

THE STRAWBERRY KING

In 1909 the rich farming land of Upper Gillies Bay was home to only two families (the McElroys and Eriksons) when Swedish carpenter Peter A Staaf pre-empted a Crown grant of 160 acres. Clearing a large area, he built a family home on the property while working as a carpenter insured a reliable income.

Staaf constructed several houses in Gillies Bay and Van Anda (in addition to the Little Billy mine tramway). In Powell River he helped build the pulp mill as well as many of the company houses in the townsite.

Being community minded, Pete turned his attention to local needs such as (in 1910) construction of the Gillies Bay District School - a log structure situated on McElroy's farm. Staaf's crew also completed the 1912 Shelter Point wharf to enable easier transport of farm goods and passengers.

Staaf meanwhile continued his own agricultural pursuits. He planted extensive orchards (originally 160 trees) and his excellent strawberries earned him the title of "Strawberry King" of Texada.

Pete then worked on boxing his produce and transporting it to market. A Model A car parked outside his shed served as power for his next project - a box sawmill. Staaf based his design on plans advertised in a Montreal newspaper. All metal components were fabricated in the blacksmith shop on site.

The white pine blocks (cut from the property) were placed in a smoothly-swinging counter-weighted carriage which moved through the saw blade to produce 22" box sides. The control was rigged up to the car's throttle which drove the blade at 900 rpm.



Another invention - a foot-pedal operated nailing jig - was used to fasten the sides of the boxes together. Painting over a copper stencil - "*Grown and packed by P A Staaf, Gillies Bay, BC*" - completed the labelling and the apple boxes were off to Powell River and Vancouver Island markets.

Pete Staaf later became Justice of the Peace, helped survey the region and continued to promote Texada agriculture. In the 1923 *Agricultural Journal* he wrote: Texada's soils are some of the "best soils in the area." His encouragement of fellow Scandinavians to emigrate resulted in the district becoming known locally as "Snoose Valley."

A community-minded individual with many talents, the "Strawberry King" was a true Texada pioneer.