Logging’s glory days relived on Vancouver Island

The glory days of logging and the forest industry—including a 1929 Washington Iron Works steam donkey—can be viewed at the McLean Mill National Historic site, near Port Alberni, on Vancouver Island.

“Wooden spars”; the “high-rigger”; the “donkey”; “tongs”; the “sled yard”; “heel boom loader”; the “whistle punk”.

They’re all terms from a bygone and fast-fading era. But a person who wants to get an idea of the way it used to be in the glory days of logging on the West Coast only needs to visit the McLean Mill National Historic site near Port Alberni on Vancouver Island.

During the summer, on weekends and for special occasions, the “J.J. Logging” crew at the McLean Mill site fires up the 1929 Washington Iron Works steam donkey, checks the rigging and gets ready to present a high-lead yarding and loading demonstration.

The logging demonstration was the brainchild of old-time logger, Jack James. James started logging for forest company Canfor at the age of 14 in the Nimpkish Valley of northern Vancouver Island. He learned his basic logger skills crewing on a steam donkey. James rose through the ranks until he became a well-known woods foreman for several different outfits, retiring from Mars Contracting down the Alberni Inlet on Vancouver Island, in 1996.

Now retired in Port Alberni, James felt it important to do something to preserve the heritage of old-time logging. There are static displays of old steam locies and donkeys at several locations on Vancouver Island, and museums with photo displays and dioramas. There is the logger sports circuit, but only at the McLean Mill is it possible to see and hear a real old-time logging “show” working.

At the McLean Mill, visitors can see a steam-powered sawmill cutting logs into lumber. The McLean Lumber Company also ran a logging operation to supply their mill, from 1926 to 1972.

The steam donkey, which last yarded logs in 1972, has been restored once before—for EXPO ’86 in Vancouver. But it had been rusting and rotting in the bush at the edge of the mill site ever since. Other pieces of derelict equipment remain on site, as well as bits and pieces, such as tree plates and blocks.

In 2008, James decided that there had been enough waiting. McLean Mill Manager Neil Malbon bought in on the project. James assembled a crew of retired loggers and other interested people and, for the first time in forty years, a ‘sled yard’ was in operation in an Alberni Valley camp.

Island Timberlands donated the fir sled logs, which were barked, sniped and then shaped to receive the donkey engine that was being restored at the same time. The steam sawmill cut the 24” square timbers used between the two skids. Then, the crew had to bore holes for the steel rods holding the skids together. By summer’s end, the sled was complete.

In the winter of 2008-09, the steam engine was jacked up off the old rotten sled and slid on greased rails over onto the new sled. A perfect fit!
Next on the list was rigging a spar tree so that the donkey could power a high-lead yarding show.

Island Timberlands agreed to let James have a strip of trees next to the mill property as a logging site and for the back end of the rigging.

Here was another first—the first wooden spar in the Alberni Valley since the 1960s. Aaron Thom was the high-rigger. He topped the tree in April and felled the timber. Stumps were notched for the guy lines. Thom rigged the tree while the crew did the ground work. Skills not used in forty years were dusted off and put to work. James did a rehearsal on the ground first, using a log stub to demonstrate the placement of the tree plates at the top of the spar, where all the guy lines are attached.

Finally, all was ready. On June 26, 2009, the donkey was fired, steam pressure rose to 150 pounds, the punk blew one long blast and “J.J. Logging” swung into action. The chokermen were waiting.

Only three turns were brought in that day—hardly highball logging—but James had a look of great satisfaction on his face.

There were several logging demonstrations that summer but James still had one more thing that he wanted done before he would consider the job complete. He wanted a heel-boom loading system rigged off the spar as well. As he said, “What’s the use of yarding the logs into the landing if you cannot load them out? Let’s give the public more to see!”

The spring of 2010 saw the sled yard busy again as a second sled was built, this time for the loading donkey—an old Murdie winch once used by the McLeans at a ‘gin-pole’ log dump. The Ford V-8 flathead was restored to power the gas donkey.

Work continued into the summer. The boom also had to be built, stiffened and buffered by old railway rails. The rails were found lying in the bush, just where the McLeans had left them more than 60 years earlier after using them on a similar boom! Aaron Thom was called in to do more rigging for the loading system.

At the same time, the crew was doing a weekly steam-powered, high-lead logging demonstration with the donkey and spar tree. Finally, in August, the boom was complete, the rigging hung and the gas donkey in position.

James gave the signal and the boom’s nose rose steadily up and into place. The engineer pulled the lever and the boom swung ponderously over the logs in the landing while the heavy cedar chunk counterweight rose up in the air. Then the tongs dropped down and the chaser set them in a log.

Another signal from James saw the log swing up and heel against the boom, which then swung back, pulled by the chunk line.

James just grinned. “Now you’re logging, boys!!”

Further information about the McLean Mill National Historic is available at www.alberniheritage.com