

Seymour gets a mention.

# A separate peace

## In the forests above West Vancouver, a hidden history survives

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**FOR James Craig, the route up Hollyburn Ridge is slower going than it used to be.**

The retired lawyer, a resident of Vancouver since the 1930s, leans hard on a pair of hiking poles as he picks his way over the patches of dirty snow that cling to the hollows between the trees. The path he follows on this rainy June morning branches and branches again, until it is barely visible among the glistening salal and Oregon grape that crowd the forest floor.

He pauses to catch his breath, and explains to the reporter who accompanies him that this familiar trek used to take about 10 minutes, but now, at 86 years old, he needs closer to 25.

Craig makes his way deeper into the woods, crosses a brook — the family used to use it for drinking water, he says — and then stops and points to a gap between the towering hemlocks that dominate this part of the mountain. A red metal roof is visible about 50 metres away, half hidden by greenery.

“That one’s ours,” he says, and sets off again towards the tiny log shack.

Inside the cabin, named by a previous owner “Johanne’s Burg,” it smells of cedar. A low mudroom and simple kitchen open out onto a main room, maybe 12 feet by 12 feet, that holds a couple of couches and a coffee table, a wood stove, a small bookcase and a few other scraps of furniture. A pair of ancient wooden skis have been attached to the wall by way of decoration. Above is a tiny loft with enough space for two small beds. The space is filled by the soft tapping of rain on the roof.

It’s hard to make out details, as there are no electric lights and the windows have been shuttered against bears. The only light comes from a skylight cut into the ceiling.

The cabin, built during the Great Depression, has no running water, no central heating and no flushing toilet, but as Craig, perched on the coffee table, legs crossed, talks happily about the family activities that take place here and regular outings into the surrounding woods, it becomes clear that this modest hideaway is a precious thing.

“I love the solitude,” says Craig. “You get the wood stove going and have a beer. . . . It’s nice to have a place to escape to.”

Glancing out the window at the stillness of the forest, it’s hard to believe the refuge is only 10 kilometres from downtown Vancouver.

Craig’s cabin is one of about 100 that remain on municipal land on Hollyburn. Last year, the fee that West Vancouver charges the owners to occupy them rose almost fourfold to \$1,720. He worries that that levy, on top of property tax and fees for regular home inspections, may force the oldest owners to leave. As a 20-year veteran, Craig is a relative newcomer, but some of the legacy owners (as they are called by the association representing them) have been here for half a century or more. If they were to go, it would be a sad turn of events not only for the individuals involved, but for the North Shore as a whole.

Their disappearance would mark the loss of a connection to a little-known but fascinating corner of Vancouver’s history.

The first, simple cabins began springing up along Hollyburn Ridge in the early 1920s, in the final days of nearby Nasmyth Mill, which had been cutting up the ancient Western red cedars of Cypress Bowl since the end of the First World War.

Workers at the mill, which stood at Hollyburn’s 2,500-foot mark, would chop the logs into



NEWS photos Mike Wakefield

**JAMES Craig enjoys a quiet moment inside his cabin on West Vancouver’s Hollyburn Ridge. The tiny log home, built in the 1930s, is one of about 100 left on the mountain. See more photos at [www.nsnews.com](http://www.nsnews.com).**

short sections and send them rocketing down a 3.6-kilometre flume — essentially a wooden aqueduct — to a second mill on Rodgers Creek near West Vancouver’s Marine Drive, where they were sliced into shingles for export.

With no chairlift or roads to speak of, outdoor enthusiasts of that era would come to the North Shore by boat and make the long hike up the mountain from the waterfront to explore the ridge and to try their hand at skiing, a sport that had just arrived on the West Coast with immigrants from Scandinavia. Some of those early visitors, teens for the most part, built simple shacks along the ridge as an alternative to hiking all the way back down to sea level every night.

In 1923, its supply of lumber exhausted, the Nasmyth mill closed down. The building was taken over within the year by entrepreuneuring snowbirds and converted to the Hollyburn Ski Camp — the first commercial ski operation on the mountain. With a new home base for the sport, its following grew — and so did the number of cabins.

Donald Grant, archivist for the Hollyburn Heritage Society, estimates that by 1930, there were more than 200 dotted throughout the forest. These earliest shacks, built inexpertly

by young adventurers and often incorporating low-grade lumber salvaged from the abandoned flume, have long since vanished, but they were succeeded over the next decade by a generation of sturdier log cabins, built from rot-resistant yellow cedar using Scandinavian know-how. Craig’s cabin, built in this era, is testament to their durability.

By the time Canada entered the Second World War, that number had likely swollen to about 300, according to Grant.

It was around this time that the 20-year-old District of West Vancouver started to take note of the unregulated abodes, and appointed a ranger to begin patrolling the area and collecting fees for the use of the land. The charge was modest, but initially at least, extremely difficult to collect from furtive owners. It foreshadowed more serious conflicts to come.

In her book, *Hollyburn*, Francis Mansbridge tells of how the outbreak of the Second World War brought new regulations banning “enemy aliens” from the ridge for fear they would poison the city’s water supply, and the introduction of special lanterns that prevented light from escaping upward, just on the off chance would-be Japanese marauders were passing overhead.



**CRAIG and his son spent thousands bringing the tiny structure up to code.**

Beyond these minor precautions, however, the war did little to disrupt cabin life, according to Grant. A large portion of the thousands of photos collected by the heritage society date from that era, and show groups of beaming young people standing by their prized hideaways, and the beginnings of a small but thriving community, complete with dances, competitions, and regular social events.

Interest in the area exploded in 1951, when the Hollyburn Aerial Tram Company built a chairlift that carried enthusiastic — and often terrified, according to Mansbridge — skiers from the top of 26th Street to Hi-View Lodge, a new and comparatively luxurious base for skiing. Suddenly the cabins were easy to reach, and the area was buzzing with visitors. The surge lasted 15 years, until the lodge and the landing area burned to the ground in a what was likely a deliberately set fire.

The old footings of the chairlift can still be found today, moss covered and half hidden by the resurgent forest. One is visible, in fact, from the meandering path to Craig’s cabin.

The lift’s demise slowed skitrafic on Hollyburn to a trickle. With easy access gone, interest in the ski slopes and in the cabins waned. Some of the buildings were allowed to disintegrate, and those deemed unsafe were demolished. More than 40 cabins disappeared during this time, according to Mansbridge.

Although the accessibility brought by the construction of the long and winding Cypress Bowl Road in 1973 and the ski resort that followed helped slow the attrition, the community faced a new threat from West Vancouver, which had adopted a policy aimed at effectively exterminating it. New construction was banned, and municipal staff recommended that the cabins be allowed to disappear naturally over the coming decades.

It wasn’t just West Vancouver’s hidden cabin community that was coming under attack. Twenty years before, there had been about 300 log cabins on Mount Seymour, according to the resort administration, but the construction of a road up the mountain in about 1950 had eliminated the need for many of them, and by 1975, just 40 remained nestled in Seymour’s forests. Today, there are about 15.

The 200-cabin, Depression-era Grouse Village came to an even more abrupt end. After dwindling for some years, those that remained were torn down after Grouse Mountain’s privatization in 1976. It was a move that was intensely controversial at the time.

The Hollyburn cabin owners, fearing a similar fate, took matters into their own hands. In 1973, they banded together to form the

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# Hollyburn cabins' future comes with a price

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Hollyburn Ridge Association, an organization whose mandate was to ensure the cabins' survival. The association worked with West Vancouver council to develop a land-use plan that allowed a place for the cabins, and it hassled its own membership to keep their places in good repair to avoid further attrition.

The owners achieved some level of certainty about their future in 1984, when West Vancouver started issuing five-year permits, but their fight was far from done. Over the years, they faced a series of threats to their piece of paradise, helping to put an end to a resurgence of logging in Cypress Bowl and in the early 1990s playing a roll in defeating a proposed mountainside golf course that would have eaten into what little old growth forest remains on the ridge.

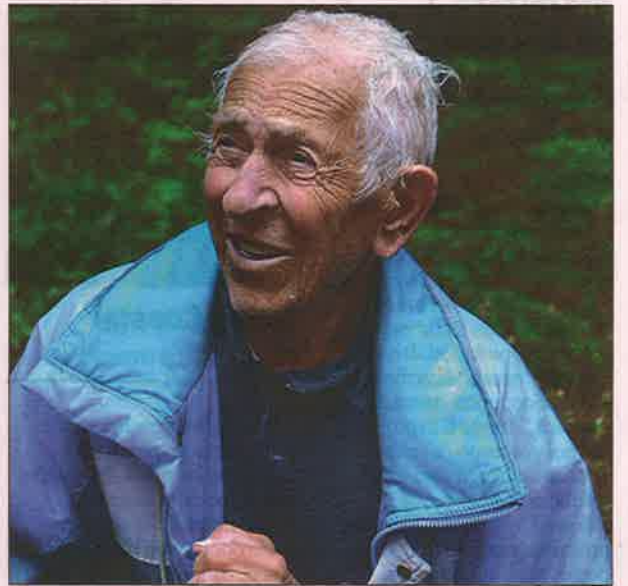
Today, it appears the community's future is secure — the future of the buildings themselves, anyway. In 2004, the district, together with the HRA, undertook inspections of all the remaining cabins and hatched a plan to ensure their survival. If the owners would agree to bring their structures up to an acceptable standard and submit to regular inspections down the road, the municipality would grant them 10-year permits to occupy.

The process touched off a frenzy of renovations along the ridge. Craig and his son shelled out tens of thousands of dollars to upgrade their shelter, he says, replacing the roof and flying in new cedar logs by helicopter to replace some of the originals that were rotting away.

But the assurance from the municipality has come at a price. The cost of the permit to occupy rose last year from about \$450 to \$1,720 a year, and will continue to rise by three per cent annually. Added to property taxes, the cost of inspections and other outlays, the change threatens to force some of the cabins' long-time owners,



THE refuge has no running water, electricity, sewer service or even road access. Craig, now 86, worries that some of the older cabin owners on Hollyburn will be unable to pay newly raised fees imposed by the municipality.



those on fixed income especially, out of their treasured retreats. "I don't have the income anymore," said Craig. "I think that's the case with many of the owners. . . . They're not people with large amounts of money; they're people who are probably in my class."

It's particularly galling, he said, given how little the municipality provides in the area. The cabins have no running water, no sewer, no garbage pickup, no direct road access and effectively no police or fire service. The paths nearest the cabins are all maintained by the owners, he added.

Bob Tapp, another retiree who has owned a cabin on the ridge since the 1940s, voiced similar concerns.

"You get the impression from some of the council members that they think we have Whistler amenities at rock-bottom prices," he said. "If I didn't have kids to pick it up, I'd have trouble paying these kinds of fees out of my pension money."

Jackie Swanson, who heads up the Hollyburn Ridge Association, said the district's new tack has, on the whole, been a positive one

since it now appears to be onboard with the idea of preservation. The association had known for some time the increase was coming — West Vancouver held off on it while owners were making upgrades — and then came to an arrangement with the HRA that helped out some of the hardest hit for the first year, she said, but now that the grace period is passed, it's not clear what will happen.

If some are forced to leave, it will be tragic, said Swanson. "There's a lot of good knowledge and wisdom that comes out of our seniors," she said. "They are the people who have been instrumental in creating Cypress."

At this point, however, it appears the new fee is here to stay, said Andrew Banks, West Vancouver's senior manager of parks.

"Over the last few decades, there have been moments when the relationship between HRA and district has been less than desirable," said Banks. "Now, we view them very much as stewards of the

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## District: Fees fair considering location

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cabins. We're all on it together to make it very accessible and very much a community asset."

That said, the new rate is a fair one, he added.

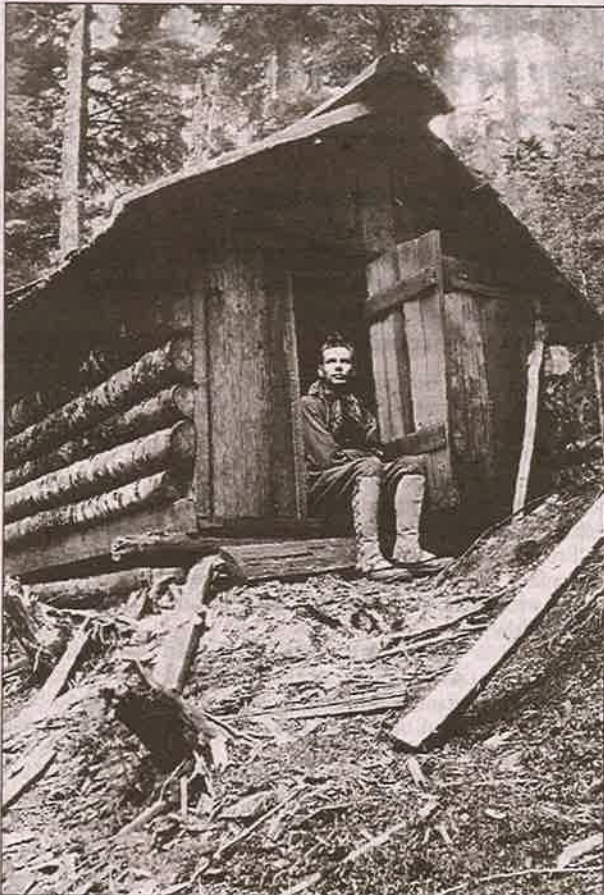
"The way the district views it is that you have access to a cabin in a beautiful mountain setting close to a ski resort," said Banks. "There is a lot of benefit."

But the municipality's words are cold comfort for Craig, who worries that his son won't be able to hold on to the cabin when it passes to him. The thought, however, doesn't appear to diminish the enjoyment he takes from his simple shelter.

As he picks his way back over the snow spattered forest floor toward the outside world, Craig pauses to point out a candle next to a tree stump that marks the resting place of one of the family's past pets. He smiles.

"It seemed like a good place," he said. "Maybe some day they'll bury me up here."

Acknowledgements to Hollyburn Heritage Society who, together with Francis Mansbridge's Hollyburn, provided much of the historical background for this story. For more information, visit [hollyburnheritagesociety.ca](http://hollyburnheritagesociety.ca), or search the society on Facebook.



Eliff Haxthow Collection, courtesy Hollyburn Heritage Society

MANY of the first small cabins to appear on Hollyburn Ridge in the 1920s were built using boards from abandoned flumes.