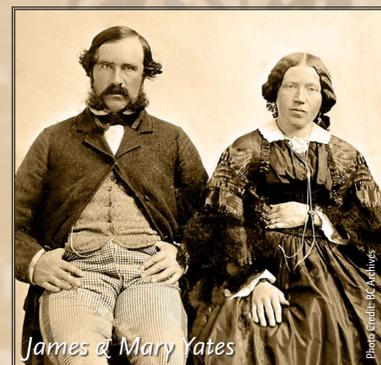
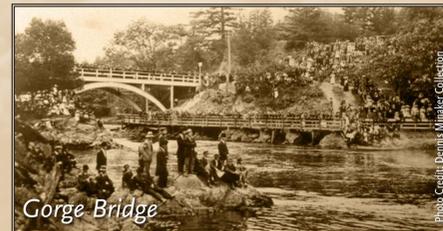


Gorge Park

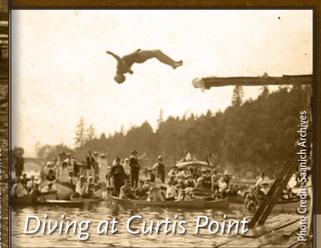
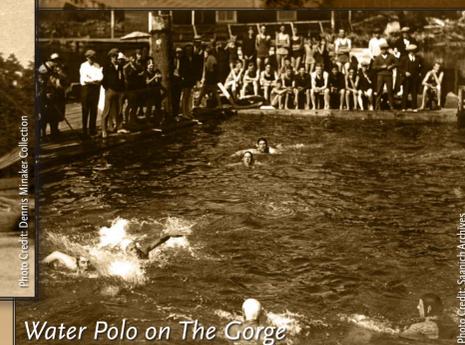
For thousands of years, the Gorge Waterway provided the First Nations with both shelter and sustenance. After the founding of Fort Victoria in 1843, the water course gave access to large colonial farms and the outdoor pleasures of boating, swimming, picnicking and camping. Much of that summertime fun took place along the shores that were to become Saanich Gorge Park.



James Yates, early publican and politician, first settled this land in 1852. His Craigie Lea Farm covered almost 400 acres east of the Gorge Narrows. Beginning on May 24, 1867, the farm's shoreline served as a popular vantage point to watch the Queen's Birthday regattas with races by uniformed sailors, Coast Salish paddlers and amateur oarsmen. Floating brass bands, greased-pole contests and nearby taverns added their own delights to this annual water carnival. Special regattas honoured visiting dignitaries such as Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald.

Eventual subdivision of the Yates estate into private - and often stately - shoreline homes and gardens spurred the City of Victoria to secure public access in 1904. Eleven acres of the old farm next to the Gorge Bridge were purchased to become the City Gorge Park. Initial improvements included the first public landing for boaters. Swimmers were accommodated in 1912 with the construction of a two-story bathing pavilion popularly known as the Free. Located opposite the reversing falls, this changing facility offered a sun-deck, springboards, freshwater showers and the added thrill of leaping from the nearby bridge into the rushing water below.

The Free soon became Victoria's most popular outdoor swimming site and the hub for both fun and serious competition. Adjacent waters were home to annual long-distance swims from town and even relay races with visiting world champions.



In 1919 one aquatic club leased private land east of the Free. There at Aaron Point - popularly known as Curtis Point - they built a log-enclosed swimming tank for water-polo matches and a series of diving towers that rose 100 feet above the shallow water. Demolition of the highest tower followed a tragic dive in August 1922.

Saanich purchased Gorge Park from the City of Victoria in December 1966. By then the Free had long-since burnt to the waterline and other waterway pleasures of a simpler time had faded into warm memory.

City Parkland Turned Over To Saanich

By A. H. MURPHY
City Hall Reporter

The first major transfer of city-owned parkland to Saanich took place at Gorge Park Wednesday when Mayor Hugh Stephen turned over approximately 11 acres to Reeve Hugh Curtis.

At the same time the reeve turned over cheques worth \$34,830 to the mayor. The ultimate objective of turning parkland over to the municipality in which it is located.