

# Bridge Lake's Russell Ross – the early years

By Sherry Stewart



I have known Russell Ross, the son of Norman and Vi (Shertenlib) Ross, since my family and I moved to Roe Lake in 1968. He was a good neighbour back then, and a

great storyteller, and nothing has changed. I cornered him in his comfortable kitchen awhile back. With a mug of excellent coffee at hand and pictures of his family smiling at us from the front room, I asked him about his life. He looked out of the wide kitchen window at his sleek purebred cattle grazing on the slopes below, and then beyond to the timeless expanse of Bridge Lake. He said nothing for a moment, and then he smiled.

"I always was a real bush kid," he told me. "I always thought of my cousin, Ian, as a really sharp kind of a kid. I thought of him as a scientist, he even had a darkroom and developed his own pictures. He was a worldly type of kid compared to me, because I was a bush kid and there was no getting away from that."

Russ was born on Dec 23, 1929. His mom, Vi Shertenlib, lived as a girl alongside Bridge Creek on what is now Shertenlib Road and she went to the Roe Lake School. She grew up and married Norman Ross and they eventually moved to Williams Lake somewhere around 1939. But Russ, even as a boy, kept coming back to live on Bridge Lake with his aunt and uncle, Alice and Gordon King. He just loved living in the bush.



Russell Ross's Bridge Lake family (L to R): Alice King, Gordon King, Goldie Shertenlib MacInnes. Bottom row: Barbara and Jack King, Vi Ross and Russ.

Like his cousin Ian, author of our last two installments, Russ has memories of the occasional family road trip. There was one trip in particular, when he was around 10, which took him first from Bridge Lake to Lone Butte, and from there it took what seemed to a 10-year-old a very long time to reach their destination of Williams Lake.

"I remember Uncle Gordon took Mother and me to Lone Butte with the team and wagon," Russ told me. "We stayed there in the hotel that night, and then my dad came sometime in the night or the next morning, and then we headed for Williams Lake. I'm pretty

sure it took at least two days to get there," Russ said, laughing. "Dad had an old Chevy sedan, and I remember that we had more flat tires on that trip! First we came upon an accident, a big Packard car had turned over on the 100 Mile hill coming down into 100 Mile. It had upset on the corner and people were hurt, I guess not too severely. They sent me up to the top of the hill to stop traffic. We proceeded on, but kept having flat tires, so we stayed at a friend's ranch for the night, maybe around 122 Mile. The following day we stopped in at other friends, the Mayfields. Dad wanted help,

I think, fixin' one of the flat tires, but they were butchering, so he had to stay and help them butcher. That meant that we stayed there that night and proceeded on the next day. I remember that there was another accident too, where a car had rolled down towards Williams Lake, but we eventually made it home.

"When we were living in Williams Lake, Dad worked for various ranchers, putting up hay and feeding cattle and building fences I suppose. Then after a year or so he



Russ Ross and the indispensable Ferguson tractor



got a job with the PGE and was working on that, and he worked right down to Squamish at times. Well, they were looking for men to work in the copper mine at Britannia, and he got a job there.”

At that time, Britannia Mines was the largest copper producer in the British Commonwealth, and Britannia Beach was booming.

“Mother and I moved to North Vancouver for a time,” Russ says. “We stayed with Mother’s sister Edna and her husband. I attended the Queen Mary School there for two terms, and mother and I eventually rented a house in North Van while we waited for a place to open up at Britannia Beach. In those days, the only mode of travel between Vancouver and Britannia Beach was by Union Steamship. No roads, no rail lines yet. Eventually Dad was able to rent a house at ‘The Beach’ and we moved up there.

“Immediately after Pearl Harbour they instituted blackouts at that mine and anything connected to it, because it would have been a prime military target,” Russ says.

“My dad often wasn’t home because he was working up in the mine and living at the town site up there. One of our neighbours was a designated air raid warden, and I remember one night pretty soon after the blackouts started he came by and told my mother that he had been walking out on the beach side and there was a crack of light showing through one of our windows. I remember him saying, ‘You’ll have to get that fixed, Vi.’ Yeah, it was very real. It got home to a kid right away, I’ll tell you. We knew they thought that submarines could come in there and shell that

plant at any time.”

Russ remembers, “Some of the cigarette packages had collector’s cards in them with pictures of various planes, the Allies and also German and Japanese planes. Not just planes but warships as well. We traded them at school. There was a Japanese freighter that used to come into Britannia Beach for ore. They picked up the raw ore at Britannia and hauled it back to Japan and refined it there. I remember we would get a bird’s eye view of these ships coming into the dock, and I can’t recall the name of that particular ship now but it was a big ship, and it had loaded there just prior to Pearl Harbor. That ship’s name came up shortly after as one of the ships sunk at sea before



(L to R:) Gordon King, Russ Ross and Lloyd Woodman

it reached Japan.

“Very quickly after that the War Measures Act came into effect and they moved all the Japanese families off the coast and into the Interior. I remember being there watching all these kids, some of them my friends, board a ship for Vancouver. Never saw them again. The closest internment camp for the Japanese near us here was one between Lone Butte and the 93 Mile. It was at Taylor Lake, and I believe some of those buildings that were used for the internment are still there. They were made of plain lumber, and I don’t know

if there was any insulation in them at all. Those people apparently cut pulpwood logs and pit props for propping up the mine ceiling.

“I felt really boxed in at Britannia Beach,” Russ says. “The high tide would wash up on the steps of our house on the one side, and there was about a 6 or 8 foot wide bicycle trail on the other side and then just the mountainside.”

At the age of 14 Russ came back to the bush that he loved to live with Alice and Gordon King and to attend the old North Bridge Lake School, which was being taught at the time by Mrs. Patty Law. He walked about 2 1/2 miles to get to school, and when he finished Grade 8 he continued his studies by taking correspondence.

“Mrs. Law was being paid to teach up to Grade 8,” Russ says, “But when the two Faessler girls, her son Dave and I were ready to go on to the Grade 9, Mrs. Law took on the job of being our correspondence teacher. This certainly was over and above what she was being paid for.

“Now the senior Charlie Faessler and Mrs. Law taught us music. She was famous for putting on a very

elaborate Christmas concert each year, and one year she wanted to have a school band ready for the concert. Naturally she wanted to involve everybody, and most of the other kids were already taking music. I was the odd man out, and she decided, ‘Well, we don’t have a Hawaiian guitar player.’ That’s what got me started playing guitar. Later I played with Charlie Senior and Mrs. Law in my uncle Gordon’s band, and we played for all the local dances. Looking back on it, we were not under-privileged kids, we were really fortunate kids.

(To be continued...)