

Norwegian Settlement

On October 30, 1894, eighty-four Norwegian-speaking settlers, nearly all men, arrived in Bella Coola to take up land grants in the Valley. Reverend Christian Saugstad, a Lutheran Free Church minister from Minnesota, USA, led the group seeking religious freedom and economic security. The government promised each settler title to 160 acres on condition it was cleared and a dwelling built. With a Norway-like terrain and climate like that of Northern Europe, Bella Coola offered great promise.



Photo courtesy Bella Coola Museum/Local Archives

At the time, 16 non-aboriginal traders, missionaries, and farmers resided near the river mouth. The aboriginal Nuxalk population, which had been radically reduced by disease, was concentrated in the lower four miles of the Valley.

Arrival

Aboard the sidewheeler Princess Louise, the settlers drew lots for tracts of land

and each teamed up with three future neighbours. Nuxalk helpers were contracted to transport the settlers and their supplies to the new land assignments, five to 10 miles away, some by 'spoon canoe' and others on foot up 'the road' promised by the government - little more than a rough trail through the rain forest.



Photo courtesy Bella Coola Museum/Local Archives

Settling In

Arriving at their destination, each team of four settlers erected a crude log "hytte" they shared as a shelter that first winter while clearing their four adjacent parcels, hewing logs to build more permanent homes, and tilling the newly cleared land for gardens and fields. With spring, a supply ship delivered more settlers including families of the original group. That year, the first Lutheran wedding took place, homes were erected, and a school was built. In three years, a saw mill was producing lumber. Work soon began on the Augsburg church,

the centrepiece of Hagensborg, named for postmaster Hagen Christensen. The large fields cleared from the forest more than a century ago are now devoted primarily to raising native hay for Valley livestock, and pose a constant struggle against the encroaching cottonwoods and alders that would reclaim the land for the rainforest.



Photo courtesy Bella Coola Museum/Local Archives

Economic Growth

In cooperation with Nuxalk leaders and workers, other entrepreneurs, and government, the settlers engaged in a building boom as the new 20th Century began: roads and numerous bridges, more lumber mills, fish canneries and boat-building yards, two wharves, and town sites near tidewater on both sides of the river. A new age had begun.

Photos by Simon Bangen and Ivor Fougner. Courtesy of the Bella Coola Valley Museum/Archives

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