

Big finish needed for Kinsol Trestle

By T.W. Paterson, Special to The Citizen
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Little did I realize, that grey, drizzling winter day years ago when I first set eyes upon the Kinsol Trestle, that I'd find myself labouring to save it from deliberate destruction.

And little did I realize what I was getting into, when that day did come in April 2006, that the Ministry of Highways and Transportation, responsible for the abandoned CNR railway grade that is now part of the Trans Canada Trail, announced its intention to demolish this magnificent structure as a safety hazard and insurance liability.

Well, here we are, three years later and, with the formal launch in June of a public fundraising drive by the Cowichan Foundation to top up the bank account to complete rehabilitation of the Kinsol, I find myself reflecting on the bumps along the road to the old girl's salvation.

It's been quite a learning curve! I mean, really, how does one go about convincing the powers-that-be that they're dead wrong on all counts: That, despite appearances, the trestle is structurally sound and worth saving, that a look-alike replica won't attract hikers, cyclists and equestrians to the Trans Canada Trail, that the trestle is not only a priceless artifact and icon of our Island industrial heritage, but a potential world-class tourist attraction? That it's the crown jewel of their proposed Cowichan Valley trails system?

Where and how to begin, as it happened, proved to be the easy part. Upon announcement of the Kinsol's proposed demolition, two newspaper editorials spurred me to action. I'm thankful for being prodded in my decision to go to war, so to speak, by comments on the editorial page of a local paper. They urged restoration not destruction, with which sentiment I agreed instinctively. But for all my passion for history, and uncomfortable at the thought that if I failed to take a stand I'd betray everything I've ever written -- preached -- over 40 years, I dithered over getting involved.

Until local editorial comment and, conversely, that which appeared in the Times-Colonist. Praising the provincial government for finally reaching a decision over the trestle's fate and the Koksilah River crossing necessary to complete the Trail, the Victoria daily urged swift replacement with a clone, what we historical "purists" came to dismiss as the Stick Bridge or the Martha Stewart Bridge.

Outraged by what I perceived to be callous indifference to our heritage, I agonized for half a day in writing a rebuttal to the T-C editorial. Did the editor truly believe that heritage structures which had reached a state of deterioration through neglect should be torn down and replaced with counterfeits? In, of all places, a provincial capital whose very character is defined by its heritage, landmark buildings such as the Parliament Buildings, Empress Hotel, Christ Church Cathedral and scores of others?

Hardly likely! So why the double standard when it came to the Cowichan Valley's most famous icon?

One thing I did recognize from the very beginning: That an appeal to public nostalgia or sense of history, however noble those sentiments may be, just wouldn't cut it. Although I didn't seize upon the exact buzz words, heritage tourism, at the time, I took the stand then, and do now, that the secret to the salvation of the Kinsol Trestle lay/lies in its being the star attraction of the Valley's Trans Canada Trail.

This was confirmed the moment I began looking for likely allies via Google. To my joy, provincial hikers, cyclists and horseback riders had already discovered the Kinsol; a common theme of travel pieces on Vancouver Island recommended the Trestle as a must-see. Score one.

Then I made another momentous discovery: Bridges are sexy! Now, my mother had always admired pictures of covered bridges such as you see in the eastern provinces and states, and I've always been a sucker for

bridges generally, but it hadn't occurred to me that many, many people, men and women, find bridges attractive. Score two.

Score three proved to be the most valuable of all: Media people fell for the Kinsol on sight. None of them had seen the trestle before the news of its impending demolition prompted their attention. I can tell you that, having led numerous camera crews, anchor people and reporters to the Kinsol, without exception they left empathetic, even supportive. They, as did so many others, saw the value in saving this monument to our railway and logging history and became the trestle's greatest allies.

Now I could re-cap all that has since transpired, from the low-point of two years ago when the CVRD staged its "Open House" to convince the public that demolition and reconstruction was the only answer, to the change of heart by the MOT which then put up much of the \$4.1 million on hand to restore the Kinsol and, subsequently, and by most CVRD directors. But I've told all this before (sometimes, admittedly, with ill-concealed emotion) and the Citizen has followed the story in its news columns.

So here we are, June 2009. It's time for members of the public who have supported the cause morally, who have for three years spoken up in the Kinsol's defence, who have button-holed me on the street with questions as to its latest status, to step forward. The Cowichan Foundation, a venerable institution in this Valley with a stellar record of raising funds for good causes (bursaries and scholarships for one) is out to raise \$2 million to complete the trestle's estimated restoration cost of \$5.5 million which includes a seed fund for regular maintenance.

At the June 10th launch at the trestle, ardent trestle proponent Jack Peake made the first donation. Let him be the first of an avalanche of support for the Kinsol Trestle! The Foundation is seeking corporate donations of cash and/or goods and services as well. As for individuals in these recessionary times, every donation counts and can be made by cheque, money order or credit card, by mail or online (www.kinsol.ca) to the Cowichan Valley Regional Board -- Kinsol Trestle.