

Whistle farm gets new home

A piece of logging history is moving from TimberWest's Nanaimo Lakes property to the BC Forest Museum near Duncan.

Crews from TimberWest and the museum are relocating the "whistle farm," where legendary engineer and inventor Robert Swanson tested his air horns and whistles from the late '50s down to recent times. Swanson, who passed away last year, is best-known for Vancouver's "O Canada horns," which blast out the first four notes of the national anthem every day at noon. He also designed the famous Gastown steam clock.

The whistle farm is located west of Second Lake, close to the First Lake logging camp. Swanson leased the site because the acoustics were excellent for testing his inventions.

Bob Beard, South Island region vice-president, says people who worked at Nanaimo Lakes in the '60s have told him of hearing the sound of horns and whistle tests echoing through the forest. "You could

hear them quite clearly. It's a narrow valley."

When Swanson died in 1994, the lease on the whistle farm reverted back to TimberWest.

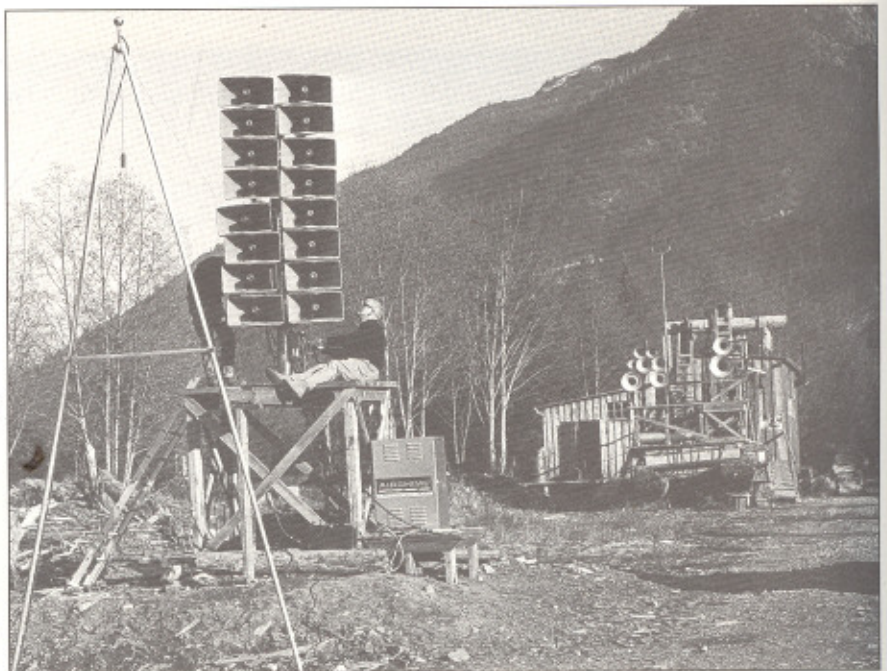
Bill Challenger, president of the company Swanson helped create – Airchime Manufacturers Co. Ltd. in Burnaby – says the farm's 1914 boiler still works: "It's something right out of the steam era. There's nothing like it anywhere in the world."

He says Airchime has no need for the remote test facility because the company has a special sound-proof chamber in Burnaby for testing horns and whistles. Instead of demolishing the unique, ramshackle old farm, TimberWest has donated the works to the BC Forest Museum in Duncan.

Museum staff will move the more fragile pieces from the farm, while TimberWest crews will move the heavier equipment such as the boiler.

Museum manager Mike Osborn says he is "quite ecstatic" to get the farm fixtures. "The whistle farm tells an unknown but important story," he says. "It represents the impact individuals can have on the forest industry."

Swanson, a prolific and energetic inventor, had considerable impact on the forest industry during his life. He invented a fail-safe air brake system for logging trucks which has been adopted as the standard



At the whistle farm: Bob Swanson prepares for a test.

all over North America. As well, he got the idea for the runaway lanes for trucks seen throughout BC.

As the provincial government's chief railway safety inspector, Swanson wrote the Railway Code of British Columbia at a time when the logging industry relied heavily on steam and diesel locomotives.

He also designed air whistles for the new generation of diesel-electric locomotives so that the new trains would sound more like steam engines. It was a safety measure designed to prevent confusion, as the early diesel train engines used horns that sounded like trucks. ▲

(For more on Robert Swanson, see page 10.)



Bob Beard (left) of TimberWest and Vern Wellburn of BCFM inspect horns at the whistle farm, Nanaimo Lakes.

TW donates papers to archives

TimberWest has donated both cash and valuable records to the Campbell River Museum's archives collection on logging, making the collection one of the most extensive.

Timber cruiser Geoff Sanvido, on behalf of TimberWest, donated cruise records from the 1920s and 30s. The records were on the holdings of the International Timber Company, which began operations here in 1909. They provide detailed information on rail lines, harvest schedules

and species mix.

The records neatly complement the already extensive holdings of the archives on the Elk River Timber Company, a major employer in the area. Elk River Timber was sold to B.C. Forest Products in 1980, and BCFP was purchased by Fletcher Challenge in 1987, becoming TimberWest in 1993.

TimberWest has also donated \$12,000 to the museum, \$10,000 to the building fund, and \$2,000 for archival care. ▲

A remarkable life: **Logger, inventor, poet**

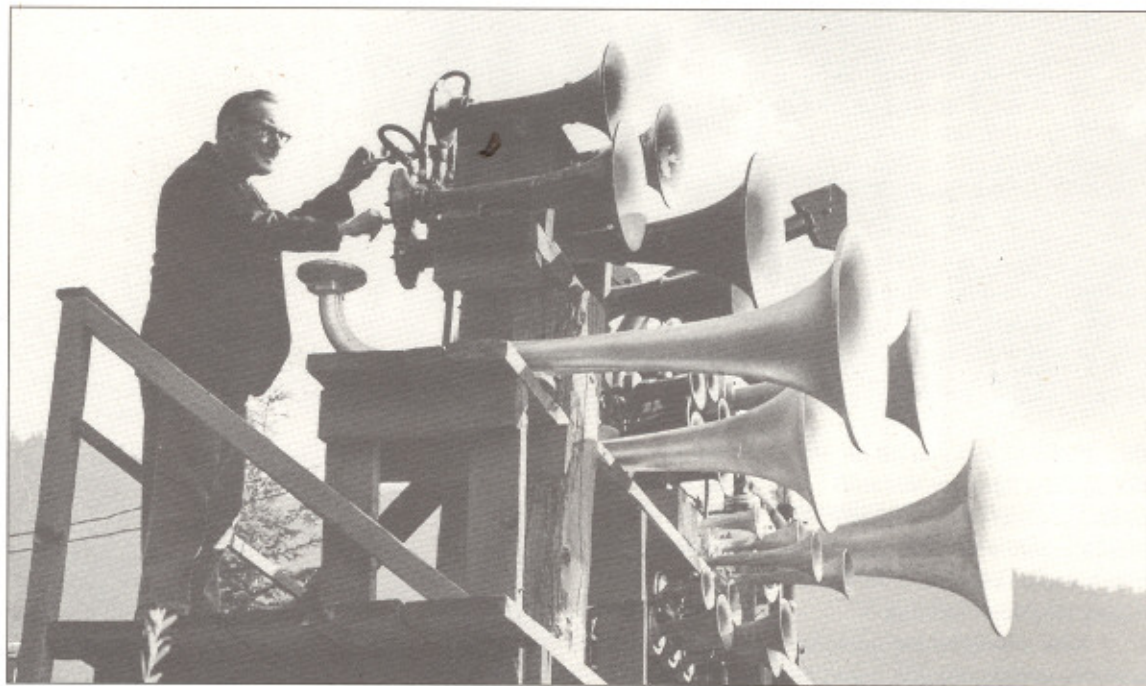
The late Robert Swanson was by all accounts a remarkable man.

Born in England before the First World War, Swanson was sent to Canada for safekeeping during the war.

By the age of 14 he quit school to work full-time in the logging camps. At 17 he had his steam engineer's papers. When there was no work in the woods, he took upgrading courses and eventually earned a professional engineering degree without ever having attended a university.

Former business partner Bill Challenger describes Swanson as a remarkable innovator and an exacting engineer. "I never in my life saw him without a tie on."

Encouraged by poet Robert Service, Swanson wrote and published several volumes of poetry about westcoast loggers — including *Rhymes of a Western*



Robert Swanson conducting horn tests at the whistle farm, Nanaimo Lakes, in the early 1960s.

Logger, Rhymes of a Lumberjack and *Bunkhouse Ballads*. The books were popular, selling over 80,000 copies (see below).

Late in life, he was still

active. His former secretary, Shirley Irwin, recalls a "dynamic" man who was hard of hearing after years of ear-shattering tests at the "whistle

farm." It was, she says, his only sign of age. "His mind was working as hard when he was 88 as it was when he was in his 20s." ▲

The Call of Spring

The skylines sweep o'er the side-hills,
steep — 'cross the bowl of the azure sky,
And the echoes roll from knoll to knoll
as the swishing cross-cuts fly;

The toppling trees sing melodies that
are music sweet to the ear,
And the waters roar on the canyon
floor, but O, so crystal clear,

It's the only life removed from the
strife of a world gone raving mad.
So when axes ring at the call of Spring,
it's a thrill and my heart feels glad.

O, to breathe the air of the Great Out-
There, when the spring-flushed torrents
race,

Where things are real and a man can
feel the beat of the rain on his face,
As he breasts the gale on the open trail

in that great, big, Outdoor Land,

When the woods turn green by a wand,
unseen, in the grip of Nature's hand.

O, I want to go where the breezes blow
and the white waves hurl on the shore,
And the swallows return — it is then that
I yearn to be back in the woods once more.

O, to hear the frogs in that land of logs
ring out their spring-time tune,
As the starlight shines through the
stalwart pines, and I see the pale spring
moon,

When the breeze is stilled, and the east is
filled with the blush of the new-born day,
The morning mist will roll and twist as it
moves out, down the bay.

While the coffee brews I'll lace my
shoes and watch those colors change

As the rising sun puts gold upon the snow-
capped mountain range.

So remove me, afar, from the clang and the
jar of your city's ceaseless roar,
And set me down miles, miles from a town
on a pathless woodland shore —

For I've had enough of your big town stuff
until now my belly's full:

I'm tired of your streets, of your two-bit
cheats with their well-phrased, well-slung bull.
And I'm sick in the crop of your restaurant
slop, of your mobs, and your city's smoke.

And when robins sing at the Call of Spring,
I'll be glad to go back....'cause I'm broke.

Robert E. Swanson (From *Bunkhouse
Ballads*, published 1945)