Ladner and Delta Street flooded in Jan. 1895 Winter Storm
Flood of 1894 was not so great

Reading histories of Delta relating to behavior of the Fraser River from earliest times, it's interesting to find that the 1894 freshet flood did not seriously affect the municipality, contrary to some versions of the event.

Rambling

by Edgar Dunning

The flood in January, eight months later, caused more damage of which there are a number of photos at Delta Archives.

Terrence Philips, who researched and wrote "Harvesting the Fraser, An Early History of Delta," published by Delta Museum and Archives, wrote: "The 1894 Great Flood of the Fraser left Delta relatively unscathed, but in early January, 1895, high winds and winter tides caused a break in the dike along the Crescent Island shore. All of Delta and particularly Ladner's Landing suffered major flooding."

"Town property owner Thomas McNeely led the crusade to have all of Delta diked. This expensive task was undertaken by the municipality in 1895 and 1896. The contract was given to Henry Benson, perhaps because he was renowned for his efficient dredging of his own Boundary Bay land, but also because he was the only person with a dredge."

Gordon Taylor, who wrote one of the first histories of the municipality, "Delta's Century of Progress," published in 1958 as part of the commemoration of the B.C. centennial, stated: "During the flood of 1894 the land was covered by salty water to depths of two and three feet. Many of the houses had eight inches of water in them, while 10 inches or a foot in barns was quite common. It was necessary to store grain in the upper floors of the houses to keep it away from flood waters."

Benefiting from later research done by others, I now believe Dr. Taylor erred in the date of the flood that damaged Ladner's Landing and which is pictured in a number of photos at Delta Museum.

Strangeley, in "Above the Sandheads," the memoirs of T. Ellis Ladner, edited by his daughter, Edna G. Ladner of Burnaby, there is no direct reference to floods of 1894 or 1895. A chapter, "Fraser River Shipping Channels," tells in detail how the river has changed its course from early times, but nothing about floods.

While I wasn't around for the 1894 or 1895 floods, I did take part in the freshet flood of 1948, working on the break that occurred on the northwest corner of the T. E. Neilson farm, now the Mariner Estates off Ferry Road. Other flooding occurred that year on Westham Island and at Sunbury.

If a flood occurs in our lowlands this year, all I'll likely do is take photos.
HONEST JOHN OLIVER

Scene 12. John Oliver, p.M.P.
Settled down to married life John worked out less frequently, and set himself wholeheartedly to the development of his own farm. He found his partial dyking unsatisfactory. In odd seasons high tides would overflow the undyked portion of his lands and destroy his crops; and, though his drainage would take out the salt again, it meant the practical loss of a whole year's work.

As an offset to these crop losses he bought a few cows and went in for the rearing of beef cattle. He had plenty of grass and fodder, and the place seemed well adapted for beef production, but the sloughs and low places, when beaten into bogs by the winter rains, proved veritable cow traps. Time and again the mushy earth drew the animals into itself, and like a black strangler choked out their lives.

John did not give up cattle on that account, but turned to hogs as another side-line. He grew oats, barley, and wheat for feed, and with the grain he mingled the mangolds and turnips which grew to monstrous size in his fertile soil. These he sliced or pulped in a hand-turned machine, and through another grinder he crushed the grain which formed the staple of his feed.

Pigs are notably prolific, and soon John was surrounded with a squalling, nozzling, guzzling multitude which greeted him with joyful grunts and squeals when they saw him approaching with the laden pails, and he found it hard to beat them back with a stick. As they grew in numbers it was necessary to enlarge and spread out the pens so that the place took on the semblance of a hog ranch, and a neighbour dubbed the owner "John Oliver, P.M.P." or "Proprietor of Many Pigs."

Many years afterwards a political opponent declared, "Old John is all right feeding the hogs, but when it comes to running the country he is a good farmer." However, when John finally changed his P.M.P. to M.P.P., and became in reality a Member of the Provincial Parliament, he found it required more courage and a bigger stick to withstand those who would guzzle, if they could, at the public trough than it had done to beat back the hogs on his Delta farm.

FROM: HONEST JOHN OLIVER: THE LIFE STORY OF THE HONOURABLE JOHN OLIVER
BY JAMES MORTON

THE GREAT FLOOD

One of the drawbacks of John's farm was a shortage of fresh water. There was too much brine beneath the soil and around to admit of satisfactory wells, and pipe lines had not yet been laid, so it was a daily task to take team and waggon to a spring in the fields about a mile away and fill his barrels. The barrels were heavy to handle, so he built a wooden tank on wheels which he could fill through a hole in the top and drain from a bung-hole below. Thus he managed to get along until such time as he could make gravitation work for himself through a mile of pipe.

The droughts of John's farm were suffered more deeply, still from a superabundance of brine. The sea tides had been his worst enemies, and on one occasion they nearly overwhelmed him.

One day in a summer of the late eighties a great tidal wave came sweeping up with wind and rain. Helpless, John saw it surge over and through his dykes. He hustled the stock into the barn and joined Mrs. Oliver, who, with her baby in the lower room of the house, was gazing through the windows in terror at the approaching destruction. Under the lash of the wind and the beat of the rain they saw it creep up toward the house and the barn.

The cattle moaned in the barn, the pigs squealed, the ducked in alarm. The tide continued to rise they did not know whether they would be drowned or not. Up to the door of the house came...
DYKING AND THRESHING

Scenic 14. Dyking and Threshing

It was then that John resolved to dyke his land more effectively. He had not sufficient funds to do it himself, and he disliked the idea of borrowing; but the very life of his farm depended upon its protection from the sea.

Other neighbours had suffered, and it was proposed that the municipality should build a general dyke along Mud Bay, and assess the cost in taxes against the land. The proposal required the consent of the landowners, and when it was placed before John Oliver, to the chagrin of the others, he refused to place his land in the scheme.

It was always his way to refuse to allow the community to do anything for him that he could do for himself, and with his innate self-confidence he felt that he could do better work than anyone else could do for him. Afterwards he found that it would have cost him less had he gone into the municipal scheme.

By this time he had obtained title to his land, and was in a position to borrow on his security. He decided to dyke the whole side of his farm facing the tides. To throw up a mound of earth, two yards or more wide and some six feet high for a length of half a mile or so was no light task. It was impossible for him to do it alone, so he hired half a dozen husky Swedes and they set to work.

One of the men writing recently said: “When I first came out here I worked for the late John Oliver, but he was early enough in them days.”

Those who worked for John usually realized this. It was a case early and late.

They had no machinery beyond ploughs to tear up the earth.
and horse-drawn scrapers to drag it to the dyke, and each night they emerged from their work like dusky gnomes. Here and there they encountered boggy spots that had to be filled to get a solid foundation, but John would not be beaten. The obstacles were overcome, and after weeks of gruelling toil the dyke was finished and his farm was so much safer from the rushing tides. The problem of draining had already been dealt with, and he had a sense of security such as he had never felt since first he homesteaded there.

The work drained his finances severely, and he said that it took him six years to make up the money he had paid out in wages; but the wall of earth stood firm, and he was able to worry less and devote himself to other tasks.

His crops for the year had been destroyed by the flood, and the rains of the coming winter were needed to wash out the salt through his drains and restore the old fertility. In the meantime he had to make something to carry on.

As there was not a threshing machine in the district John decided to stretch his credit further, and buy one to thresh for his neighbours. He secured one of small dimensions, operated by a horse treadmill. Light as it was, it was difficult enough to get around over the muddy roads in a wet fall, and he used to tell how, on occasions, he had to rig up a "Spanish windlass," a log with holes bored for spokes standing in an upright frame of poles. Around this log a winding rope would drag his machine out of the mire where a horse could not find footing. It was crude as threshing machines go, and was operated by two horses, toiling always uphill and pressing the endless slats downward beneath their feet, which, turning wheels within wheels, kept the small separator humming. Still it was infinitely speedier than the flail, his machine was in great demand, and John prospered.

In those days he toiled among the dust and straw with chaff in his nostrils, and a cloud of flying grime around him that turned his tears to ink and his spittle to tar. He slept with the horses in the stable or on the hay in the loft, but he had known harder beds and this did not trouble him. He went out a white man in the morning to return a begrimed and bewhiskered negro at night.

The following year his land, cleansed by rain and drainage,
II THE RIVER FRESHET

The fact that two-thirds of the precipitation into the enormous drainage basin of the Fraser (90,000 sq. miles) is in the form of snow accounts for the phenomenon of the "freshet" which is the first and most significant limitation, because of the problems associated with floods and drainage. Second, and more subtly, the variation in timing and amount of freshet flow complicates an already complicated movement of sediments affected by a combination of wind, tides, currents and changing underwater topography. Shipping is affected by the deposition and movement of sediments. Fish and smaller organic sea life are affected by the movement of sediments. Dispersal of municipal and industrial wastes is affected, and in turn affects the fish and other organisms.

1. The Natural Flood Hazard

In the absence of dyking, natural floods in the lower Fraser would occur whenever the water elevation at Mission exceeded 5.5 metres. Since 1894 (when reliable records were first kept) this elevation has been exceeded on an average of two in every three years. From 1948-1972 the elevation of the Fraser at Mission approached or exceeded 7.0 metres five times. The "floodplain" describes land that was flooded in 1894 when the elevation at Mission was 7.92 metres (26 feet), flooding an area of approximately 74,870 hectares. Because of the limited time for which records are available it is uncertain with what frequency an 1894 flood can be anticipated. However, it has been estimated that a 7.92 metre water elevation at Mission represents a 1:140 year flood. Although such an occurrence is an extremely remote possibility, the maximum probable flood has been computed (by Inland Waters Directorate, Environment Canada, 1973) at 39,620 cms or 12.19 metres at Mission. This flood would occur if all factors contributing to flooding (snow pack, Spring temperature regimes, Spring precipitation) were maximized.

Also, dyke failure can occur through seepage, ponding and outright collapse. The major causes of dyke failure are excessive periods of high freshets and inadequate maintenance. The longer a freshet maintains water levels above 5.5 metres at Mission the greater the chance of dyke failure. The 1948 flood registered 7.61 metres. Equally important, the water level remained above 5.5 metres at Mission for 38 days and within 0.2 metres of dyke crest for 14 days, subjecting existing dyking to additional stress even where overtopping did not occur.

While dyking remains an important feature of development on the waterfront lands along the Fraser it cannot solve all the development problems in the floodplain. The predominance of fluvial sediments and organic deposits, plus the fact that the landscape is mostly flat and poorly drained, constitute additional natural limitations to development, as do the steep slopes in some parts of the Estuary.
Ladner and the Flood of 1894

by Gwen Szychter

The residents affected by the 1993 overflow of the Mississippi River in the Midwestern United States undoubtedly have applied the label "the big flood" to their experience. In all likelihood, they will be dating events in their lives from that time. This is typical of how people remember historical events.

There are many people still living in Delta, who remember graphically the flood of 1948, arguably British Columbia's most disastrous. But for those who lived on the Fraser River and in its vicinity the definitive flood, "the big flood" against which all others are compared, is the 1894 one. Local lore has led us to believe that this flood had the greatest impact on the residents of Chilliwack and other points upriver. Ladner and environs were believed to have suffered minimal damage, being most adversely affected in January 1895 instead, when rain and tide combined to put the village under water. Not so.

The winter of 1893-1894 saw unusually heavy snow deposits in the upper Fraser Valley. This snow pack, melted at the end of May by unseasonably hot temperatures, caused all the streams emptying into the Fraser to overflow their banks. From there the domino effect brought disaster to the communities along the river.

On 25 May 1894, Quesnel reported that the water in the Fraser River was rising "half an inch per hour." By 4 June, the flood waters had exceeded the previous record set in 1882; at New Westminster the river registered 13 feet 9 ½ inches above the low water mark. Many locales on the lower Fraser were under water by then, including Annacis Island. And the waters continued to rise until 10 June. This was the peak of the flood. Afterwards the waters of the Fraser began to subside, but by then a tremendous amount of damage had been done in the valley, with thousands of acres under water.

The files of the Provincial Archives in Victoria reveal the extent of the damage suffered by Delta's farmers. Much of the municipality escaped unscathed. The village at Ladner's Landing was threatened for a time on 3 June, when the dyke burst opposite Chinatown. Feverish sandbagging by the residents, many of whom were at the time attending Sunday morning service in the Presbyterian church, prevented any serious problems.

Westham Island suffered some flooding, with some pasture land and hay crops being reported 'under water after two hundred feet of the existing dyke was washed out. The Dominion Government wharf there, as well as London's wharf, collapsed and were swept away. Brodie's Cannery on Deas Island was inundated and fell into the river.

But it was Crescent Island that bore the brunt of the overflow from the Fraser. Not surprisingly, therefore, the names of Crescent Island farmers predominated among the requests for relief.

The provincial government in Victoria established fairly quickly a Fraser River Flood Relief Fund, for the dispersal of seed to those farmers affected, so that they could re-sow their fields once the water had subsided. Two grain merchants in New Westminster, Brackman-Ker, and Youdall & Sinclair, provided the seed for farmers in this...
municipality, and deliveries were made, naturally enough, by the boats that typically plied the Fraser.

This disaster had occurred at a crucial time of year for local farmers. If the water did not subside fairly quickly and the land did not dry out enough to enable the planting of a second crop, they would be forced to buy fodder, that is, hay, oats, turnips, or other feed, for their cattle over winter. This would be an intolerable financial burden for many of these men who were just getting established on the land. Luckily the waters receded in time to sow another crop.

In each municipality the reeve was designated to oversee the operation. In Delta, the agent was Paul Ladner, son of then Reeve William H. Ladner, who had delegated the position to the younger man. Political patronage at its most blatant? Probably. However, Paul Ladner was well-regarded and educated, and knew his neighbours well, as can be seen from his reports, some of which follow. In addition, the job probably did not pay much, and appeared to have been only a month or so in duration.

In any event, the applications from local farmers, while brief and to the point, are also informative. A sampling of those applications gives us a clear idea of the effect of the disaster locally.

The following letter from a farmer located on the southeast bank of Crescent Slough is typical:

Ladner's Landing, June 16th [1894]

Gentlemen,

All my farm being completely submerged by the flood I have lost all my crop. I hereby make application for a ton of potatoes, 500 lbs. of oats, 1 sack barley and 1 lb. turnip seed.

I am yours
respect[fully]

Ernest R. Chidell

Mr. Chidell appeared to be leaving nothing to chance, giving the agent an itemized list of his requirements.

Most letters tended to be explanatory, giving some detail of the farmer's situation, perhaps because previous experience with government suggested the necessity of taking nothing for granted. Since farmers had seldom been in government, even in those days, perhaps the detail of the following application is not excessive:

Ladner's Landing, June 9th 1894

To Reeve Ladner,

My ground was under two feet of water last week and the crop I had in is ruined. I had one acre planted

& if I can get 5 or 6 sacks I could plant again for my own use (potatoes).

L.V. Lucas

Another letter writer who believed in the direct approach, giving a list of specific requirements, was Douglas Dove, who farmed with his brother, Spencer, on 156 acres on the mainland opposite the easternmost end of Tilbury Island. Because of the farm's location, his address is somewhat different from that of the other petitioners:

New Westminster B.C. June 19th 94

Dear Sir,

My farm having been flooded with the high water I make an application for the following seeds.

1 ton oats
300 lbs. of Timothy Seed [replaced by "400 lbs Millet"]
6 lbs. Turnip seed
½ ton Potatoes

Douglas D. Dove

New Westminster, B.C.

West ½ of Lot 130 Gp 2 Delta Municipality

This is one of the few instances in which changes to the requested materials or amounts were noted directly on the applicant's letter. An assessment of the damage to Dove's property was contained in the Distributor's Report made out by Paul Ladner for this application:

This 10 acres of newly seeded hay will be a complete loss as it is covered with sediment about two inches deep & the pasture will be damaged very considerably for the same reason. Garden & roots a total loss. The fences on this property have been very much damaged & about one third drifted away.
Right: One of the other letters applying for seeds "... to be given to farmers that have had their crops ruined by the overflow of the Fraser..."

On the back of many letters was noted the approval given by the Provincial Secretary or his assistant, as in the following:

Ladner June the 18/94
Dear Sir,
I beg to apply for 500 Lbs Potatoes as my crop has all been lost in the recent flood. My land is situated on Crescent Island on Lot 149 Group 2.
R. W. Hawthorne
Mr. Paul Ladner, Ladner

On the reverse is written the following order:

Messrs Youdall & Sinclair, Please fill the enclosed order by delivering to R. W. Hawthorne, Ladner. James Baker Provincial Secy

Evidence that it had been delivered is noted, "delivered June 26th 94 MS".

All deliveries were recorded in this fashion, directly on the order written by either Baker or Townsend.

Applications continued to come in, as late as the early part of July. It may have been that news of the relief program did not reach everyone in the district for some time, although deliveries of seed from the government began to arrive on June 26th. This appears to have been the last letter received:

Ladner Landing, July 5th 1894
Paul E. Ladner Esq, Agent for Distribution of Seeds

Dear Sir,
I beg to apply for one and a half ton of Seed Potatoes
E. Beadleston

At the bottom is a notation: "Please fill this order, Wm B. Townsend, For Prov Sectr"

The appointed agent, in this case, Paul Ladner, also filed a letter of recommendation in respect of each application, referred to earlier as the Distributor's Report. It appears that these recommendations were generally acted upon, but they also reveal a lot about the community and its individuals, not to mention serving as a barometer of the relationship of each applicant to the Ladner family.

The following notation is probably the most negative, and since Nathaniel Mitchell had been in dire financial straits in the early 1890s, to the point of losing one of his original holdings, Ladner's comments are not surprising. The notation reads as follows:

This applicant is in debt about as much as he can be, his farm is heavily mortgaged. It would be useless to grant more than half of what he asks for but [I] would suggest that he be allowed 500 lbs of potatoes. My reason for suggesting cutting his application down one half is that with his horses it would be impossible for him to put it all in.

It is apparent from other papers that Mitchell received less than he expected as a result of his application, but whether he registered a complaint at being shortchanged is not known, at least not from the surviving records in this file. The reason put forth by Ladner is also unclear. Were this man's horses incapable of doing the amount of work required because they were too old? Or did he not have enough horses for the work? We shall never know.

Finally, we should not be deceived into believing that there were no fraudulent or exaggerated claims. Delta contained, as it does now, a cross-section of inhabitants, some honest and law-abiding, and some not. One farmer, George