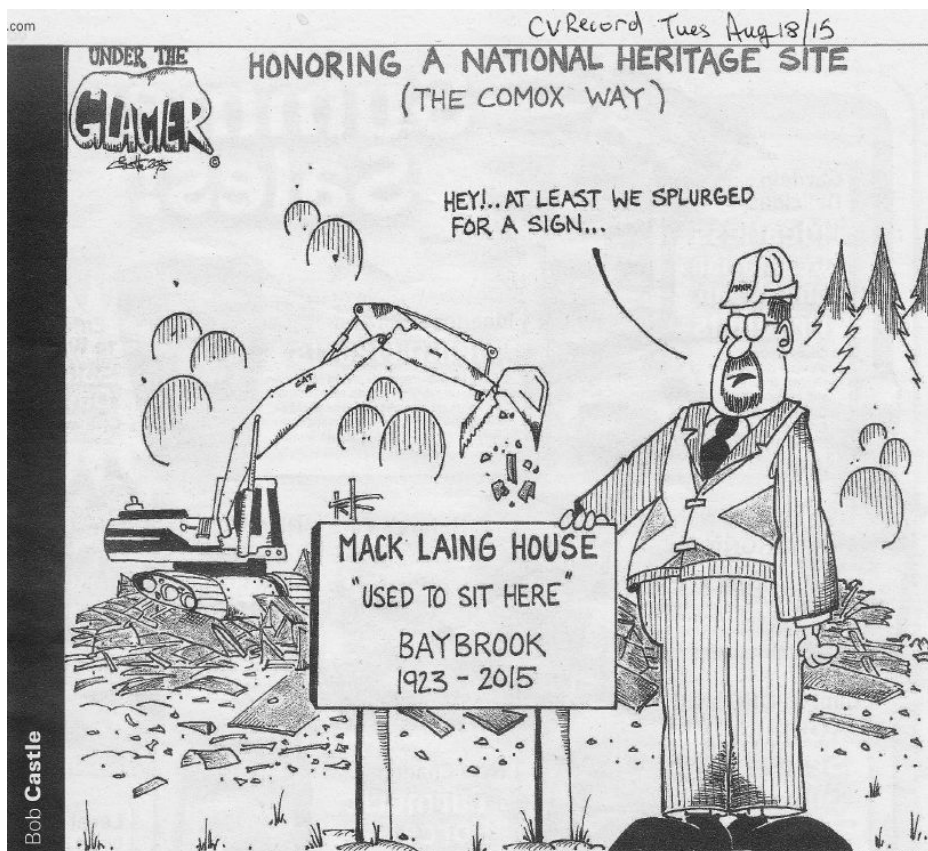
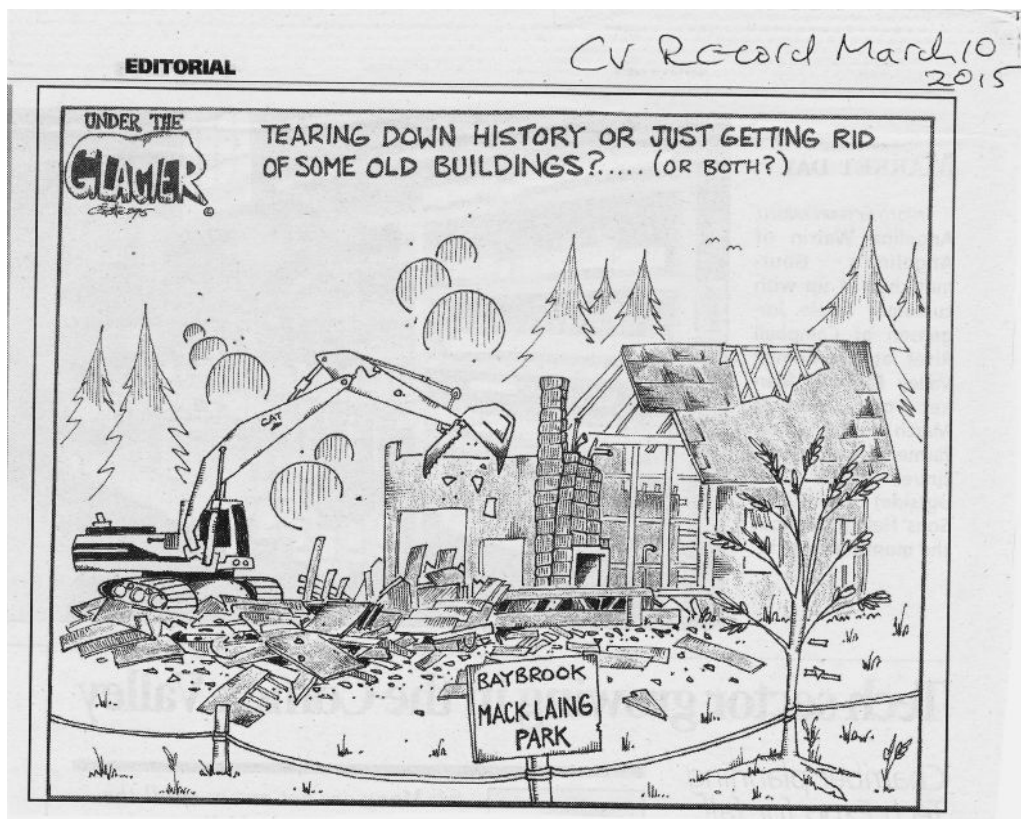


**Press on Hamilton Mack Laing homes
of 'Baybrook' and 'Shakesides'**

2015

Editorial Cartoons - Comox Valley Record



Stephen Hume - Vancouver Sun, April 10, 2015

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Stephen Hume: Comox to demolish former homes of B.C. naturalist and painter

2

Houses are surrounded by parkland donated by Hamilton Mack Laing

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST APRIL 12, 2015 8:49 PM



STORY

PHOTOS (2)



Mack Laing's Brookbank House with scientist Loys Maingon, who wants to preserve it as a heritage site. Stephen Hume/ Vancouver Sun

COMOX — Tucked away amid manicured gardens of a cul-de-sac fronted by some of Vancouver Island's most valuable suburban homes is a nondescript gravel drive.

You'd never know from the absence of signs but it leads across a bubbling salmon stream to a stunning vista of wind-combed sea grass, saltwater marsh and tidal flats of the Courtenay River. The panorama sweeps away west to the glittering Comox Glacier on Forbidden Plateau.

This park was willed to the people of Comox by one of British Columbia's most fascinating historical figures, Hamilton Mack Laing.

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That, says Maingon, was when "scurrilous" accusations began to fly.

He says a petition claimed the Mack Laing Heritage Society was trying to take over and commercialize the park; that there were plans to build a convention centre on the site; that it would put the town on the hook for securing annual grants of \$500,000 to maintain the site.

Artist Brian Scott donated paintings to support the heritage cause; Kees Visser, the president of the Federation of B.C. Naturalists, wrote warning the town that demolition would be "a cultural affront," erasing the legacy of a man whose research, writing, photographs and art laid the foundations of Canada's ecological heritage.

On February 25, Comox council voted to demolish both houses.

Richard Somerset Mackie, associate editor of B.C. Studies, author of four critically acclaimed social histories of the Comox Valley including a biography of Laing, cancelled his appearance at a valley literary event scheduled for May saying the demolitions would be just the most recent of half-a-dozen heritage buildings lost over the last decade.

"This destruction amounts to cultural vandalism," Mackie wrote. "Why should I celebrate books, history and heritage with a community that consistently destroys what I have tried to protect and perpetuate?"

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Stephen Hume - Vancouver Sun, August 6, 2015

Stephen Hume: Wrecking balls are destroying B.C.'s heritage — and its character

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST AUGUST 6, 2015



STORY

PHOTOS (2)



Demolition of Canadian artist and naturalist Mack Laing's former residence in Comox got underway on Thursday. Photo by Loys Maingon/Special to The Sun.
Photograph by: Loys Maingon

Ho hum, another day, another fragment of British Columbia's heritage erased in the name of progress, cleanliness and saving NIMBY neighbourhoods from visitor parking.

There'll be cheering among the historical sanitizers in Comox today as iconic Canadian artist and naturalist Mack Laing's former residence is consigned to the garbage. It joins the rubble of half a dozen other historic "eyesores" which no longer afflict the gaze of tourists whom civic leaders presumably think prefer visiting strip malls.

Nothing like making your town look like bland suburban everywhere instead of maintaining the unique sense of an edgy past that might actually attract cultural tourists instead of encouraging them to head on up to Cumberland or Campbell River where heritage seems important.

Mind you, the vision-bereft of Cumberland once had their day, too. What was once the biggest Chinatown outside San Francisco, including its magnificent opera house, was razed. Pothunters were then encouraged to rummage through the site and carry off artifacts from when Canada was in its infancy.

All that remains is a derelict log cabin, historical plaques, museum displays and the cemetery where — so far at any rate — nobody's advocated demolishing the historic tombstones of union activists, including the boulder with the red hammer and sickle. Oh, wait — they did that once, too, vandalizing the Japanese cemetery in the name of patriotism, although it has since been shamefacedly restored.

More recently, in a fit of ideological pique, the provincial government expunged from road signs the name of Ginger Goodwin, a socialist labour leader shot dead by Dominion police in 1918. His blood-stained memory, alas, rose from the grave to become the engine of a thriving cottage tourist industry.

Of course, signs bearing the name of his capitalist foe, mine owner Robert Dunsmuir, remain intact.

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Letter writers still rant about commemorating a draft-dodging communist but, hey, people are interested — why try to drive off those who want to leave their dollars in bed and breakfasts and local eateries? Isn't that called cutting off your nose to spite your face?

Who cares today whether Goodwin was a leftist radical or that coal from Dunsmuir's mines was reportedly sold to refuel German armoured cruisers menacing Vancouver from San Francisco harbour.

What's important — and what Cumberland has since come to recognize — is that meaningless retroactive moral judgments aside, it's all fascinating stuff for history buffs and it's the fascination that attracts cultural visitors to your town, where they spend their money.

Campbell River, points out Richard Mackie, who wrote the Laing's biography in 1985, hosts Roderick Haig-Brown's house Above Tide, built in the same year that Laing built his house above the beach at Comox.

"Look what Campbell River has done with Haig-Brown's legacy — the house anchors the Haig-Brown Institute, the Haig-Brown Festival, and the Haig-Brown Writer in Residency. Haig-Brown's Above Tide helped put Campbell River on the (cultural tourism) map, but with the demolition of Mack Laing's Baybrook, the Town of Comox has put itself on the map for all the wrong reasons."

Kathryn Molloy, executive director of Heritage B.C., which had urged Comox town council not to destroy what the organization described as an "irreplaceable" bit of the province's history, expressed disappointment that the politicians couldn't retain Baybrook "and use the building in ways that will conserve the heritage values of this significant site while celebrating the important life and work of Mack Laing."

Loys Maingon, the local heritage activist who advocated for saving the site and using it as a natural history interpretive centre, said that "hand deconstruction" of the building, salvage and recycling of materials was promised. Instead, he said, municipal authorities sent in heavy equipment to smash the structure.

"Our national heritage building can now be found at the sanitary landfill," he said.

"Baybrook was one of the last remaining heritage buildings in Comox. As the letter from the National Trust shows, it was the only building in the Comox Valley that qualified as a national heritage site. Its destruction is an incredible statement of cultural ignorance and a reprehensible betrayal of fundamental Canadian values," he said. "Today's events are a national disgrace that deserve national publicity."

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HERITAGE

The End of the Trail

Controversy brews over the future of former local naturalist and writer Mack Laing's Comox homes

By Kerry Staley • September & October 2015



Hamilton Mack Laing's former home, Shakesides, has weathered more than 60 winters and now it sits at the epicentre of perhaps its most turbulent storm yet. Laing lived in the home, which sits in what is now Mack Laing Nature Park in Comox, until his death in 1984 at the age of 99. Photo by Paul Hensen

There is something strangely alluring about old houses. Beyond the tattered, crumbling facades, stories of time and place reside between old walls, echoes of yesteryear, tangible reminders of local history. Such is Shakesides, an alluring relic set amongst the forest on the shores of Comox Estuary, home of the late Hamilton Mack Laing.

Made from a kit home in 1930 by Laing, Shakesides has weathered more than 60 winters and now it sits at the epicentre of perhaps its most turbulent storm yet. A structure worth keeping, worth the time, money and resources to maintain it and allow the visual story of Mack Laing to organically unfold? Or is the relic an increasingly dangerous "eyesore," beyond repair, an irrelevant, derelict, and unnecessary structure, and void of the necessary resources to mend and maintain it?

The cedar roof shingles of Shakesides are peeling and layered in moss and lichen, the shingled side walls brown, faded, tired. Various plants and vines have interwoven themselves up and across the structure, entangled, running uncontained. Several windows are boarded, western blinds hang lopsided from inside the front room. On top, two left windows with small triangular roof panels watch down over the house and the vast foreground beyond like the old eyes of an ancient owl. It evokes an image of a figurative guardian of the land. But the owl's window-paned eyeballs are cracked and peeling too, and in desperate need of care.

Even the boardwalk, which winds its way right in front of the dwelling, has seen better days. Unruly weeds grab at the feet of passersby as people stop to embrace the scene before them, both man-made and natural.

To stop and look across the tidal waters of the estuary brings into clear view the Beaufort Range, a vast green blanket of growth with its stark ridgeline silhouette traversing the sky. To the right, the Comox Glacier shines down, glowing bold, white, majestic. It represents a stunning vista, a panorama so magnificent that one simply cannot resist to stop and stare.

Two hundred metres from Shakesides, also on the estuary and surrounded by trees and abundant birdlife, is the site of the former Baybrook house, Laing's first Comox home, constructed in 1923. Baybrook lived numerous iterations, having been sold to a local family in 1949, and then again in 2006, but where the structure sat for close to 93 years is now rubble and a solitary cement slab, left by demolition workers following orders from Comox Council.

In the early hours of August 2 of this year, a giant, mechanical claw put a sudden, confronting end to this part of Comox's history, sparking a heated debate that continues to gather flame and fury. Finger pointing, accusations, and blame have enraged the issue; the act of blatant disregard for Laing's will, wanton destruction of a natural heritage zone, name calling, slander, lies, bullying, outright arrogance and ignorance, and even identity misrepresentation.

According to author and former Comox Valley resident, Richard Mackie, who in 1985 wrote Laing's biography entitled Hamilton Mack Laing: Hunter-Naturalist, Laing was, "By training a teacher, artist, popular writer, and journalist," and today his "legacy remains far reaching and very much alive."

Born in Huron County, Ontario, in 1885, Laing's family moved to Manitoba and settled on a dairy farm in Clearings where he became a keen hunter and observer of nature. Educated locally, he moved to the Winnipeg Normal School in 1898 and in 1900 he qualified as a rural school teacher at the age of seventeen. A gifted teacher, he taught his students nature study, helped introduce the Scouting movement to Manitoba, and in 1908 was made principal of Oakwood High School at Oak Lake, where he remained until 1914.

In 1905, he earned a diploma in story writing from the National Press Association of the United States, and his first published piece of fiction was *The End of the Trail*, published in 1907.

After briefly visiting BC in 1909, he moved to Brooklyn, New York, in the summer of 1912 to further his studies and three years later he graduated with an art diploma. In the same year he bought a motorcycle and drove from New York to Winnipeg, the first of several "expeditions."

In 1920, he decided to return to Canada. He chose Comox—described to him as "a very birdy place"—and in 1922 cleared his land with little assistance and built his home from a Shanopie Aladdin Ready-Cut kit. Five years later, he married Ethel Hart of Portland and together they established a successful commercial orchard—Baybrook Nur Orchard—which included walnut, pecan, filbert, hazelnut, apple and plum trees. They also grew mushrooms and an assortment of vegetables. In 1944, his wife Ethel died of cancer after a short illness. Laing was devastated. In 1949, he sold the Baybrook property and orchard, retaining four acres along Brooklyn Creek, and in 1950 he built Shakesides on the adjoining lot, in what is now Mack Laing Nature Park.



Mack Laing harvests filberts at the Baybrook Nur Orchard, circa 1947. Photo courtesy Comox Archives & Museum Society (A2004.004.004)

Laing was an avid photographer, taking many photos of local wildlife, scenery, people, and the work done on his land. He kept detailed diaries and observation notes. His reputation as an expert on birds flourished during these years. He had many visitors during this time, including fellow naturalists, artists, hunting and fishing companions, and writers.

Over his lifetime, Laing published more than 700 articles, 22 of which were featured in scientific publications of his day. His works were described as a "delight to read." Additionally, Laing collected more than 10,000 vertebrate specimens in his lifetime, the majority for the National Museum in Ottawa. Throughout the 1930s and 60s, he continued to study, write and photograph with fervor, and in 1973 he bequeathed his Shakesides property to the Town of Comox. He continued living in the house until his death in 1984 at the age of 99 years.

He was, without question, a hardworking man of great skill and supreme talent. According to Mackie, "(Laing's) importance lies in the strength of the friendships made over his long life, in his collections of birds, mammals, and plants housed in Canadian and American museums and universities; in his influential nature stories published in newspapers and outdoor magazines, his attitude to nature and to predatory animals... which he never lost, and which he disseminated through his work."

A plaque erected in 1983 in Mack Laing Nature Park reads, "he gave his home and land to the Town of Comox, in trust, in perpetuity, for conservation and to encourage appreciation of nature." Laing's will stipulated the preservation of Shakesides—his second home—as a nature centre, and provided \$25,000 for its maintenance. According to Comox Mayor Paul Ives, this fund is still safely stored in council coffers, but the suggestion by some that this amount is equivalent to about \$300,000 in today's currency has little merit says the Mayor. Ives claims the actual amount to be somewhere closer to \$75,000.

In 2009, the Town of Comox, working together with the Nature Trust of British Columbia, purchased three parcels of neighboring land—including Baybrook—for a little more than \$1.2 million.

"We did that to add to the green space," says Ives. "We have essentially doubled the size of Mack Laing Park." Then, soon thereafter, on the back of official property assessments undertaken by both a professional structural engineer and architect, the Town of Comox declared that Shakesides was structurally unsound and was therefore to be demolished.

Regarding Baybrook—named by Ethel Laing as a place where Brooklyn Creek meets Comox Bay—the same assessment concluded the structure could be carefully rehabilitated and adapted to a new public use. Nonetheless, council were concerned about safety issues and the possible burden on local taxpayers to foot refurbishment and maintenance costs. After lengthy discussions, they made their intentions public; Baybrook, too, was slated for demolition.

The Mack Laing Heritage Society (MLHS)—a small, local, volunteer body created to ensure the legacy of Laing—rallied behind these findings and urged the Town of Comox to preserve Laing's original dwelling, Baybrook, as a nature centre in lieu of Shakesides. The MLHS got a legal opinion that the Town should transfer its trust from Shakesides to Baybrook. The society also got the support of various heritage agencies, provincial and national, voicing their support for the preservation of Baybrook. Interestingly, they also learned, and confirmed, that part-time Comox resident Alice Munro had spent several months at Laing's former house.

In an official letter from Heritage BC dated June 23, 2015, Executive Director Kathryn Molloy writes "Because of Baybrook's rich heritage value... we believe that Baybrook should be conserved for present and future generations. We encourage the Town of Comox to retain the Baybrook property and use the building in ways that will conserve the heritage values of this significant site..."

Additionally, according to the MLHS, Heritage BC offered to assist with restoration costs to the tune of \$150,000 and that other sources of funding were available to offer viable, cost-effective preservation options. Mayor Ives was quoted by the Comox Valley Echo on August 11 as saying, "They just said funding might be available," suggesting the funding was far from guaranteed.

From the National Trust of Canada, a letter dated July 31, 2015 from Natalie Bull, Executive Director: "Baybrook was the home of esteemed naturalist, collector, author and educator Mack Laing from the time of its construction in 1922 until 1949, representing his most active and prolific period of research and writing... The National Trust urges the Town of Comox to reconsider its decision to demolish the important heritage property. We encourage you to recognize the heritage significance of Baybrook and to take advantage of Heritage BC's offer of assistance..."

Despite impassioned pleas from the MLHS and Canada's most prominent heritage agencies, in February the decision to demolish Baybrook was upheld and early on the morning of August 2 the order was carried out. Despite several angry and frustrated protesters, the big rigs rolled in.

"It amounted, in my opinion, to a battle of wills between Ives and Loys Maingon (MLHS's President)," says Richard Mackie. "Ives was determined to win, and he did win—but the people of Comox have lost an important house and part of their heritage. Given the written promises of financial and institutional support for Baybrook's preservation, I can only conclude that Ives' actions were short-sighted, spiteful, and vindictive. Everyone in the Comox Valley would have benefited from the preservation of this house."

In his own defence, Mayor Ives says, "We need to step back from the emotional side and start to work together." He added that the Town of Comox respects the heritage value of the Mack Laing area, and has, as a rule, embraced green space. "Just look around our town and see the good work that's been done," he said, highlighting numerous local parks and forested areas, including Filberg Park, Marina Park, and the North East Woods, as natural areas of council focus.

Stephen Hume, an outspoken Vancouver Sun journalist who delved headlong into the issue, wrote in an August 5 Vancouver Sun article, "Comox council is left with the embarrassing dilemma of whether it wants the community celebrated for cultural stewardship or stigmatized for demolishing heritage that belongs not just to the municipality but to all British Columbians and Canadians."

In a letter to the Editor, published in the Comox Valley Echo on August 18, Loys Maingon, said "Mayor Ives has stated in press and on television that 'Baybrook had only some or little heritage value.'"

Maingon went on to add, "He (Mayor Ives) has also cast doubt on the availability of funding, as though these organizations would write strongly-worded letters with no intention of supporting their words."

The Mack Laing saga has an equally vocal flip side, as evidenced by the very next letter in that same issue of the Comox Valley Echo. It reads, "Congratulations to Comox Town Council for ignoring the out-of-town hysteria and proceeding with the demolition of Baybrook. Removal of this non-descript, derelict eyesore has opened up a beautiful view of the water and mountains. It is gratifying to know that decisions about the use of public property are made by Comox taxpayers through their elected representatives—not by outside special interest groups."

A closer look at the MLHS website or the online version of Hume's Vancouver Sun article underscores the vitriolic, sarcastic, and barbed war of words that has ensued between main protagonists. Assertions and accusations include, "The MLHS and their supporters are the only people who saw any heritage value in a derelict shack, briefly occupied by a minor historical figure who spent most of his life in the neighboring Shakesides property," and, "I hate it when democracy and responsible civic decision-making get in the way of the pipe dreams and historical fantasies of a few (very few) conflicted individuals." Subsequent responses speak of the "shameless acts of fear power intoxicated, vengeance seeking individuals."

What about old houses, then? Are they simply feeble, irrelevant shacks of a bygone era, serving no purpose and yet requiring dollars to keep erect? Would Hamilton Mack Laing, as a naturalist, have been so unforthcoming to the idea of having his former houses felled and in their place, perhaps, a pavilion offering up information, pictorials, quiet surrounding trails, a place to sit and appreciate the birds and the local scenery? Mackie, having lived in Shakesides for three months immediately following Laing's passing in 1984, says he thinks he knows the answer.

"Laing was first and foremost a teacher and he knew that teachers need a place to teach," Mackie says. "And naturalists need a place to teach. Baybrook was the ideal place for all that and more."

Mackie offers up his take on old houses, too. "Old houses and buildings are often the only physical reminders of a community's past. Their destruction—whether by arson, neglect, or civil edict—always represents a permanent loss of a community's history, identity and stories. Historic buildings anchor a community to its past in tangible and lasting ways, and their demolition severs those links for future generations, cutting them adrift."

The furore over Mack Laing's houses rages on with no end in sight. Both sides are bracing for more action. Meanwhile, as if oblivious to it all, the sun rises and falls on the vast Beaufort Range, the Comox Glacier sits high and proud, the tides at Comox Estuary ebb and flow as they've always done. Birdsong is all around. Nothing much has changed in this regard since Mack Laing heaved hammer and hoe in this same spot more than 90 years ago. Shakesides, with its alluring beauty and ancient owl eyes, rests peacefully. For now.

And the powerful, subtle words of Henry David Thoreau, etched into Laing's epitaph in the park just behind Shakesides, echo timelessly across the water and land and glacier: "Be not simply good, be good for something."



Mack Laing checks the nuts on the filbert trees of Baybrook Nur Orchard, circa 1970. Photo courtesy Comox Archives & Museum Society (A1998.004.038)

A future for natural history in Mack Laing Park

BY MARY LEE
Echo Staff

Hamilton Mack Laing wished to establish a Natural History Museum in the very park where he once resided and is named in his honour.

Efforts by the Town of Comox to fulfill this wish are underway albeit a little late in the opinion of many concerned citizens and fellow naturalists.

In 1972, the beloved naturalist granted his property to the Town of Comox with the stipulation that it be used by him for the remainder of his lifetime and, "in trust, in perpetuity, as a public nature park to be used for "recreation and conservation purposes."

Upon his death in 1982, he bequeathed \$45,000 to the town to improve and develop the home as a natural-history museum. The Trust funds left to the town were invested



and kept in good accounting order while the house dwindled to state of disrepair. Shakesides was identified unsalvageable by the Town and scheduled for demolition for August

2014.

Response to the proposed demolition of Shakesides was overwhelming causing waves of emotions throughout the community and across

the nation much like it had with the Baybrook heritage home, Laing's previous residence in the park.

The Town of Comox received letters from the public and societies plead-

ing reconsideration. The Town also received a letter from the Attorney General of British Columbia in which concerns for use of the Trust funds were expressed and advising the Town that, before any demolition, an application be made to the Court requesting that the funds be used to rehabilitate the site for its continued use a nature park. It wasn't an option, it was direction.

In early October, staff were directed by Town Council to prepare a draft Term of Reference for a Mack Laing Nature House Advisory Committee.

Terms of Reference have been reviewed and refined by council and, if passed at their November 4 regular meeting, staff will soon be advertising for volunteers to serve on a committee that has the potential to make relevant recommendations on the future of Shakesides and uphold the meaning and intent of Laing's wishes.

Perhaps even right some of the wrong done by the Town since the day they accepted the generous gift but were derelict on their duties in honoring it.

The responsibilities of the potential committee

are to review Mack Laing's will, evaluate the ability to fulfill the wishes stated within and identify funding opportunities to possibly leverage the current available Trust fund. Council also recommended that the potential committee include a goal to review and consider the conditions in the Deed of Transfer between Mack Laing and the Town.

Council recommended the Mack Laing Nature House Advisory Committee consist of one member each from the Mack Laing Heritage Society, Comox Archives and Museum Society and the Brooklyn Creek Watershed Society; two members from Comox Council; a member from the community at large and a member of the community with relevant construction knowledge and experience; and a staff member from Town of Comox.

Volunteers on the committee will serve a term of six months from the date of the first meeting.

The committee will be an advisory body to the Town of Comox Council and will make recommendations only on how to fulfill the goals set out in the terms of reference.