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The Roberts family of Mudge Island

by Lynda Poulton

David Samuel Reece Roberts was born on December 3, 1846, in rural Wales, to John and Jane (née Prosser) Roberts. His parents were farmers. He immigrated to Canada in 1871. We have no official record of how or why he came to Canada, but as his family home was in the Rhymney Valley in the midst of the South Wales coalfield, we can guess that mining may have been a factor.

David first appeared in the 1881 census for Gabriola, Mudge, and De Courcy Islands, living on Mudge Island. He was listed as head of his household, unmarried, but living with **Mary**, a 28-year-old unmarried Native woman.

On June 12, 1883, David married **Mary Isabella Martin**, the 22-year-old daughter of Jonathan Martin, an established Gabriola settler. Her mother was recorded as “Kelly of Stikene” on the marriage certificate. The wedding took place at St. Paul’s Anglican Church, Nanaimo, the Rev. J.B. Good officiating.

Within the next seven years, David and Mary Isabella had four sons—all born on Mudge Island. On May 3, 1884, **Llewellyn Martin**; on January 10, 1886, **John David**; on November 29, 1887, **Edward Voltaire**; and on January 25, 1890, **Ivor Prosser**.

On January 9, 1884, while Mary Isabella was pregnant with their first child, David pre-empted land on Mudge Island. Presumably this was the land where he had been living since before 1881. His 160-acre claim was bordered to the south by Dodd Narrows and to the north by False Narrows. To the east, he was neighbored by Mr. Norris, and to the west by unoccupied Mudge land. Roberts cleared, cultivated,

and built a barn and a house. Richard Norris of Mudge Island and Richard Chapple of Gabriola confirmed his land improvements on May 9, 1888. With this declaration, the estimated value of his land claim was \$250. In 1887, he also purchased 40 acres of pastoral land on three small islands at the east end of the De Courcy Group.

In 1884, the Nanaimo Free Press reported that David Roberts was growing large *Baldwin apples* on Mudge Island. These apples weighed in at one pound each. The newspaper article asked a timeless question, “With such a showing of produce, why do we import so much?” Perhaps his father, John Roberts, who, according to his obituary in the Cardiff Western Mail in 1887, was an experienced Welsh farmer, was David’s inspiration. Or perhaps his father-in-law, Jonathan Martin, Gabriola’s most successful apple grower, assisted him. The splendid growing conditions and his skill evidently made him very successful.

The Roberts orchards were thriving. David was acknowledged for growing “splendid” plums in 1887, “mammoth” apples in 1888, and by the summer of 1889 he was congratulated for his “monster” Queen Anne cherries. In October 1889, his apples were “magnificent”, some weighing-in at 22 ounces [629 g], with 14-inch [356-mm] circumferences.¹

Although David and his family lived some distance from Gabriola, they participated in local community activities and causes.

¹ It was a custom of the time for farmers to submit samples of their produce to the Nanaimo Free Press, which printed an accolade to those they considered worthy of one. Size was more important than taste.

On August 9, 1884, in aid of the widows and children of those killed in the explosion at the Wellington Colliery, Gabriola families were generous with donations. Included in the list of contributors were the Roberts of Mudge Island, who contributed \$1.50 (a ¾-day's pay in the mines). Also, in June 1887, David Roberts was the collector for the Nanaimo Relief Fund, for the southern end of Gabriola and the adjacent islands. He collected \$39.50 for widows and orphans of Nanaimo's largest mine disaster.

In 1887, David was polling officer at the Gabriola School for a provincial by-election. Gabriola produced only 12 votes, perhaps because of a heavy snowfall. Three months later, in the federal election, he served in the same role, again at the Gabriola School.

On Saturday, September 7, 1887, the Nanaimo Free Press described a "heroic rescue", which took place "about halfway between the portage" (probably Biggs'

Portage across the neck of Jack Point) and Gabriola Island. Three local men—Alexander Shaw Jr., John Hamilton, and John Gimmel—were travelling to Gabriola in a small boat, when the boat overturned in the angry current during a sudden squall. David Roberts and Joseph Chapple set out in a boat from Mudge to attempt a rescue, and although their efforts were hampered by strong winds and high seas, they were able to bring the three men safely to shore.

In the 1891 census, David Roberts was listed as a 45-year-old farmer on Mudge Island, living with his wife, Mary Isabella (aged 29) and four children: Lewelleyn, 7; John D., 5; Edward V., 3; and Ivor P., 1.

It is interesting to note that in 1892, the mode of transportation from Mudge, De Courcy, and Gabriola to Nanaimo, and return, was aboard the steamer *Esperanza*—see the *text box* next page

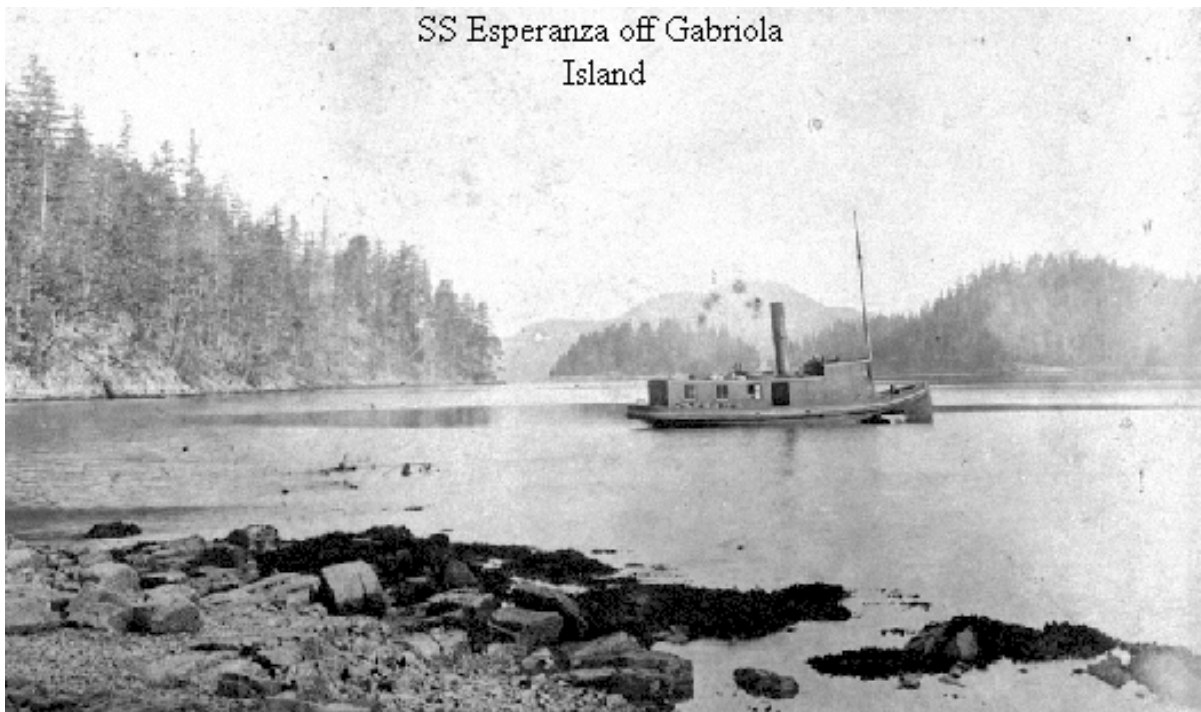


Photo courtesy of BC Archives and Records

On Feb 4, 1893, Mary Isabella, aged 32 years, died in childbirth, on Mudge Island, “leaving behind a grieving husband and four young children”. She was buried in the Gabriola Cemetery.

On October 20, 1893, David Roberts married again. **Mary Silvie** was the 19-year-old daughter of Joseph Silvie of Reid Island. The wedding took place on near-by Kuper Island. Mary’s mother’s name is unknown. The couple resided on Mudge Island, at the Roberts’ farm, with David’s four children.

The 1901 census lists David, age 54, as household head at his farm on Mudge Island; John D., 15 years; Edward V., 13 years; and Ivor P., 11 years. Neither Llewellyn, by now 17, nor Mary, by now 27, is included. We have no further information about Mary and David’s lives together.

In the 1920 Voters’ list, the Roberts family was no longer living on Mudge Island. Two new families—the Coxes and the Juriets—had taken up residence there. The list shows David as retired and living in Northfield (near Nanaimo); Edward V.—an auto driver—was also living in Northfield, with his wife, Julie; Ivor P. was involved with auto delivery and living in Wellington (also near Nanaimo); and the oldest brother—Llewellyn—an engineer, also lived in Wellington.

David Samuel Reece Roberts died, a widower, on March 14, 1925, in San Antonio, Texas, USA. We have no idea how long he had been in the USA, or if he had been living there permanently.

Edward Voltaire Roberts died on January 6, 1965, in Nanaimo, at 79 years. His wife Julie and one son, also named Edward, had predeceased him. Two sons, four daughters, 17 grandchildren and 15 great grandchildren survived him.

The *Esperanza*

Owned by Messrs. Forman & Campbell, the steamer *Esperanza* (Spanish for “Hope”) made regular weekly trips to Gabriola and De Courcy Islands. It is first mentioned in the Nanaimo Free Press in 1892, as making a double round trip to the Islands every Friday, leaving Nanaimo early in the morning, returning to that city before noon, then leaving again for Gabriola late in the afternoon.

Funerals on Gabriola were often scheduled for Fridays, in order that the minister and mourners could come from Nanaimo for the ceremony.

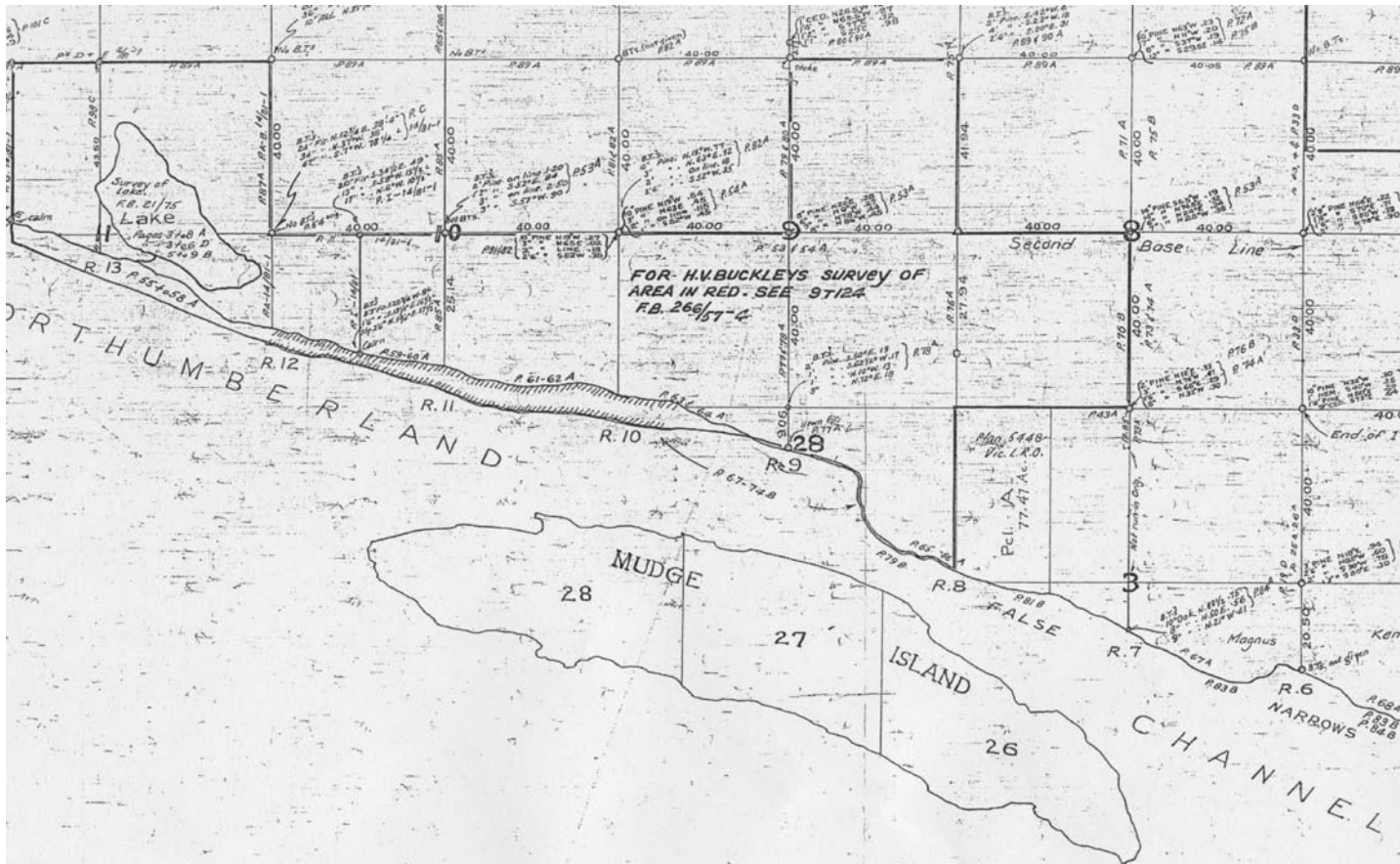
On January 6, 1893, the Nanaimo Free Press announced that:

“...Foreman & Campbell have taken their steamer the *Esperanza* off the Nanaimo, Gabriola Island route. This will be a great loss to the Island farmers, who have now no means of communicating with the city, except by sail or rowboats. The steamer has been taken off because it did not pay to run her, in fact the proprietors have been making this trip at a loss for some time past.”

The steamer continued to visit Gabriola when chartered (for funerals or inspection of the lighthouse) as late as 1894.

Nobody knows where the photograph of the *Esperanza* on the page opposite was taken. Let us know if you do—and no, it’s not Degnen Bay; we’ve looked there.

In 1975, at age 92 years, Llewellyn Martin Roberts died, unmarried. At the time of his death, he was the oldest member of The Loyal Order of Moose, No. 1952, Nanaimo. His brother, Ivor Prosser Roberts, who lived in California, and many nieces and nephews survived him. Although we know that Llewellyn’s brother, John David Roberts, lived in Florida at the time of their father’s death, we have no other information about him.



The Roberts pre-emption in 1884 was the central section of Mudge Island, Section 27.

This map was a fortunate find in the archives. It was catalogued by the date of the most recent change, March 1964, and was seemingly of not much historical interest, but inspection revealed that the original is much older than that. It shows the names of several early pre-emptors with old-fashioned spelling (Kemp, Martin, Digman [for Degnen], Gray, Magnus [for Magnus Edgar], Heath, Rodgers, and Le Beuf [for Le Boeuf]).

BC Archives and Records CM/C636

Sources

BC Archives and Records

Marriage Records

Roberts, David Samuel and Martin, Mary Isabella
BCARS Reg # 1883-09-092535; MF# B11380;
GSU# 1983708

Roberts, David Samuel and Silvie, Mary
BCARS Reg # 1893-09-094228; MF# B11380;
GSU# 1983708

Birth Records

Roberts, Llewellyn Martin, born May 3, 1884,
Mudge Island, BC; BCARS Reg # 1884-09-048298;
MF# B13808; GSU# 2114957

Roberts, John David, born January 10, 1886, Mudge
Island, BC; BCARS Reg # 1886-09-048299; MF#
B13808; GSU# 2114957

Roberts, Edward Va(o)ltare, born November 29,
1887, Mudge Island, BC; BCARS Reg # 1887-09-
048300; MF# B13808; GSU# 2114957

Roberts, Ivor Prosser, born January 25, 1890, Mudge
Island, BC; BCARS Reg # 1890-09-049906; MF#
B13809; GSU#2114717

Death Records

Roberts, Mary, died, February 4, 1893, Mudge
Island, BC; BCARS Reg # 1893-09-044526; MF#
B13084; GSU# 1927112

Probate Records

David Samuel Reece Roberts died March 14, 1925,
intestate; BCARS Probate files: GR-2213; 1881 -
1948, BC Supreme Court (Nanaimo)

Map

Gabriola Island, CM/C636, March 1964.

Nanaimo Free Press

Wedding Notices

Wedding: Roberts–Martin, June 23, 1883

Obituaries

Mary Roberts; February 4, 1893

John Roberts; Tycenol, Machen, Wales, father to
David Roberts; October 12, 1887
from the Cardiff Western Mail

Edward Voltair[e] Roberts; January 6, 1965

Llewellyn Roberts; Wed. July 2, 1975, p.11
(classified #36, deaths)

Large Fruit from Mudge Island

“Monster” “Mammoth” and “Magnificent” Baldwin
apples, September 27, 1884; October 7, 1885,
October 20, 1888, October 5, 1889

“Splendid” Plums, August 17, 1887

“Monster” Queen Anne cherries, June 20, 1889

Charity

In Aid of Widows Fund: August 9, 1884

Nanaimo Relief Committee: May 21, 1887

Political

Provincial Election: January 5, 1887

Vancouver Election: March 16, 1887

Heroic Sea Rescue: September 7, 1887

Joseph Chapple was the son of Richard Chapple, a
prominent Gabriola pre-emptor and settler.

Alexander Shaw Jr. was teaching on Gabriola at the
time. His father had also taught on Gabriola, and his
brother—John—in Nanaimo, where he later became
principal of Central School

John Gemmel pre-empted land directly across False
Narrows from the Roberts farm on Mudge Island,
including the Green Wharf area. From information in
the 1882–1887 Directories, John lived on Gabriola
for several years, finally returning to Nanaimo and
work as a miner for the Vancouver Coal Mining Co.

John Hamilton, another employee of the Vancouver
Coal Mining Co., was in charge of the diamond drill
looking for coal on Gabriola.

Other

BC Voters’ List, 1920, transcribed by the Nanaimo
Family History Society

Canada Census for British Columbia, Gabriola,
Mudge and De Courcy Islands: 1881, 1891, 1901
(microfilm)

Related SHALE family histories

Gabriola Museum History Committee, *The Chapple
family*, *SHALE* 3, pp.18–19, 2002

Donald Martin, *The Martin family of Gabriola*,
SHALE 5, pp.22–23, December 2002. ◇