

Mack Laing Heritage Society of the Comox Valley

Community event participation and outreach

Comox Valley Earth Day 2014



April 2014



About The Mack Laing Heritage Society of the Comox Valley (MLHS)

The MLHS was incorporated as a Society in British Columbia on May 20, 2014.

Its mission is four-fold:

- 1) To fulfill the stated wishes of Mack Laing's 1981 Will and Testament: "that my home be used as a natural history museum", as faithfully as possible
- 2) To oversee the restoration and maintenance of Mack Laing's home at "Baybrook"
- 3) To maintain and promote the dissemination of Mack Laing's environmental values and legacy
- 4) To fundraise annually to maintain a variety of environmental programmes of interest to the general public throughout the Comox Valley and to the Town of Comox

Fundraising

The first fundraising event, held on August 16, 2014, received broad community support and raised almost \$11,000.

For detailed information about Hamilton Mack Laing, his Will, and the plans proposed by the Mack Laing Heritage Society, please visit the Society's website:

www.macklaingsociety.ca

For enquiries and membership information, please email:

macklaingsociety@gmail.com



"I drifted as naturally to a life on the land as water runs downhill. It seemed the only job I knew that I could be always under the sky receptive to Nature's teachings.

So my work became my play; how very lucky I was!"

Baybrook: Life's Great Adventure - by Mack Laing

Background

- In 2008, the Baybrook property and three adjoining parcels, were purchased through a cooperative agreement between the BC Nature Trust and the Town of Comox, for \$2.1 million. The unnamed park was officially opened to the public in 2011.
- The park is connected to two other natural areas with maintained trails - Mack Laing Park and McDonald Wood
- Hamilton Mack Laing (b. 1883), pioneer, orchardist, naturalist, author, artist, photographer, lived on the estuary from 1922 until his death in 1982 at the age of 99.
- Laing completed building the Baybrook house from an Aladdin Reddi-Cut kit in 1923. This structure comprises the left-hand portion of the house (viewed from the front).
- With his wife Ethel, Mack Laing established a viable nut farm and orchard. Many of the trees remain in the adjoining subdivision and are still productive.
- Laing stated in his 1981 Will that a percentage of the proceeds of the sale of his property and possessions should be used for the creation and upkeep of a natural history museum in his home. This request has not been fulfilled.
- Shakesides, the house in which Laing was living at the time of his death in 1982 (on the waterfront of Mack Laing Park), is in poor condition and cannot be renovated for public access.
- Baybrook is in good condition and is ideally suited for a nature centre/museum. It is of significance to the environmental and ecological history of Canada because it was visited by well-known naturalists and biologists of the day, and was the inspiration for many books, drawings and scientific observations.
- In June 2013, the Town of Comox proposed to demolish all the buildings on the property. A coalition of nature groups asked the Town to postpone demolishing Baybrook House until a formal structural and historical assessment could be made.
- A report on the professional assessment was presented to Council in September 2013. Council granted a year for the coalition to create an economic plan for Baybrook house.
- In August 2014, the Mack Laing Heritage Society presented an expanded report on the economic feasibility of its 2013 proposal to Comox Council. Reports from Town Staff on this proposal are pending.

Proposal

- That the Baybrook property remain a walk-in nature park, as are the Mack Laing Park and McDonald Wood.
- The house will be open to the public and have wheelchair and disabled access.
- The park will be open to passive, nature-based structured and unstructured educational activities for all ages, as are other parks in Comox. Baybrook House will complement these educational activities with inside displays and information.
- With the support of Comox Valley Nature (The Comox Valley Naturalists Society), Project Watershed, BC Nature Trust, and others, the house will encourage appreciation of our natural world, as Mack Laing wished.
- The Mack Laing Heritage Society proposes to restore and maintain Baybrook as a natural history centre, with all funding for this to be derived from external sources. The Mack Laing Heritage Society will be responsible for all restoration and maintenance costs.
- The Society's interest is solely with Baybrook house. Decisions related to the park property itself are, and will remain, the responsibility of the Town of Comox.
- A qualified resident naturalist, will be on hand to train volunteers, gather environmental data for the site's conservation, and coordinate educational activities.

Consultation

- The Town of Comox is responsible for public notices and consultation, and for addressing any concerns related to any of its public parks, including parking. The MLHS is willing to assist in this regard.
- The Baybrook property itself will be managed by the Town of Comox Parks Department, per agreement with the BC Nature Trust.
- The MLHS proposal concerns ONLY Baybrook house.

Conclusion

It is the intention of the MLHS to work closely with all stakeholders, residents of the Comox and the local neighbourhood.

The Society wishes to ensure that the Baybrook house is publicly accessible to enhance the nature park experience for all residents of the Comox Valley.

Heritage Week - February 2015 - Comox Mall



Celebrating Flag Day and Heritage Week in the Comox Mall

February 15-20, 2015

Raffles, Artwork, Historical Displays Childrens Corner and "Mack"

Join us to celebrate a Comox pioneer
and respected naturalist,
artist and orchardist, who left an
impressive legacy of documents,
photographs and vertebrates
to Canadian museums.

**www.macklaingsociety.ca
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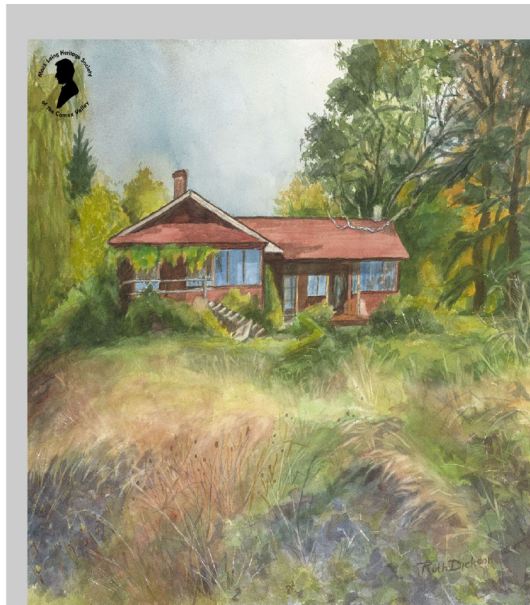
Hamilton Mack Laing purchased the virgin Baybrook property in 1921 and spent the next two years clearing it, building a road into Comox, and preparing a home site. The Bay is frequented by many bird species, one of the reasons why Laing loved the location. He was a keen photographer, writer, naturalist and renowned collector for the National Museum in Ottawa.

The original seven room, three bedroom house, was completed by Laing in 1923, from a mail-order Stanhope model, Read-Cut house kit, produced by The Aladdin Co, Bay City, Michigan. The kit cost around \$690, not including shipping, and promised "knotless" red cedar siding, flooring and interior finish.

Laing married in 1927, and lived in Baybrook with his wife Ethel during his most productive years. The couple established a commercially-viable farm, harvesting filberts, hazelnuts, walnuts, pecans, apples, plums, mushrooms and several varieties of vegetable.

Ethel died in 1944. In 1949, Laing sold Baybrook and the subsequent owner added extensions. In 1950, Laing built his second home, Shakesides, in what is now the adjacent Mack Laing Nature Park, which he bequeathed to the Town of Comox in 1973. The Baybrook farm became a subdivision, except for 2.6 hectares including Baybrook house. Laing died in 1982 at the age of 99.

In 2011, the Baybrook property was purchased by the BC Nature Trust, and the Town of Comox for a public park. The site is renowned for its extensive and historically-significant ancient middens, and its spectacular view of Comox Bay.



*Baybrook House
Comox, BC.*

Watercolour

by Ruth Dickson



Mack Laing - Comox man of distinction

Hamilton Mack Laing was born in Hensall, Ontario in 1883. His extended family moved to Manitoba, settling in Clearsprings, where he became a keen hunter and observer of nature. He never shot anything for sport.

He regularly upgraded his professional qualifications. From 1901-1911, he taught school, then became principal of the high school in Oak Lake. He learned drawing and taxidermy, played sports, and became fascinated by birds.

In 1905, he earned a diploma from the National Press Association in Indianapolis, Indiana, for a commercial storywriting course. His first published piece of fiction, was ***'The End of the Trail,'*** published in 1907. He visited BC in 1909, via steamer up the Sunshine Coast from Vancouver.

He moved to Brooklyn, New York, in the summer of 1911. He enrolled in the Pratt Institute's program of Fine and Applied Arts. Three years later, he graduated with an Art Diploma. He was an accomplished artist and produced beautifully accurate and detailed images.

In 1913, Laing's first book, ***'Out With The Birds'*** was published.

He bought a motorcycle in 1914 and drove from New York to Winnipeg, the first of several "expeditions."

In 1918-9, Laing worked in the observation tower at RAF Beamsville, Ontario. He met three prominent ornithologists during those years - Hoyes Lloyd, who monitored migratory birds for the Dominion Parks Branch, J.H Fleming, a wealthy man who later donated 25,000 bird skins to the ROM, and Percy Taverner from the National Museum in Ottawa.

In 1920, Canadian Field Naturalist published his article ***'Lake-shore Bird Migration at Beamsville, Ontario'***, which was very well received. He left Ontario and after a visit to friends in Portland, decided to return to Canada. He began writing in earnest and sought work as a field naturalist.

He moved to Comox in 1922, cleared his land and built his home from a "Stanhope" Aladdin Ready-Cut kit. In 1927, he married Ethel Hart of Portland and they established a successful and commercial orchard which

included walnut, pecan, filbert, hazelnut, apple and plum trees. They also grew mushrooms and vegetables.

Laing was an avid and accomplished photographer, taking many photos of local wildlife, scenery, the people who visited him, and the work done on his land. He kept detailed diaries and observation notes. He was considered an expert on birds.

His visitors included fellow naturalists, artists, hunting and fishing companions, and writers.

In 1929, an article written by Laing entitled ***'Oil - Black Death of Waterbirds - The Bird World Faces a New Menace - Oil - Polluted Waters - A Tragedy on the West Coast'*** was published in *'Forest and Outdoor'* magazine. In 1936, he wrote an article for *'Field and Stream'* about the horned owl.

An article by Laing, ***'Four-Footed Trailside Friends of the Rockies'***, appeared in the *'Canadian Geographic Journal'* in April 1937. Over his lifetime, Laing published over 700 articles, 22 of which are in peer-reviewed scientific publications of his day. His works were described as a "delight to read."

Laing was engaged to accompany 10 important expeditions for the National Museum of Canada and three expeditions funded by Canada and the U.S, as a "collector-naturalist", between 1933 and 1935. He was considered a "top field man."

Laing collected over 10,000 vertebrate specimens in his lifetime, the majority for the National Museum. He is credited with discovering two species of mouse. *Perognathus Laingi* was named after him in 1956.

He was devastated when his wife Ethel died of cancer in 1944, after a short illness. In 1949, he sold the Baybrook property, and in 1950, built Shakesides on the adjoining lot, in what is now Mack Laing Nature Park.

In 1979, his biography of a friend and colleague, ***'Allan Brooks - artist naturalist'*** was published by the British Columbia Provincial Museum.

A man of many talents, Laing never tired of writing, and wrote hundreds of letters, expressing his views to friends, colleagues and the press.

He bequeathed his property to the Town of Comox in 1973 and lived in the house until his death, helped by friends, health professionals and Town employees.

In 1978, Laing, still hale and wiry at 95 years old, held an art show at D'Esterre House in Comox.

He was a teetotaler, who in advanced age became very particular about food, also rejecting tea and coffee.

Laing died of a massive coronary in February 1982, at the age of 99, after falling and requiring a hip operation. He is buried in Sandwich Cemetery, Courtenay.





Christmas Display 2015 - Comox Mall

