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INTRODUCTION

Hollyburn's Cornucopia

Why are there trees I never walk under but large
and melodious thoughts descend upon me.

—WALT WHITMAN'S
"SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD"

The Hollyburn cross-country parking lot is almost empty on a late September afternoon. A pair of grouse eye me curiously as I get out of my car, no doubt gauging the possibilities of a handout. As I trudge up the trail a jay precedes me, flitting from stump to stump. Periodically I pass a cabin, mostly shrouded behind the lush vegetation. A half-hour drive from downtown Vancouver, Hollyburn possesses a peace and tranquility that are virtually absolute.

Hollyburn is the mostly forested area lying north of West Vancouver above the 1,200-foot level between Capilano River and Cypress Creek, an area whose gentle slopes make it much more accessible than the other North Shore mountains. It is both the backyard for over two million residents of the Greater Vancouver area and a treasure house of scenic beauty and natural diversity that has few equals anywhere. Nature bursts forth in profusion, its exuberance impelled by plentiful precipitation and a temperate climate.

Along with its neighbours Mount Strachan (pronounced Strahn) and Black Mountain, Hollyburn Mountain is at the southern end of the Coast Mountains of North America. The ancestors of these mountains were created with the subduction of the

Hollyburn Ridge rises above the fledgling community of West Vancouver, ca. 1920s.
(WEST VANCOUVER MEMORIAL LIBRARY 1817)

Farallon and Kula plates under the continental North American plate 80 to 150 million years ago. The compression that built these mountains ceased 45 million years ago, with the formation of one of the largest masses of granitic rock in the world. For the next 40 million years they were quiet, gradually eroding down to a low chain of hills.

Beginning five million years ago, the steepening subduction zone of the Juan de Fuca and Explorer plates caused local melting beneath western BC and Washington. The resulting expansion led to a two kilometre or more uplift, forming the present day Coast Mountains. These mountains continue to rise today.

Glaciation began about two million years ago, with the Cordilleran ice sheet reaching its maximum thickness in the last ice age about sixteen thousand years ago. Glaciation deepened valleys, straightened bends and made the valleys U-shaped rather than V-shaped, which made transportation easier for the incoming human inhabitants. Much of the younger rock has been eroded away, exhuming the range's granitic basement. While mostly granitic, Hollyburn Mountain and Mount Strachan retain roof pendants of older sedimentary rock.

Ice sheets covered the Coast Mountains during the last ice age, with only higher peaks above about 5,500 feet (1,676 metres) protruding. Moving ice and the rock and debris under the glaciers scoured and moulded the lower slopes and ridges, creating

Alex Swanson on the north summit of Unnecessary Mountain, August 1963.
The twin peaks of the Lions are in the background. (ALEX SWANSON COLLECTION)

relatively gradual inclines. The ice disappeared about eleven thousand years ago, melting in the higher areas before the Fraser Valley because the rocks exposed by the melting ice absorbed the heat. The retreating glaciers deposited erratics, large boulders picked up by the glaciers on their slow slide to the sea. Stranded on places such as the top of Mount Strachan and Yew Lake meadows, erratics can still be seen today.

Twelve thousand years ago, when the ice was retreating, a colder and drier climate favoured different trees from today. Lodgepole pine were the first trees to occupy the Hollyburn area after the glaciers, to be followed by Douglas fir and spruce. These were in turn largely supplanted by western hemlock and cedar. In the last 4,000 years cool summers and moist winters have provided the conditions for our present forests.

Temperatures now are moderate and precipitation plentiful. Measured at the Hollyburn Climatological Station at 930 metres, the average precipitation between 1954 and 1990 was 292 centimetres, of which 28 percent fell as snow, with the highest precipitation occurring between October and February. The average April 1st snow depth at Hollyburn is 380 centimetres. Measured during the same period, average daily minimums (in Celsius) ranged from -4.5 degrees in January to 8.1 degrees in August. Daily maximums ranged from 0.7 degrees in December to 17.9 degrees in July and August.

As the largest and oldest living entities with which most of us have any connection, trees occupy a unique space in our imaginations. They are a link to the past and the harbingers of promises for the future. Nurtured by the moist, temperate climate, many of the trees on the west coast have grown to astounding proportions. Some of them were so big that in early days of European settlement individuals—and even families—were said to have used the stumps as floors on which to construct their dwellings.

Up to 300 metres, the Coastal Hemlock Zone is treed with western hemlock, red cedar, Douglas fir, grand fir and yew. Above this level, the Mountain Hemlock Zone is home to mountain hemlock, yellow cedar and amabilis fir (balsam). Conifers dominate both zones because they do better in the dry summers and can grow year-round, competing successfully with the deciduous trees, whose growth is restricted to the summer months.

Yellow and red cedar have played an especially important role in the history of Hollyburn and the lower slopes. The earliest evidence of human presence on Hollyburn occurs on a yellow cedar with bark stripping scars, located above Yew Lake, which may indicate human modification from about 350 to 400 years ago. First Nations people often did not fall trees, but would strip bark or split boards from living trees. Western red cedar was so important to the aboriginal people that they called it the "tree of life." Some said the power of the red cedar was so strong a person could absorb strength by standing with his/her back to the tree. The geographic extent of the northwest coast peoples is about the same as the range of western red cedar, which was crucial to the former's development—it was uncommon until about four thousand years ago.

Cypress Provincial Park is home to some accessible old growth of remarkable size. While many of these trees are very old, it should be pointed out that at this elevation many old trees are not big. A 6.5 to 7.5 inch (16.5 to 19 centimetre) diameter tree cut for a toboggan run checked in at 280 years old. While many have ended up as somebody's shingled roof, 40 percent of the old growth (over two hundred years old) in Cypress Provincial Park remains, with yellow cedar, amabilis fir and mountain and western hemlock the predominant species. It appears that until European presence caused some major fires and environmental changes, no major fire had taken place here for 1,500 to 2,000 years, and possibly as long as 4,700 years, allowing natural development over millennia.

A century of industry by loggers has destroyed most of the great giants of the past, but some of the oldest and largest remaining trees still call Hollyburn-Cypress home. Not long ago a tree eliminated in the interests of a Cypress ski area parking lot was

found to be 941 years old. Yellow cedar lives the longest because its wood contains antifungal chemicals that prevent decay. The 1,200-year-old yellow cedar at the Hollyburn Ridge turn-off on the Cypress Bowl Road is, at 2.28 metres in diameter, one of the largest in the Pacific Northwest. Another yellow cedar, named the Hollyburn Giant, is, at 3.2 metres in diameter, even larger, although it is broken-topped and only 20.7 metres high. This tree is located at the junction of the Baden-Powell trail and the old Strachan trail.

Just upslope from the Hollyburn Giant is a mountain hemlock with the largest recorded diameter of any tree of this species in Canada (1.9 metres). The largest known living amabilis, or Pacific silver fir, in the world was discovered in the mid-1980s by famed big tree hunter, the late Randy Stoltmann, near Cabin Lake on Black Mountain. Western hemlock up to 1.8 metres in diameter also flourish on Cypress, including a grove along the Yew Lake old growth trail. Many of these trees have been discovered only recently, and it is possible that even larger specimens may exist in more remote areas visited less by people.

Its magnificent physical setting has helped make Hollyburn home to one of the most popular cross-country ski areas in North America, while the downhill ski area of Cypress next door is being catapulted into the twenty-first century by the upcoming Winter Olympics. Up to 12,000 visitors now come to play in the snow on a busy day, and with the new lifts and infrastructure being completed for the Olympics, that number will grow. The Olympic events of freestyle and aerial skiing at Cypress will confirm Cypress/Hollyburn as the North Shore's premiere locale for winter sports.

Hollyburn's rich and diverse history provides a perspective on many of our changing attitudes to our natural landscape. A variety of sometimes conflicting interests has woven a texture of personalities and events that provide a window into past issues that have shaped our present. From the time that Europeans first settled this area less than a century and a half ago, successive waves of people have etched lineaments on the landscape on both physical and deeper levels. From the increasing urban presence down below, diverse groups have brought their interests up the mountain.

Entrepreneurs, nature lovers and others have found much to attract them to Hollyburn. From 1870, when Sewell Moody hewed his first logging road through the dense forest, commercial interests have been alive to the challenges of the terrain and its lucrative possibilities. Logging roads often became access routes for hikers and skiers—many of whom combined their love of the outdoors with modest commercial activity themselves. The Hollyburn lodge in the cross-country area remains as the only surviving original lodge on the North Shore. Its fate—preservation, renovation

Hikers on the peak of Hollyburn, ca. 1927.
(GEORGE ARMSTRONG-HILLS COLLECTION)

or destruction—is one of the pivotal debates focusing on this area today. Other lodges and establishments such as West Lake/Westlake and Hi-View have provided venues where outdoors enthusiasts have gathered to form bonds that have often lasted generations.

Many Hollyburn skiers, particularly ski jumpers, competed with the world's best in the first half of this century. After the demise of the first chairlift, the development of lift-serviced skiing at Cypress opened a new era—but not without some major environmental struggles, as the lure of the logging dollar led to some ugly and unnecessary clear-cuts. More recent visitors have included mountain bikers, who have developed this area into one of the most highly regarded mountain biking venues anywhere.

Hollyburn also remains home to the only surviving cabin community of the Vancouver area. Many of these rustic retreats, built by early skiers, date back to the early years of this century. They survive as important examples of our built heritage, a link to a time when life was simpler—if harder.

The present state of relatively secure environmental protection belies the colourful and often troubled history of this area. Its proximity to a large urban centre has often placed it under extreme pressure from those with agendas less friendly to the environment. A sense of urgency has characterized many conflicts, as many of the enterprises have had, and will have, permanent effects. The mountain and the city, our natural roots and our urban accomplishments, express the polarities of our modern life. Over the past century these have played out on Hollyburn in various scenarios as loggers, skiers, bikers, developers, environmentalists and others have vigorously promoted their diverse interests. The resulting history provides a fascinating account of some remarkable personalities, a significant part of who we were.