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How the forest lovers of Cumberland BC gave The Man a million-dollar kick to the nuts

Story by Andrew Findlay Photos by Peter Moynes



Consider the mountain bike as a form of social change, even political resistance. As I hop over chainring-scarred logs along a greasy singletrack snaking through a forest of ghostly coal mining memories, it's hard not to feel a certain kinship with Albert "Ginger" Goodwin. This labour activist, socialist and pacifist, who fought for improved wages and working conditions, was murdered on a sweltering July afternoon in 1918 on the shores of Comox Lake, near the then small mining town of Cumberland on BC's Vancouver Island. Goodwin was killed by a sheriff's deputy doing the dirty work of a government and coal industry that didn't like his style of politics.

When contemporary Cumberland residents need a morale boost, they sometimes summon the memory of Goodwin, the carrot-topped shit disturber. Today, it's all I can do to hang on to the rear wheel of local fat tire emissary Dan Espeseth, proprietor of Dodge City Cycles, as he balances a log ride midway through what's masochistically referred to as the GLOP-Grasby's Loop of Pain.

On a mild February afternoon, we work our way through Cumberland Community Forest, the result of regular citizens joining forces in their effort to conserve land from rapacious logging. Ginger Goodwin would have been proud. Formed in 2001, the 63-hectare chunk of forestland sits on the edge of town; it's a place that was almost ravaged by the saw but today is a de facto mountain bike park where walkers, bikers, birders and mushroom pickers can share a living, breathing forest.

It all began with a clandestine gathering of citizens who decided the only way to save the forest was to buy it from the owners, Hancock Timber Resource Group, a branch of Boston-based Hancock Insurance. After more monthly meetings than AA and a million dollars raised, Cumberlanders got their forest. What makes this project particularly unique is that it was bought by local citizens and supported with a couple of fat non-profit grants, with nary a corporate donor or glad-handing politician in the mix.

To understand where Cumberland is today, it's necessary to step

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Left to right: front yard proclamations of Cumberland discontent; a forest worth saving; Riding Fool Hostel owner and mountain bike activist Jeremy Grasby cruising downtown; Dan Espeseth, owner of Dodge City Cycles, rails trail in the Cumberland Community Forest; one of Cumberland's key players in conservation, Mary Lyn DesRoches

“MORALE WAS REALLY LOW IN CUMBERLAND, AND I FELT THAT WE NEEDED TO DO SOMETHING POSITIVE,” SAYS MARY LYN DESROCHES, WHO HAS LIVED IN CUMBERLAND SINCE 1990. “THE ATTITUDE OF THE MAYOR AT THE TIME WAS LIKE ‘LOG IT, GREAT, MORE JOBS.’”

back to Vancouver Island's heady coal mining boom. In 1883, über-capitalist Robert Dunsmuir was handed coal and timber rights to 8,000 square kilometres on the island as incentive to build a railway. (The Esquimalt and Nanaimo railway was an unfulfilled promise from Ottawa to BC, used to entice the western problem child into confederation in 1871). Cumberland emerged from the swamp and forest shortly after, in 1888, as the coal industry gathered steam and Dunsmuir mined a fortune. At this time, labour law was a work in progress, and Dunsmuir wasn't interested in inconvenient details like an eight-hour day or equal pay for equal work regardless of race. Goodwin fought for these issues. It cost him his life.

By the 1960s, the last coal mine closed and the focus turned to logging. Since then, much of southeastern Vancouver Island has been privatized, leaving Cumberland to the whims of a fickle and dispassionate resource extraction industry. Starting with Dunsmuir and coal and followed by logging, the village has been hostage to absentee landlords, most of whom haven't given a squirrel's fart about the locals. Enter the Cumberland Community Forest Society. Mary Lyn DesRoches, an accordion-playing, free-healing, mountain-biking optometrist, has been the unassuming force behind this grassroots organization since she joined in 2002.

“At first I didn't think it was possible to raise the funds,” says DesRoches. “But then I started to realize we might be able to do this.” In the ensuing years, she chaired meetings and badgered stiff-collared logging execs, convincing them the forest society was for real. Unable to count on any moral support from the village's elected leaders, DesRoches and other residents plunged headlong into fundraising. They dug into their pockets, sold monthly member-

ships, solicited one-time donations and scored \$100,000 each from Mountain Equipment Co-op and the Coast Sustainability Trust. DesRoches even quietly took out a \$190,000 mortgage on her heritage home in Cumberland to give the campaign an extra pedal stroke. “Morale was really low in Cumberland, and I felt that we needed to do something positive,” says the 45-year-old who has lived in Cumberland since 1990. “The attitude of the mayor at the time was like, ‘Log it, great, more jobs.’”

In March 2005, what at first had seemed insurmountable became a reality. The society had banked enough to finance the first 42.5 hectares for \$669,000, followed by another 20 hectares that December for \$365,000. To avoid property taxes and secure a permanent home for the forest, the society gave it to the Village of Cumberland with a strict conservation covenant ensuring near-sighted politicians can't flip the gift to a developer.

As Espeseth and I grind up a trio of moderate switchbacks on a trail named Bugged Pig, in the heart of the Cumberland Community Forest, he points at a steep hillside and a dark hole in the moss, barely discernible through my mud-splattered eyeballs. It's all that remains of the Union Colliery #3 mine—the strike that started the boom. Later when we branch down Black Hole, our knobby tires track mere inches from a vertical bore hole where miners once tested for black gold.

In the years before the inception of the Cumberland Community Forest, people like Espeseth and Jeremy Grasby, owner of Cumberland's Riding Fool Hostel, had been handcrafting trails with the tenacity of hard rock miners. When a trail was lost to logging, they'd

refurbish or build another in an ever-evolving matrix of technical singletrack that was starting to put Cumberland on the mountain bike map. With lands now set aside for trail building and recreation, their once rogue, impermanent efforts now have a legitimate safe haven.

“We never asked for permission, we just kept building trails,” says Espeseth, who was born in the Comox Valley and lived in Nelson before returning to Cumberland to open the current hub of the local cycling community, Dodge City Cycles. “Having this forest saved close to town has really helped to boost mountain biking in Dodge. My trail map sales quadrupled last summer.”

Eighty years ago, when Ginger Goodwin was agitating for better wages and working conditions, the land around Cumberland was

like a moonscape—logged and burned to a crisp to make way for coal mining. Second growth forest has reclaimed much of this landscape, but today it's getting whacked faster than a street dealer with a bad Hell's Angels' debt. Politicians didn't lift a finger to help save the forest around Cumberland. Instead it took folks with the trail-building tenacity of Espeseth and the unassuming fundraising and diplomatic genius of Mary Lyn DesRoches to ensure a place for mountain biking in Cumberland's colourful story. If someone had told Goodwin back then that people riding bikes on trails through the woods for the sheer exhilaration of it would forge a unique future for this edgy little frontier town, he might have laughed incredulously. Finally, someone has stood up to The Man. □

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