

OCEAN FALLS

Memories



Personal stories from the original Rain People
– simpler times in a remote B.C. mill town

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INTRODUCTION



I am proud to be one of the Rain People.

The what?

The Rain People is an affectionate name given to residents of Ocean Falls, a remote, coastal town 480 km north of Vancouver that is known for an abundance of rain. In fact, on average, it rains 300 days of the year. The only way in is by boat or plane.

They say people from Ocean Falls are born with an umbrella in their hand and webbed feet. The beloved duck with its umbrella logo adorns everything from the welcome sign at the BC Ferries dock to government documents and more.

Located at the head of Cousins Inlet, half way up the B.C. coast between Prince Rupert and Vancouver, Ocean Falls was a thriving mill town in the 1950s and 1960s with a population that fluctuated between 3,000 and 4,000,

Ocean Falls: *Memories* profiles the lives of my family members, their friends and others who experienced a unique lifestyle that was special to them. They didn't care about the rain. It was just part of life in Ocean Falls.

A little bit about Ocean Falls

In 1906, the Bella Coola Pulp and Paper company purchased 260 acres of remote coastal BC land after surveying the area in 1903 for a potential hydro power facility.



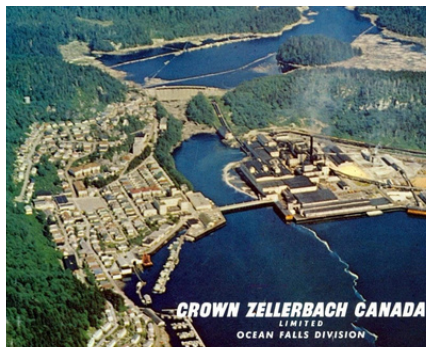
Within three years, the sawmill, a hospital and a school were built, followed by a dam in 1912 to provide the power for the mill. Ocean Falls became the largest pulp and paper mill in British Columbia for many years, processing three types of pulp on two newsprint machines, two kraft paper machines and one tissue machine. Four hydro turbines provided electricity for the mill and the town.

By 1950, the little town's population had grown from 250 to 3,500, including many families. As a company town, the mill owners took care of the people by way of building housing, schools, a theatre, a recreation hall, a 400-room hotel, a fire hall and a 60 metre pool that would be the home to future Olympic swimmers.



Built on the steep side of the Caro Mario mountain, all of the roads were made of heavy timber - a plentiful commodity -- and there were very few cars in the isolated community. Everywhere people went, they walked and climbed multitudes of stairs, making them a very healthy and fit group.

After 1953, businesses other than the mill began operating, starting with a laundry and a freight line. The Hudson's Bay store offered a variety of products, including clothing, groceries and a small pharmacy. That was also where the equipment was for reconstituting powdered milk and placing it in glass bottles.



By 1966, the mill was owned by Crown Zellerbach Canada. Workers in all facets of running a mill came from miles away, knowing they could make a good living and raise a family.

To create an active lifestyle for residents in the remote town, the company organized over 40 service clubs from boy scouts and girl guides, skiing, fishing derbies, shooting ranges, bowling and more.

B.C. Airlines, steam ships and other boats were a lifeline for travelling to and from Ocean Falls as there is no road in from the mainland.

Twice-weekly runs with supplies including food and purchases from store catalogues were barged or shipped up from Vancouver or other cities, giving residents access to almost anything they wanted.



Carol Engebretson Jones

My mother, Carol Jones, first experienced Ocean Falls as a young teenager before her father, Arnold (Bing) Engebretson moved the family, including her mother, Vera and her brother, Dennis to Burlington, Iowa for work as a carpenter. He was born in America and wanted to reconnect with his family.



By the time they moved back to Canada, and to Ocean Falls, Carol was an adult, having graduated high school in the USA. Her memories of both times in Ocean Falls are fond.

"We were living in Dawson Creek in 1945 when my parents met some people who talked about Ocean Falls. They said the town's mill offered jobs with good money and many families were moving there," she says.

"I was twelve when we arrived in the summer, just before school started. There was lots of fun things to do for kids outside of class. When I was older, I had a part-time job at the mill's cafeteria clearing tables. I was also a pin setter at the bowling alley. "

Carol and her friends went to the pool a couple of times a week, which was one of the most popular things to do in town. "After we swam, we often went to the store for a chocolate milkshake at their soda fountain."

One of the annual special events Carol participated in was the May Day celebrations. "Four girls were chosen to take part and then one was voted in as the May Queen, but that was not me," she explains. "They had a parade on the main street and the younger children in would decorate their bikes to ride in the procession. Then they would go to the school for the Maypole dance. The kids who did that practiced and practiced so they could learn how to twist the ribbons around the metal pole and untwist them again to the music



Although she wasn't into playing sports, Carol and her friends would go to the ball field above the dam to watch games. The local movie theatre was another regular spot to hang out with friends.

Mount Baldy, that rose above the town like a steadfast guard, was a source of winter and summer recreation for Ocean Falls residents, even the not-so-sporty like Carol.

"One year when I was about 16, I went with the ski club group on a hike up Baldy. There was about 12 of us, including my friends Doreen and Betty. We took a boat across the lake and walked up the trail to the top. It wasn't rock climbing but it was a really hard hike to the



snow line. I got sunburned, and the teacher who came along got really sunburned too. It was fun and quite an adventure."

Back in town, festivities such as dances at the town's Big Hall brought residents out for evenings of music and dancing. "Everyone dressed up for the dances," Carol said. "The men all wore suits, white shirts and ties and women had pretty dresses and high heels. It wasn't a fancy place but it was a lot of fun every week." In the school gymnasium, the teenagers danced often at the Teen Town sock hops.

To help with the process of dressing well, Carol's mother, Vera, ran a dress shop out of their home. "She would go to Vancouver to a wholesaler and buy fancy pieces. Then the ladies would come to our house to buy them. I got to try everything on first so I always had a lot of nice clothes," she said.



Several bands, consisting of two or three musicians, were ready to help with tunes that ranged from waltzes to polkas and more. "My dad played the fiddle at a lot of the dances," Carol said.

Arthur Jones 1931-2013

Arthur (Art) Jones grew up in Vancouver, his working path taking him into heavy duty mechanics. When he was looking for a job in 1955, he applied at the Crown Zellerbach office in the city and was told a position was available in Ocean Falls.

Where the heck was Ocean Falls? He soon found out.

Art took a boat from Vancouver, an overnight trip with staterooms, to the remote town that was to be his home for the next seven years.

He worked for the mill in their garage from 1955 to 1958 before moving to Standard Oil where he delivered oil to homes in Martin Valley.

As most people in town, Art's social circle grew as he attended functions, went to church and sang in the choir. On one particular evening at the weekly dance his friend, Eva Fisher, introduced him to a young lady who was boarding at her home. Carol Engebretson.

Soon after, Art and Carol were dating and by May 1958, they tied the knot, with a honeymoon back in the big city of Vancouver.



And along came Laurie Jones

In February 1959, the Jones's had their first of three additions. I had so much hair the day I was born the nurses at the Ocean Falls hospital tied it in a pink bow. My parents were so proud.



My recollections of Ocean Falls are few as we moved to Kelowna when I was three, but I do remember playing in the wading pool (I was too small for the big pool) and carrying my tricycle down cement stairs to visit my friend Brian across the street. Not a good plan in hindsight.

Winter was fun, especially when my dad built a snowman that was twice my size.



Looking out at the harbour from our front porch was the start of my lifelong love of ocean views.



The Martin Inn



Once known as the third largest hotel in B.C., after the Hotel Vancouver and the Empress in Victoria, the Martin Inn, a 400-room facility, was not only home to over 400 single men, most of whom worked in the mill, it was also a significant gathering place for Ocean Falls residents.

The rooms were simple, with a bed, dresser and a sink. Showers and washroom facilities were shared on each floor.



The cafeteria at the Martin Inn fed mill workers, and it was also the meeting place for townspeople young and old. The menu offered grilled steak for \$1.85 or a cheese omelet for \$1.05. Kids could splurge on a lemon Coke.

Other facilities at the hotel included a barber shop, a beauty parlor, pool tables, a card room and the Blue Room, which was the centre for dances, awards nights, and other events.



Dennis Engebretson

My uncle, Dennis Engebretson recalls the day the war had ended when they were living in Dawson Creek. "I vividly remember walking down the street waving a funny little flag. The next day I woke up in Ocean Falls," he said.



"I was in grade two when we moved to Ocean Falls. It was a multi-room school with elementary classes. I recall as a kid going to the dock with my friends to fish for shiners, which were a small fish. When somebody caught one, we would cut it up and use it for bait to catch the bigger fish. We'd lie on the dock with our lines in, and soon everyone had one in the bucket. We didn't take them home because they were too small.

One day when we were in grade six, we were on the dock and a kid came towards us in an eight-foot dingy. He was using a 1x4 piece of wood for paddling. We all jumped in – Jim Barley, Walter Frame and a couple of other guys. We got other pieces of wood and paddled around to places we hadn't been for a long time like the Japanese and Chinese bunkhouses. We didn't have a life jacket among us and we picked up a tin can from somewhere to shovel the excess water out of the boat. We didn't want to get our clothes wet because we would really get in trouble when we went home."

In the winter he says they would have lots of fun tobogganing with all the hills in town. "One of the best spots started from way up on 10th Street. That was about the highest spot in Ocean Falls for houses. There was a way to go really fast on the big bobsled on school hill because the road was all wood. Just like a bridge. The older teenagers had a big bobsled that fit about eight or nine people on it. They started off at the top of the hill and they would go by the school at about 90 miles an hour. And then they'd break over the flat stretch and be done. Then they'd have to have to turn around and haul the heavy toboggan all the way back up to the top of the hill."

After Dennis returned to Canada from Burlington, Iowa, he did regular shift work at the mill before starting an electrical apprenticeship.



The mill looked after everything in the town that was considered electrical, including the theatre. Dennis was trained on how to run the projector. "One night we were working on a show called Hush Hush Sweet Charlotte. There was a scene where a young boy had to sneak into a house and bring something out to be initiated into a club. We could see the movie from the projection room and as the boy was tip toeing into a room where a lady was sleeping, the sound suddenly went off. We were turning up the volume and frantically trying to figure out why we lost the sound. Then as the boy was creeping out of the house, the lock in the living room scene struck one

and 300 people jumped out of their seats. We turned the sound down right away and realized the silence was just part of the movie. The manager ran upstairs and asked what happened. We told him there was just a little glitch in the electrical system. The next night they played the same movie and we turned the sound up on purpose."

Dennis met Patricia (Pat) Clark in 1960 at the coffee shop in the Martin Inn, which was a regular hangout for the young people. "She was a teacher who had just moved to Ocean Falls. We dated for a couple of years before we got married in 1962. Our first son, Gary, was born there."

Another fond memory for Dennis in 1961 was a weekend trip to Calvert Island, north of Vancouver Island, with his friends in their regular mode of water transportation -- a landing barge. "A couple who owned the barge -- Hilton and Jean Spellman -- lived in my sister's (Carol's) basement suite and they came up with the idea of the trip. We got some lumber and enclosed the barge but it didn't have a head so the ladies had to use a bucket at the back of the barge with no handrails. "

He said Calvert was an isolated island with nothing but wolves and beaches. "The only thing between the island and Japan was water. We wandered the beaches and found glass balls that came off the Japanese fishing nets. It was a great weekend."

By 1966, Dennis, Pat and their growing family left Ocean Falls for Nanaimo, B.C. where he worked in the mill as an electrician.

Ben Kaye

Ben Kaye came to Ocean Falls from Devon, Nova Scotia. His mother and father separated shortly after World War II and his mother remarried into the Jobses family. "When the coal mine shut down in Devon, we moved to Ocean Falls. But it wasn't just us. The entire extended family moved, including the Frames, the Barnes, the Jobses and the Reeds. They were all related somehow," Ben explains, noting the families arrived just before Christmas in 1947. "The guys used to joke and say 'don't say anything in Ben's presence because he's related to half the town'."

Ben met Dennis Engebretson in elementary school and they became fast friends. "We used to go up a trail on Mount Caro Marion, behind the highest house, and make forts out of branches, shingles and whatever scrap wood we could find. It helped that Dennis's father was a carpenter so he had some building knowledge."

When they got older, taking their boats to Wallace Bay was a favourite pastime. "There was always something to do in town, too. We spent a lot of time at the bowling alley and when I got old enough, I got a job setting pins. There was no automation at that time."



He and his friends spent many Friday nights at the school gymnasium for Teen Town dances. "Sometimes guys got together with a little band or it was recorded music. It was really just an excuse to get dressed up."

We lived near the hospital and I got a job working there. In the morning, before school, I went down and took the garbage out. And then I took the clothes and all the dirty linen into a big cart and push it down the hill to the laundry.



Then I went to school. After class, I went down to the laundry, got the clean stuff, pushed it back up the hill and put it inside. Then I went in and washed the hallway or one of the men's wards. We could always find a job if we wanted to."

Like most young men, Ben played baseball and softball, and had a couple of boats. "A lot of our fun was on the weekend going out on the boats and waterskiing, fishing or going up on the beach and drinking or something like that. The name of my boat was the *Ripple Skipper*. I got into scuba diving as well. I used to get paid to swim the length of the boats to cut the netting and the lines that were tangling up the propellers in their rudders. But our fun diving was out in Wallace Bay looking for crabs and other things."

After high school graduation, Ben worked in the men's department at the Hudson's Bay store before heading to Toronto to take an accounting program at Ryerson University. "I travelled a bit then applied for a job at Crown Zellerbach in Richmond. Because I was single and they knew I was from Ocean Falls, they transferred me back up there."

Dave Owen

Dave Owen lived in Ocean Falls in the boom time when life was full and young people never wanted for something to do. "In the Big Hall, there was basketball, ring hockey and bow & arrow shooting," he said. "There was a trap



shooting club by Link Lake that was built by volunteers. Link Lake is an 18-mile lake that is held back by the dam, which is where the power for the mill comes from. We used to fish up

at the lake and one day a friend of mine caught an eight pound trout. That was big fish for freshwater. After I moved to saltwater fishing, I built five boats that I sold at different times. I fished salmon all the time.

Like Ben Kaye, Dave was a member of the Drum & Bugle Band. "There was the Pipers because Ocean Falls was a mixing of people," he said. "There were people that came From the Hungarian Revolution, some came from England, there were people that came from Scotland, and not just singles but groups of them. Ocean Falls had a attitude that if you could work and you were good, you could stay and we'd give you a benefit. The Company even went to the VC penitentiary to see if anyone want to go to Ocean Falls when they got out so, even though it was was an isolated community. So they had to work hard to get people to come and stay there. But most that came with families never left until they had to in the end.

Dennis Engebretson was also part of Dave's close

friends. One weekend a large group went by boat to Bella Coola for a friend's wedding. As young men would be at a party, they got a little carried away didn't make a good impression on the older people at the wedding. "They called us a bunch of savages. and the name stuck," Dave said. "Dennis even wrote a song about the savages that he played on his guitar."

While life was good in the Ocean Falls, there were definitely challenges living in a remote location. "By and large it wasn't too bad, but when the barges came in with food you had to go shopping before the fishing fleet came in because they would buy up all the fresh items."

The turnover in the mill often depended on age and marital status. "There was a big turnover but families that came tended to stay because most of those guys already had a trade or profession. It was the single ones that were rolling all the time. We used to call them Boomers. They would boom in here and boom out right away. " It was a good town for single ladies because there were 10 men to every woman.



Martin Valley expands the town

Located 1.5 miles out of the Ocean Falls townsite, Martin Valley was a collection of homes owned by the residents, not the company, although the company had a buyout option.

Martin Valley was split by the Martin River, with approximately 65 homes in total. Built in the 1950s and 1960s, this modern neighbourhood was inviting and friendly.



The land was a former farm and many of the homes had stunning ocean views. Like everything else in Ocean Falls, the structures were on the side of a hill so

it was not unusual to have a black bear or other wildlife in the yard.

"My dad built many of the homes in the newer section of Martin Valley," said Carol Engebretson Jones. "The home we bought after we got married was on the original side of the Valley, down the road from the cemetery. We were the third to last house on Highland Road."

On the way into town was a boulder known as the Fairy Rock. On Sunday walks after dinner, adults would hide coins in the crevices of the rock for children to find. It was a source of fun for all ages.



Eileen Clozza Gyger

Eileen Clozza Gyger was one of the true Rain People, born in 1944 and raised in the town. "My parents – Attilio and Itola Clozza, arrived in Ocean Falls in 1925. I had two older brothers and one older sister. I also had an aunt and uncle and cousins living there," Eileen explains. "I went to school from kindergarten until grade 12. When I was 16 I started working after school and on weekends at Johnston Terminals with Lou Bliss as my boss."

Coming from a musical family, Eileen began taking piano lessons in grade seven. "All of us played music. My brother was in a youth accordion group. When I got older I played in a band called the Twilights. We played at a Christmas dance in the Big Hall.

Skiing was another big part of the Clozza family. "My father and brother worked on building a ski lodge at Sawmill Mountain.

Unfortunately some kids burned it down a few years later.



CHRISTMAS DANCE

The annual Christmas Dance which is sponsored by Crown Zellerbach Ltd. for students from Grades Seven to Twelve, was held in the Blue Room of the Martin Inn on December 20, 1962. The highlight of the evening was the presentation of watches to Sandy Gilchrist and Jack Kelso for their outstanding performance in the British Empire Games. Other highlights included songs that were sung by Tom Powell, alias "Spook", Bob Wareham, and Ralph Belbin. Music was supplied by the "Twilights", which is composed of Brian Lawrence, Eileen Clozza, Alec Matwick, and Elmar Theissen. Chocolate Milk, sandwiches, and cake were served by the teaching staff during the course of the evening. I am sure that it is agreed that a wonderful time was had by all.

Modern technology took many years to reach Ocean Falls. "We never had a TV and getting the radio stations tuned in was also difficult. If the weather was right, you could get some stations.

But there was always something to do for Eileen, no matter the season. "We had one of the largest hotels in the province and we all gathered in the cafeteria after school for a toasted butterhorn and cherry coke," she said.

"We hiked and skied Mount Baldy and Sawmill Mountain, went swimming in the dam rocks in the summer, attended many dances and swam in our pool the rest of the time. Our summers were spent either fishing on Link Lake or camping at the family cabin in Wallace Bay. Both my uncles had boats and often we travelled to Bella Coola, Bella Bella and Namu. I think the only challenge was not been able to travel to the city for shopping." She adds many people who grew up in Ocean Falls have remained friends and still keep in touch.

Eileen's cousin, Emilio, was well known in town as the barber, as was her father's blacksmithing talents.

Attilio Clozza Fifty Years as Smithy

How many tradesmen can claim fifty years experience in their trade? ATTILIO CLOZZA, who has been in the blacksmith trade since he was thirteen years old, can. Attilio will observe his thirty-fifth anniversary this year.



Though the scope of his work has reduced, he still applies his skills to make and repair equipment and sharpen tools. His picaroons and chipping hammers are considered better than those sold by suppliers. Sawmill push arms, shafts, pipe clamps and numerous other metal parts of many different shapes, pass over Attilio's anvil or trip hammer.

The old timers don't agree when the last horse left Ocean Falls, but when it did, it was wearing Attilio's shoes.

Small town athletes to world stage

Affectionately called the Pool of Champions, the 60-foot, four lane pool was home to the Ocean Falls Amateur Swim Club (OFASC) where swimmers went on to claim top honours in swim competitions around the world.

According to the BC Sports Hall of Fame, from the 1940s to early 1970s, Ocean Falls swimmers accounted for 26% of male placements on Canadian international swim teams and these athletes won 35% of all swimming medals won by Canadian men in major international competitions, including the Pan American Games, the Commonwealth Games, and the height of wins, the Olympics.

In 1965, the team of four men, two women and the coach travelled to Red Deer, Alberta, for a swimming championship and won the Speedo Trophy for combined team aggregate.



Returning home with their collection of medals made everyone in Ocean Falls proud of the swim team.

Champions Emilio Clozza, Allen Gilchrist, Ralph Hutton, Sandy Gilchrist, Lenora Fisher, and Richard (Dick) Pound all went on to success after their years on the OFASC.



Tragedy amidst tranquility

Over the years, several disasters struck the town, shattering the peaceful existence for residents of Ocean Falls.

In 1950, a major apartment fire in killed eight people, a mudslide in 1965 killed seven, including a family of four, and the town's Charleson school burned down on the night between December 21 and 22 in 1969.

Although no one was seriously hurt in the school fire, the town's people were traumatized. But their strength and community spirit prevailed. While the school was closed for three days, several teachers and town folk went to Bella Bella to obtain school desks. Soon after, classes were held throughout the town, from the community centre to the Royal Canadian Legion branch pub (grade 12 students) to part of the Martin Inn hotel. The new school, with one of the largest indoor gymnasiums in British Columbia, opened in 1971.

Recovery from the slide, however, was not as easy.

Heart wrenching efforts to find bodies, then have services for the departed took a toll on the quiet life of Ocean Falls.



But again, the town rallied and worked through the tragedy to bring the town back to its peaceful balance.

A new era

Today Ocean Falls is a shadow of what it was prior to the closure of the mill, and the buildings that were not demolished by the company still exist as the few residents call the tiny town their home.

The forest is reclaiming much of the township, but many of the homes in Martin Valley are standing and occupied by locals or seasonal residents who come for the fishing and other outdoor recreation.

In a 2019 online story by CBC News entitled *Not dead yet: The wet beauty of Ocean Falls, B.C.*, BC Premier John Horgan, who worked in Ocean Falls to pay for his university, was quoted as saying "There's always been someone that's come up with an idea for Ocean Falls. I'm hopeful that one of these days one of them is going to take off, and the town will be reborn with that sense of enthusiasm I remember as a young man."

The dam is now providing electricity for nearby Shearwater, Bella Bella and the local residents. But it has also sparked interest for bitcoin companies who have set up shop in Ocean Falls, using the powerful to run computers.

With the continuing power of the dam that helped to facilitate a memorable life for so many in the past, fingers crossed an entrepreneur with a workable vision will bring Ocean Falls back to the boom town it once was.

