

TEXADA'S COOPERAGES

Skilled barrel-makers called coopers were essential tradesmen in the old days.

Bellied wooden barrels in all sizes were needed for many aspects of early life. Goods for general stores were shipped and often displayed for sale in barrels: dry or "slack" barrels for grains, flour, nails, etc and "wet" barrels for syrup, salted fish, whisky, etc. Coopers crafted them all.

Coopers also built barrels for shipping industrial items such as whale oil or lime and thus the Texada connection. Island kilns produced quicklime which reacted with moisture and required new, dry barrels to store and ship the product.

The first recorded mention of an operating cooperage referred to one in Sturt Bay in 1898. JJ Palmer (Marble Bay Mine) and father-in-law WH Christie (cookies) formed a partnership to establish a limekiln and shipping facility across from the present boat club. By 1907 their capacity was 300 barrels/day.

In Blubber Bay the 1911 census lists three (Irish) coopers working at Pacific Lime: John Bullview - head; his 16-year old son, Emeal; and John McIlray. The 1916 mines report mentions "extensive storehouses and wharves" with a cooperage using local fir and iron hoops imported from Oregon. By then the kilns were producing 150 barrels/day.

Barrels were hand-built using around 25 tools specific to the trade. Local fir logs were split into future staves and tapered at both ends. Curved drawknives were employed to plane down the staves and bevel the long edges so they would fit seamlessly side-by-side.

The staves were held together vertically by the bottom hoops while a small stove steamed the barrel from inside. With the wood softening, the staves' upper ends were pulled together and rigid hoops were hammered down around them. The lids ("heads") were hammered into a groove cut inside the rim of the barrel.

And voila! - a watertight storage and shipping container for the lime. The barrel's wide belly also allowed for easy rolling and manoeuvring down into ships' holds.

The barrels stacked in the Blubber Bay storage shed (see photo) show how important the cooperage was in supplying the needs of Texada's early limestone industry.

