrs. And Mr. Faber waited by the front porch. Everything was tidy as a pin. Even the barn was clean after Mr. and Mrs. Faber and their son Ted had brushed the cows and trimmed their tails of any dirty clods.

The Fabers had waited for this time. Finally, they arrived, that cloudy day on 24 May 1967. Close friends and family gathered around, watching the woman with a light green dress, wearing a light brown beaded hat walk to their home. Mrs. Faber, in her Sunday best, a black dress, with a red rose

corset, and Mr. Faber, with a red carnation pinned to the lapel of his grey suit. Then, the moment came. Mrs. Faber stood a meter apart, bent forward, and shook the hand of Queen Juliana of the Netherlands. The queen had come to visit the dairy farmer in Pitt Polder, British Columbia.

Mrs. Faber escorted the queen inside their home while Mr. Faber followed, with his hands behind his back. There was a hushed mood inside the living room that afternoon. There was Ted, his wife Wilma, and their newborn son, Martin, in the crib. "Is that your son, Ma'am?" the queen asked Mrs. Faber.

"No, it's my grandson."

"Then, how old are you?" the queen replied. The family and friends laughed and the mood lightened as they realized how down to earth the queen was.