Mudflat Dreaming

WATERFRONT BATTLES AND THE SQUATTERS WHO FOUGHT THEM IN 1970S VANCOUVER

Jean Walton
For Nancy and Jack,
with a salute to those A-frame days
on the King George Highway
Map of Vancouver and environs, showing Maplewood Mudflats squatters site, Bridgeview neighborhood, McCabe & Mrs. Miller set, Habitat Forum at Jericho Beach and other locations.
How often I sang this song, in school, at summer camp, in the family car as we drove through the Redwood Forest, or with our cousins down near the Gulf Stream waters. How easy it was to learn that all of “America the Beautiful,” its spacious skies, its amber waves of grain, was made for you and me. It seemed like almost every song I learned in childhood affirmed a proud claim to a tract of territory — like Boulder, Colorado, where the columbines grow, or the hills the greenest green in Seattle — vast or local, hilly or flat, and most of all, smiled upon by a deity, as though to bless our attachment to it.

This is not to say I was a particularly patriotic child, but just that I must have come to take for granted a sense of belonging to a land, and its belonging to me, by the time I turned thirteen and we moved to Canada. Only then, when a classmate sneered at my Yankee origins, did I begin to feel the mildest version of what it might mean to live as a stranger in alien territory — and thus to understand that the crossing of a border was no inconsequential thing. This might have been my father’s home and native land, but it was hardly mine — or rather, I was going to have to start all over again if I were to embrace this latest bit of mud as the home base from which I was to launch a new life.

I was what you might call a teenage ex-pat, unwillingly displaced in 1970 to live just across the border near Vancouver, on a strip of highway where my grandparents had bought a motel a few years before, which we were now taking over for them. My father was returning to this True North Strong and Free and, more speci-
cally, to what had been hailed by his parents as an exciting new business opportunity, given the hordes that would surely pour into British Columbia for fishing vacations and skiing holidays, or even to settle in the rapidly developing suburban tracts that were spreading out along the Fraser Valley, from Vancouver itself to Langley or even Mission, 40 miles upriver.

I recount this bit of autobiography as a way into a story I want to tell — not about my own family’s occupation of a liminal frontier near Canada’s Emerald City, but of two settlements, one on the south bank of the Fraser, very near to our own commercial strip on the King George Highway; the other almost directly northwest of us as the crow flies, on the north shore of Vancouver’s Burrard Inlet, just off the Dollarton Highway. I’ve come to think of these as twinned communities, both on the water’s edge, both the sites of dramatic territorial conflicts, both harbingers in their way of the almost unbearable situation ordinary Vancouverites find themselves in today.

It’s difficult to know how to enter this tale of land contestation, uncertain as I am of whom I’m addressing. Is it Canadians, and more specifically Vancouverites, who already know the story — or at least half of it — as a legend they keep telling themselves in a nostalgic tribute to a cherished pre-modern past? Or is it Americans, who know little of Canada and practically nothing of its westernmost outposts, often picturing their northern neighbor as comprising vast snowy prairies — an impression that’s accurate when applied to Manitoba, where my father grew up, but hardly appropriate for the rain-soaked and mountainous West Coast, which (as I inform my friends) is more like Seattle — mild and verdant.

To my Vancouver audience, then, I call upon you to accompany me in this story, as though we are telling it together to an ill-informed American populace. I cannot count myself as one of you anymore, and perhaps I never could, despite the decade I spent on British Columbian soil. But maybe my distance in time and geography from my one-time stomping grounds permits me to address the story to Vancouverites as well, both the part you never tire of
hearing, as well as the other part you’ve forgotten. It’s about shacks on a shoreline, drawn-out battles with local mayors, avid squatters of literary fame, and unwitting squatters of working-class obscurity. It’s about flows and seepage, downpours and upsurges, salt tides and dirty ditches and alarming coliform counts. It’s about the family you left behind, the family you made with your friends, the family that you tried, so hard, to save from eviction. But it’s also about those long-gone 1970s romances: a utopia not so much “off” the grid as nestled in with its detritus; the idea of free children, running wild and unfettered; the image of the countercultural artist who needs a supportive woman by his side; the pure ore of doing one’s own thing, crafting with your own hands, and crossing paths with just the right woman of the night, with her heart of gold.

It’s about the glitter I found while panning in the past of my West Coast adolescence forty years after the fact. You know what it’s like. You have just one little bitty question, maybe you’re hoping to find someone’s family album with fading snapshots of the very block on which you lived at one time, or you want to remind yourself of what the corner up the hill from your house looked like before the Sky-Train came through and rearranged the landscape. Just that one thing, and you know where to start sifting, too, with that best of all mining tools for excavating the past: the internet. But next thing you know you’ve gone down a rabbit hole that’s more like an endless mine shaft, and who knows when you’ll find your way out again.

Oh sure, you’ve travelled back to your hometown in real life, all the way across the continent, across the border, to visit your sister and brother as the nieces and nephews grow up. And every time you show up, you are struck by how tenacious that pull of nostalgia is. You know what it’s like — every time you make that return pilgrimage, it still retains about it a distinct whiff of the past; every time you turn your rented car up a remembered street, or look across the Fraser at the mountain range that always seemed like an ancient woman to you, finally giving up, exhausted, just lying down on her back; every hour you spend in the drizzle that seems to materialize in the air rather than descend from the uniform grey
of the low-lying cloud cover — it all seems imbued somehow with an aura of the once known but now abandoned.

Because abandoned by you.

When you visit, your sister and brother have no idea you are experiencing this, despite your shared childhoods. Because they never left, these streets, these shaggy cedars, these glistening lawns and uniform strip malls have the banal feel of the contemporaneous day-to-day. Nothing special. But to you, coming back to the place is always a return to the past. You can’t get to the bottom of this odd sensation by being in the present of the place that is a past to you. That’s why you turn to the archives of that past, if not to dissipate the nostalgia, at least to better acquaint yourself with its contours.

In my case, the expedition to find a ’70s Vancouver led me almost immediately to three short documentary films, antiquated fragments of a former era, that were as precious for their vivid depiction of the time and place in which they were made as for the urgent arguments they wished to impress upon their original audiences.

One was dimly familiar to me — had I seen it before? Or maybe it’s just that it featured the same small-time politicians I had come to know while working as a teenage photographer for our local weekly newspaper, the Surrey–Delta Messenger. This was Some People Have to Suffer, a documentary by Canada’s National Film Board (NFB) about the plight of a working-class neighbourhood barely a mile away from our motel, at the bottom of the King George Highway as it arrived at the banks of the Fraser River. Here, residents living on the flats of the flood plain, in a small enclave called Bridgeview, could be found petitioning Surrey city council for basic amenities to upgrade their aging infrastructure. With its images of ramshackle houses set amongst salvage yards and lumber mills, children with lunch pails sprayed by passing trucks, and mealy-mouthed Surrey mayor Bill Vander Zalm taking a drag from his cigarette as he wonders whether it might be better to relocate everyone and just industrialize the whole area, the film brought back to me vague recollections of the insinuations of my new classmates, who despised the lowlifes living in that contemptible corner
“down the hill,” so out of place in a municipality that fancied itself as the new suburbia for the middle class. The effect this film had on me was downright Proustian, with its travelling shots of contaminated ditchwater, the orange girders of the bridge across the Fraser, the tumbledown houses fronted by weedy ditches, constant downpours, and shouting matches in the crowded council chambers. I could almost feel the clammy slap of the bellbottoms at my ankles, smell the stench after the latest rainfall. Thanks to the NFB, I was restored almost wholesale to those overcast years we spent on the King George Highway in Canada’s largest, but maybe most maligned, municipality: Surrey.

The other two films, *Mudflats Living*, an NFB production, and *Livin’ on the Mud*, an independent film by a documentarist from Washington State, also featured scenes of conflict between residents and a local mayor, between livability and commercial development, between the mud of natural abundance and the cement

‘From one clogged culvert to another’
– Bridgeview

ditch. Some People Have to Suffer