

Vancouver Sun

'Grand old man of the seawall': For 32 years, a crusty Scot worked on and off at the job of building the seawall but didn't see it completed

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Color Photo: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun / The Stanley Park seawall, shown here near Second Beach, is popular with Lower Mainland residents and tourists alike.

Photo: Dan Scott, Vancouver Sun / Stanley Park legend James Cunningham takes a rest while working near Ferguson Point in 1959.

Photo: Eric Lindsay, CVA 392-26 / A historical photo of the Vancouver Seawall. The man in the centre with the cap is Jimmy Cunningham. This photo was taken in August 1963 and shows the seawall under construction near Siwash Rock. Jimmy died a few months later.

Even when he was in his 80s, Jimmy Cunningham followed the same routine: He'd wake up in the morning and head down to supervise the crew building the seawall around Stanley Park. After working on and off at the job for 32 years, it had become one of his life's obsessions.

By all accounts Cunningham was a character. Once when he was long past retirement age and sick with pneumonia, Cunningham showed up on the seawall with a topcoat over pajamas because he figured the crew couldn't get along without him.

At 160 centimetres tall -- five feet, three inches -- and weighing close to 91 kilograms -- 200 pounds -- the red-haired Cunningham was as stocky as a fire hydrant. By the time he was an old man, his hands had been mistakenly whacked so many times by a hammer that his knuckles were swollen and misshapen.

Reporters referred to him as "crusty" and "pawky" -- a Scottish word meaning

shrewd. He was described as "the weather-beaten little artisan" and as the "grand old man of the seawall."

Born in 1878, Cunningham grew up speaking Gaelic in Rothesay, on the Isle of Bute on the west coast of Scotland. By 1910, once he'd arrived in Canada, he spent several years working his way across the country on the railways and sending money back to his wife, Elizabeth, in Scotland. Eventually his family joined him in Vancouver.

He began working on the seawall at Brockton Point where he supervised construction of the lighthouse. As he and his crew continued westward toward Prospect Point, they had to time their work to coincide with low tides. Often they had to scramble to clear away sand, rocks and other debris to get down to the sandstone to build the seawall's concrete base. The bulk of the seawall under the surface is filled with rocks from the beach and from construction sites around town -- and anywhere else the parks board could get

cheap fill. For the most part Cunningham and his crew worked during the lowest tides between March and October.

In winter, the work schedule changed. Sometimes Cunningham and his crew were down at the surf taking advantage of extremely low night-time tides. But more often than not Cunningham would be working by himself in the Stanley Park works yards cutting the granite coping stones -- the handsome top stones -- for the next season. By 1931, the park board named him a master stonemason.

In the 1950s, as a cost-cutting move, Cunningham used stone setts -- blocks of natural stone -- from old streetcar lines to build the face of the seawall. A decade later, granite coping stones were replaced by concrete for the same reason. Even seamen on punishment detail from HMCS Discovery on Deadman's Island were sent to work on the seawall.

It wasn't always a steady progression around the park. During stormy weather waves often lashed against the uncompleted wall and destroyed several days' work by washing away all the undried mortar. In 1962 Typhoon Frieda carried away several hundred feet of blocks near Siwash Rock.

Sadly, Cunningham never managed to complete his life's work. He died on Sept. 28, 1963, at the age of 85, with about 2.5 kilometres remaining on the 8.8-kilometre route around the park. There's a plaque in his name at Siwash Rock.

"[In] Stanley Park some time ago," wrote Patti Flather in a 1986 story in The Vancouver Sun about her great-grandfather, "I was walking on the

shaped slabs of granite that top the Seawall near Second Beach. The rocks are solid, sturdy, a buffer for the park against the tides. They will last a long time. Jimmy came close to being one with the rocks he crafted. He was solid and ageless."

Those words are more accurate than you might first believe. Cunningham really did become a part of what he built: His ashes are buried in an unmarked spot somewhere in the Seawall.

By 1971, after some 54 years and \$1.5 million, the Seawall around the north side of the park was nearing completion. On Sunday, Sept. 26, about 150 people watched as federal and local politicians, including Henry Herbert, (H.H.) Stevens, one of the original Seawall promoters, tapped the last block into place midway between Prospect Point and Siwash Rock.

In a slightly tongue-in-cheek editorial marking the occasion, The Vancouver Sun compared the seawall to other great walls in history, including the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall and even the Berlin Wall. In a burst of civic pride, the editorial called it "the world's most glorious footpath."

In reality, the 1971 celebration was premature. There were still several unfinished sections around the park. The actual completion date was Sept. 21, 1980, when the last gap by Second Beach was linked and the Seawall finally circled the park. A plaque by the Second Beach concession stand marks the occasion.

Over the years, but especially since the early 1970s, the Seawall has grown into one of the most loved and used recreational routes in the city. Local residents and

tourists use it year round to walk, run, bike and inline skate. It ranks among the city's top tourist attractions.

And like any good idea, it has spread around much of the city's inner shoreline. You can now head from the entrance to Stanley Park near Georgia Street eastward along Coal Harbour to Thurlow and further still once the Convention Centre expansion is finished; on the English Bay side, you can head along Sunset Beach past the Burrard Street Bridge all the way around False Creek until the off-road portion of the seaside route peters out just at the western tip of Kitsilano Beach Park, although there are trails through Pacific Spirit Park, across Point Grey, and back to a trail along the north arm of the Fraser River. Altogether, a continuous seawall or seaside trail winds 22 kilometres around the city's waterfront.

One of the remarkable things about the seawall around Stanley Park, and its continuation around False Creek, is how it has morphed into the landscape. It looks entirely natural -- even though it's anything but. It's difficult to imagine Stanley Park without its granite and stone necklace. If you ever see photos of the Stanley Park foreshore before the Seawall, it looks incomplete -- as if something's missing.

Ironically, if the parks board tried to build a seawall around Stanley Park today, it probably couldn't because of federal environmental regulations that prohibit any harm to fish habitat in the foreshore.

It says a lot about a city that one of its biggest public gathering spaces -- measured in total area -- isn't a public square used for protest but a promenade used for exercise. Maybe it's because of amenities such as the Seawall that we're the fittest city in the

country.

While the Seawall today might seem as natural in Vancouver as rain in November, it wasn't always such a part of our cultural landscape. Men such as Cunningham and his colleagues physically constructed the Seawall foot by foot. But there were many others involved too, including planners, visionaries and civil servants who worked behind the scene.

Perhaps one of the most important was then park board superintendent W.S. Rawlings, who is credited with being among the first to imagine a seawall around the park.

"It is not difficult to imagine what the realization of such an undertaking would mean to the attractions of the park," he said in 1918, "and personally I doubt if there exists anywhere on this continent such possibilities of a combined park and marine walk as we have in the making in Stanley Park."

As for the actual date construction started, The Stanley Park Explorer by Richard M. Steele says the first section built as a seawall was at Second Beach in 1917.

It was about that time that someone in Vancouver noticed that the wake from passing ships through First Narrows was eroding the foreshore from Prospect Point to Brockton Point. Since the park is on a 99-year lease from the federal government to the city, local officials managed to convince Ottawa to spend money building a wall around the park to stop the erosion.

By 1920, the Seawall had become a federal make-work project. That year, more than 2,300 men were hard at work on the Stanley Park foreshore -- a number that

would never be equalled again.

But former park board superintendent Stuart Lefeaux said in an interview that erosion was never really a problem around Stanley Park. It was just a ruse to get money out of Ottawa. By 1967 Ottawa called the parks board's bluff. Public works said the seawall had been completed around the park in all places subject to erosion from the sea.

Within four years, by the time federal money ran out and the bulk of the Seawall was completed, the first major Seawall battle was underway. It pitted walkers and nature lovers ambling along on foot versus sweaty cyclists zooming by on their bikes. A similar battle occurred several years later with inline skaters. For the next 13 years, the battle between the two camps was fierce and unrelenting, providing numerous colourful stories in The Vancouver Sun that helped confirm our whacky Lotus Land reputation across the country.

"We're on the road to disaster," warned park board vice-chair May Brown at the time.

In the early 1970s, cycling on the Seawall was not only illegal, police had an active campaign to enforce it. They would perch at various key locations along the Seawall, nab cyclists and write \$100 tickets -- about 3,000 in total by 1976. One park board commissioner even wanted to start ticketing joggers.

In 1977, a solution appeared on the horizon. The Calgary--based Devonian Group of Charitable Foundations was willing to donate \$900,000 to cover half the cost of widening the seawall to six metres to accommodate cyclists on the

English Bay side for about 4.3 km.

Pedestrian and nature advocates went ballistic.

"What utter folly," said Frank Turnbull, president of Save Our Parkland Association, about the potential loss of trees and bushes.

"No one expects that the wilderness aspect of the park can ever be restored. But every single tree and shrub that does remain is precious."

In an editorial, The Vancouver Sun agreed, saying that matching the Devonian grant would be "a waste of money . . . at this moment in Vancouver's history." The editorial called park board officials who were in favour "ninnies."

Even popular Vancouver Sun columnist Allan Fotheringham couldn't resist commenting. He described widening the Seawall as a "genuinely idiotic" plan "to accommodate goofy cyclists to bash into all the peaceful pensioners and sane pedestrians who enjoy a quiet stroll."

Despite the criticism, saner heads on council prevailed. Councillors voted to approve matching the Devonian grant and widen the Seawall to create separate, mostly side-by-side paths for pedestrians and cyclists.

But even that didn't bring peace. Two more important innovations had to be introduced before civility reigned on the Seawall.

In August, 1978, the city spent \$7,400 on four Seawall and bird sanctuary information officers to patrol the Seawall for eight weeks. Within weeks, the

program drastically reduced the number of cyclists illegally cycling on the west side of the Seawall.

But the biggest initiative occurred in June, 1984, shortly after Jim Lowden, now director of Stanley district, started working for the park board. Resolving the cyclist/pedestrian conflict was his first big job.

He got his inspiration from the success of Granville Island. Pedestrians and cars lived together peacefully on Granville Island because pedestrians knew that cars were coming only from one direction.

"Let's apply that to the seawall," Lowden said.

As soon as one-way cycling counter-clockwise came into effect, the number of conflicts between the two camps almost vanished. Peace finally arrived on the Seawall.

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CONSTRUCTING THE STANLEY PARK SEAWALL

- Work started on the Stanley Park seawall: 1917

- Final link in the seawall completed by Second Beach: 1980

- Length of the Stanley Park seawall: 8.8 km

- Longest uninterrupted waterfront walkway: 22 kilometres from Thurlow Street in Coal Harbour to Trafalgar Street in Kitsilano Beach Park.

- Most men working on the seawall at one time: 2,300 in 1920

- Beginning of one-way cycling counterclockwise around Stanley Park: June, 1984