

A Voice from the Past

By Tom Wright

On July 27th, 1859 a small group of pioneer settlers landed on Admiral Island, even then popularly known as Saltspring Island. Across the Straits, the Fraser River gold rush was in full swing.

Among the newcomers was a Scot named Jonathan Begg, who had recently arrived in Victoria, coming from California by way of Ontario. He was lucky in the draw for land, and selected a prime 200 acres stretching from Trincomali Channel to the beautiful lake now known as St. Mary.

Begg was a market gardener and was determined to set up in business. He built a small store in what became known as Beggsville and eventually was called Fernwood.

On March 10th, 1860 he wrote to William and Margret Chisholm in Onion Grove, in Cedar County, Iowa, to tell them of his arrival and to describe his new home. William Chisholm, who travelled back and forth from Scotland bringing Clydesdale horses for eager Iowa farmers, was married to Jonathan's sister Margret.

Years later when William died, Jonathan Begg's letter was one of several left behind in a small black chest. The chest became a family treasure.

During the hard times of the Depression, William's grandson sold some of the envelopes, then valuable because of their packet stamps. According to William's great-granddaughter one "black packet stamp," possibly the very one sent by Jonathan Begg on his letter, realized \$750, which was enough to feed the family for a year!

Fortunately the letters themselves survived.

Not long ago Jonathan Begg's great-granddaughter brought copies of some of them to Saltspring Island, where they are now safe in our archives.

In March of 1860, Jonathan Begg had lived on Saltspring for less than eight months. His letter to the Chisholms provides a fascinating glimpse of life on the island during very early pioneer days.

Here is the letter in its entirety. To help the reader, I have divided it into paragraphs, added commas and periods and edited out the capital letters which Jonathan used with enthusiasm. Some interesting spelling has been left in.

*Aboyme Place
Salt Spring Island
Near Vancouver's Island
March 10th, 1860*

Dear William and Margret,

I take this opportunity of again writing you from this place. The history of my transactions and operations since I came to the Pacific coast are so voluminous that I cannot begin to tell you all. You are aware that I wintered last year in California, where I immediately got employment at \$40 per month to superintend a nursery. After remaining there some 3 mo. and having seen quite enough of the society and climate to suit me I left without a penny in my pocket to push my fortune in the North.

On arriving in Victoria about the first of June of last year the town was suffering from a reverse in business caused by bad news from the mines. Finding I could get no work of any kind as there were hundreds more out of employment, I immediately went to work and rented a vacant house with 2/5 of an acre of land where I put in about 1500 cabbages &c. As the land was of poor description I did not realize much from it. In the fall advertised as gardener &c in the local paper when I got a job to work for Mr Wood the banker, which set me a little on my feet again.



When I resided in Victoria I had other work on hand of greater moment than my everyday employment. I found the land system in such a deplorable condition that no one out of employment of the H.B. Coy. could procure an acre of the public domain. I saw that justice and reform was necessary, so I commenced a movement which has since changed the whole land system of the colony. I got up a public meeting in one of the principal hotels where strong resolutions accompanied by an urgent petition to the governor and local legislature was carried. A deputation of the most respectable citizens was chosen to wait upon the governor &c. So the movement went until the H.B. governor and council had to submit to the popular demand. The result is we

have been allowed to pre-empt for 2 or 3 years the public land to the extent of 200 acres each with the prospect of being able to obtain them at about \$1.25 pr acre, as by that time they will be in the hands of the local legislature who are pledged to a man to reduce them to the above figure.

After the above movement was concluded to the satisfaction of all parties I was one of 18 adventurers who went out to view the land, when we lighted on the island mentioned on the heading of this letter. It is about 20 miles long and varying from 2 to seven miles wide. It lies at the bend of the Canal de Horo in the Georgian Channel, and lies immediately opposite the mouth of Fraser's River, being distant about 40 miles N.W. of Victoria, and within 1/2 mile of Vancouver's Island. I can see the mouth of Fraser distant about 20 miles with the Cascade Mountains distant 75 miles any clear day on going back about 1/4 miles to the top of a mountain behind me.

This is one of the most romantic regions I was ever in. Scotland is no where in that respect. But to my narrative, the band of adventurers referred to including myself finding the island beautifully situated in the midst of an archipelago more beautiful than the 1000 islands on St Lawrence. This being the most convenient to Victoria (north?) and to San Juan, we determined to form the settlement here. We drew for choices of selection, and I was fortunate enough to get the second, so you may readily conceive I have not a bad farm. My lot fronts 1/4 of a mile in a nice little bay where about 2 miles oppsd between me and Fraser's River lies a long island shielding me from the N.W. summer wind.

Behind my lot, on its rear, it borders a beautiful fresh water lake of some 2 miles in length, teeming with fish. I have about 80 acres of prarys on the farm. It is not exactly a prary as it more resembles an 'English park, as here and there there is a clump of beautiful balsam growing. Last fall I erected a cabin on my lot—14x17—it is a log one and covered with shakes on poles, being altogether more open than a house that would freeze to death a cow in winter in Canada, with nothing but a small fireplace and mud floor, yet so beautiful is the climate that I have passed the winter in it very comfortably.

I need not tell you that commencing in a wilderness without capital, and a stranger to boot, has been a hard task, but I have by perseverance and industry so far

surmounted all my difficulties very satisfactory, and am now in possession of 200 acres of the best land on the Pacific coast. This spring I have commenced operations in company of 2 young men I have taken in company for this year only. I have got about 3 acres enclosed and under cultivation which I am at present at work on. We will be able to put in 1 acres vegetables, 1 acres turnips and cabbage, 1 acres potatoes. I have planted 75 apple trees this spring, and put in a number of goose berries and current bushes in addition to the crops already referred to. You may imagine how vegetables pay here when green peas sell at 10 to 2 1/2 cts lb, cabbages from 2 1/2 to 10 cts lb, turnips 2 1/2 cts-10cts etc.

Schooners pass to Victoria by my place from Nanaimo about 3 times a week, and we have a weekly mail. I am Post Master, and has established a little store on my lot in addition to my farming operations. I will send you a paper with my advertisement in it.

There is now 50 settlers on the island. The farms are 200 acres each 1/4 mile fronting the Straights and 1 1/4 back, so there is a settler and house 1/4 mile on each side of me for quite a distance.

From being the originator of the land movement I am known through the length and breadth of the Colony, and I now mingle in the best society in it.

I have not been in such good health for many years as I am at present. The fine climate, plenty of work and good prospects I have at present has done it.

My live stock at present consists of a tom cat and young dog. I may mention that I have a valuable salt spring on my lot, very strongly impregnated with pure salt, being 1/5 salt.

The fare is \$25 from Sanfrancisco to Victoria on steerage and 50 cabin. From Victoria to my place they chg \$2 in schooners.

It is very cheap living here as the Indians who are very useful and very good to white men bring us large quantities of the best the waters, woods and forest can

produce for a mere song. For instance, I buy a good buck weighing 100 lbs for \$1.50 in trade, that trade costing me originally about half that amt. A salmon weighing 10 lbs can often be bought for 12 1/2 cts. A duck costs about 12 1/2 cts. Grouse 25 cts in trade.

English noblemen live no better in this respect than we do for we have the best the sea and land can provide for a trifle.

A word about the climate. I have now seen a little of both California and this country. In California the climate in the winter is indeed beautiful, but there is something so very relaxing in the California climate as



Deciphering a 130-year-old letter was not easy. Can you find the two passages shown?

to make you sensitive to the least air of cold. I was astonished on arrival in Sanfrancisco last year to find men sitting shivering at the stoves when in fact the weather was something like early June weather in Canada. I felt the effect myself. After being there a few mos. I began to be sensitive to the least air of cold wind, and the winds blow very strong in many places there. The summer here is like Italy, while in California everything is burned up by an almost verticle sun, turning the seasons most completely so that the summer is the season of rest in the vegetable world of California.

The society of California, although improving, is not any the best, and the government is rascally bad. No man except a clever rogue or Irishman can attain any position there. The only thing I liked about California were her fruits. In that she is superb. This colony and the adjacent territory presents numerous advantages for

a new beginner over California. The land here is excellent in many places. The government is better and this climate and society is more to my taste. I have quite a number of Canadians for neighbours, at least parties recently from Canada.

This is the cheapest place in the American Continent to live in. Every thing wearable and required in a family can be bought as cheaply as in Toronto, and many things cheaper owing to Victoria being a free port.

Now having brought forward my history for the last two years I may now ask you what you have been doing and what are your prospects, for I have learned nothing from the East since I left it except one letter from yourself in California, which contained no news except a number of queries which I have now tried to answer in the above.

If you get this all right do please answer your answer to this No. 2 so as I shall know what you reply to. Send me all the news far and near for 18 months past, and I will write in return. Give my kind regards to any of my friends you may see or write to. Rem me to the Buffalo folks, and also to your Pickering friends.

Yours truly,

Jonathan Begg
Saltspring Island P. M.
by Victoria
Vancouver's Island
via overland route.

Through his numerous informative contributions, Saltspring Islander Tom Wright has become the "GIG historian."

