

Trestle always brings Morris back

BY SARAH SIMPSON, THE COWICHAN VALLEY CITIZEN
SEPTEMBER 3, 2010

A Canadian Automobile Association premium member sticker is stuck to the bumper of Ralph Morris's Toyota sedan, just to the left of his Alberta license plate. It's no surprise Morris and his wife, Margaret, have a little extra insurance coverage given they make the drive from Edmonton to Vancouver Island at least once a year. They've done so for decades.

"I have a daughter that lives in Victoria," Morris admitted.

And while it is nice to see her, and he loves her dearly, his true passion is the Kinsol Trestle. A retired senior engineer, beginning in 1961 it was Morris's job to inspect the trestle, along with 1,999 other spans in western Canada. But none was like the Kinsol. He said it was one of the last bridges he visited during his first round of inspections after moving on from bridge designer to bridge inspector in the early 60s. He recalls travelling across the south end of the span on a track motorcar and being gob smacked.

"It was the first of the bridges that I looked at and I said 'whoa!' and I gather that's the impression a lot of people get when they first look at it," he said.

His reaction was unique, despite already seeing more than 1,000 other spans. From then on he was in love. But it was a long-distance love affair.

"Officially, my assistant and I divided up the whole 1,200 bridges and we'd look at half the territory every year, so every second year we'd actually make a full inspection," explained Morris.

The biennial visits to the Kinsol left him wanting more. Soon, he started making regular pilgrimages.

"I used to come out on my holidays a lot, just to come and look at it," he explained. "And after I retired I used to come out here every year, at least once."

He's been retired 22 years.

"I still try and get here every year," he said.

Once an inspector, always an inspector. Does he ever get tired of looking at it? There is such a thing as a dumb question after all.

"No," he said. "I don't."

His close relationship with the historic trestle has resulted in an equally tight relationship with the contractors who are tasked with restoring the structure. Given his occupation, Morris kept detailed notes and had a stash of documents related to the Kinsol and to the other bridges he oversaw. Not wanting the documents to get lost when the Kinsol Trestle's rail line was abandoned for being unprofitable in 1979, he took them home. He did after all have a particular fondness for the Shawnigan-area span and "Everybody knows that space costs money, so stuff that wasn't any use was thrown out," he explained. He makes no apologies for "borrowing" the papers. Years later he turned them over to Kathryn Gagnon at the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives.

That's where Macdonald & Lawrence Timber Framing's Gord Macdonald finally tracked them down. The timber specialist contractor overseeing the rehabilitation of the trestle had found Morris whilst researching the trestle's history. The information provided to Macdonald and the workers, from both the cache of documents and from Morris himself, has proven invaluable. So much so, some of Morris's own designs from decades ago will also be put to use.

"Why be clever? The work has already been done," said Macdonald, noting certain aspects of the bridge would be re-constructed "as per Ralph's drawings."

The pair stood on a viewing platform Monday and watched as crews worked atop and below the historic landmark. Their talk was mainly technical with a bit of history thrown in here and there. Morris's next visit to the trestle will be a much different experience. He'll have a chance to inspect Macdonald's crew's handiwork. Macdonald maintains that by March of 2011 Morris and the public alike will be able to walk across the span. Morris can't wait.

"It's wonderful that this is going ahead," he said.