

Charcoal Henry

About halfway between Hagensborg and Bella Coola lies the oldest continuously operating farm in the Bella Coola Valley – the “upper farm” cleared and operated by John Clayton, a former employee of the Hudson Bay Company trading post at the river mouth. He bought the business from the Bay when it closed in 1882 – 12 years before the arrival of the Norwegian settlers.

At the time, Clayton had his home and farm where the Bella Coola Townsite now lies, and his wife’s diary mentions visits to the “upper farm” in the Snooka area. The Claytons were among the 16 non-aboriginal residents of the Valley when the Norwegian settlers landed in 1894.



Photo courtesy Bella Coola Museum/Local Archives

In 1891, Frank Henri, a Francophone entrepreneur from the Rivers Inlet cannery to the south moved into the Snooka area, buying a piece of land and razing the rainforest, burning the wood in pits as he went – manufacturing charcoal to fuel the canneries that were developing out the inlet. This earned him the nickname “Charcoal Henry”. Those who care to climb the steep slopes above the farm might discern dark areas spotting the field – the visible remains of “Charcoal Henry’s” pits. Some area residents recall when the curve in what is now Highway 20, just east of Henri’s farm, was called “Blackman’s Corner” due to the farmer’s charcoal complex.



Photo courtesy Bella Coola Museum/Local Archives

Local lore includes an account of two of Charcoal Henry’s helpers battling the smoke and flames engulfing his wagon on the cliff-face road to the wharf (pictured here). They had loaded the wagon with sacks of charcoal that had not sufficiently cooled.

Lore also has it that one cold winter day shortly after Henri and his wife Susan built their new house, Susan died, and the earth was so frozen that burial was impossible except inside the shelter of the old house where a grave could be dug. Decades later, the farmer who succeeded Henri respectfully realigned his driveway when his excavator struck some old foundations. When Frank Henri died in 1913, he was buried in the nearby woods.



Photo courtesy Bella Coola Museum/Local Archives

Henri gave an acre of his farm as a site for a local school (seen in the photo above) which in time was moved to the Bella Coola Townsite where it houses the Museum. The property is now occupied by the residence of the school district superintendent.

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