

A CANNERY'S REVIVAL

JUSTINE CRAWFORD AND MARK BELL

We decided to get out of Vancouver because of a dog fight.

Our dog won a fight with a new neighbor's dog. He unleashed the dog police on us, stalked us at trailheads, and tried to put our dog down. We realized, "It's not the dog. It's us; we need more space."

So we got our very first Visa card and chartered a floatplane from Campbell River to look at acreages listed for sale. Most turned out to be old cut blocks with nary a conifer left. Starting at \$600,000, you could get a sea of alder, a rusty excavator, and fish farms as neighbors. The first thing we thought was, "Going to have to learn to fly a plane. Groceries are a day away by boat to Campbell River." But it wasn't a lack of stores or scenery that was a problem; it was a lack of purpose. There are many lovely spots on the Central Coast, but we're not artists or writers or anything. We needed something that put us to work.

Landing in Prince Rupert in late March 2006, we found a land of opportunity. After the incredibly pure air, the first thing we noticed when we came here is there are many things one can do. Over breakfast one morning, we saw Cassiar Cannery listed in a real estate paper. It had a photo of Cassiar's iconic five houses lined up and looking neat. After driving around Rupert for a day and a half looking at other properties, we finally convinced the realtor to take us to Cassiar, about thirty minutes from town. It took fifteen seconds on site and we were hooked. We were running around like kids at recess. We saw the many ways Cassiar would sustain us.

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We returned to Vancouver, packed up, and officially moved August 2, 2006. Holy cow, what a place! What a mess! It scared off people who clean sites for a living. The whole thing—the actual site—was just a disaster. When Cassiar stopped production in 1983, it entered into twenty years of neglect.

When we first arrived, a lot of people thought we were joking. We slept in a house without power, cooked in the house next door, and had to shower in another. The houses were gross. It was so bad we almost put our tent up inside the living room but settled by sleeping on it rather than in it.

All of our buildings were crammed full of junk, like our freezer building—we couldn't be in there for longer than half an hour at a time because the air was foul with rust and dust and pigeon poop. But the mess didn't intimidate us. We knew it was cosmetic and something we could blow through with chainsaws, trucks, and some energy. It was just exciting. And now we laugh when people use the "R" word about us... "Resort!"

Our first project was to clear the docks. It took us eight or nine months and we would just get up and do it all the time. It was just the two of us and a little help, mostly from family.

When we bought Cassiar it was supposed to be vacant at possession. However, the non-caretaking caretakers refused to leave and holed themselves up in a large, non-floating floathome on the marine grid. It had a nice big lodge on top of a wooden barge. But it was stuck in the mud, and they weren't leaving. They would drink Rum and Cokes and watch through the window of the lodge as we struggled to move huge

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beams around. The only way to get them to leave was to fix the barge so it was legally safe, because you cannot push somebody's boat in the water if it doesn't float.

Mark corked the 200-ton barge by himself, in the mud. We got it floating and the tugs came up and towed them away and everything was totally safe and sound and those guys were still on it! It was a lot of work trying to get rid of them, but Justine's family owns a bar and she's used to eyeballing ruffians!

Some of the guys that knew how much work went into the barge and the dock clean up put us onto a project on a forty-six-foot vessel called the Eros owned by Jade Miner Steve, a well-known character in Northern BC. Steve wanted a cabin extension on a beautiful wooden troller. We had to bid on it. Mark made a quote that was way wrong but we stuck with the quote and worked for \$4 an hour and it turned out first class. Steve is pretty social, so lots of people looked at the cabin extension. Poseidon Marine, our boatshop, got busy from there—but no more quotes!

We have short-term and long-term plans. We have to phase everything in because we have bills to pay. We're self-funded, so we only go as far and fast as our bank account allows—and it never keeps up. Poseidon Marine has paid most of the bills and now we're bringing on two restored, furnished guesthouses. We've expanded into home renovations, working on the construction side in addition to boat repair and restoration.

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In the next phases, we will be developing and expanding our tourism business with additional guesthouses as they are restored. These houses are the former cannery manager houses and are all charming and very well built. In September 2010, Cassiar Cannery's Guest Houses received Approved Accommodation status from Tourism BC. That allows us to advertise and market through Tourism Prince Rupert and Tourism BC. We'll put a little bistro into the clubhouse building; we'd like to find someone who can help us do that so we don't have to go make sandwiches and then go mow the lawn!

We would like to put in greenhouses for a retail plant nursery and for growing food. That's Justine's obsession—plants—so we've allocated about fifteen acres as a greenbelt and agricultural belt on the Diaper Pile. We call it that because when we arrived at Cassiar there was a huge mound of diapers left there. We've planted our first three fruit trees for a little orchard. Our friends at Inverness Cannery want us to take a couple llamas, which we would be lovely once we build a spot for them. Llama manure is great for gardeners, definitely better than diapers.

Cassiar's next primary industry is a premium, sustainable drinking-water business. Salmon processing used large quantities of water; it's a big system of several creeks fed by rain and meltwater. Instead of packaging fish, Cassiar is going to package water. It relies on everything being clean and pristine, which is good for fish and wildlife. It will be good for tourism, and we hope it will provide an enduring, high-value industry for our area.

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We would like Cassiar Cannery to be a model of sustainable development in the conservation economy. We'd really like to demonstrate how you can take a place like this, so heavily dependent on a single resource, build on what it was, and evolve it to what it can be. Diversification is key. That way, if something goes sideways, everything doesn't collapse, it's just one component. One reason why Cassiar Cannery is the longest consecutively operated cannery of all the canneries on the West Coast is because it can adapt. It has so many different characteristics; it can do so many different things.

We think of Cassiar Cannery as more than a site. It is essentially a small town. At its peak there were 1,000 people that lived here with up to 600 workers. Cassiar Cannery wants to go back to work. Once Cassiar gets fresh paint and new wood, it will be one of the prettiest little spots around with flowers and gardens and a bit of business.

Canneries are such a huge part of our short-term history in BC, at least the last one hundred years. We still get visitors from all over the world who remember the place as an operating cannery or who worked here. This place sure perks up when there are a lot of people around. We're trying to get everybody's pictures and record their favorite memories, which are all really funny and have nothing to do with how many cans of salmon there were. We remember hearing: ten-cent chocolate bars in the store, the rope swings, all the kids playing kick the can! Candy from the train, walking to Rupert for a beer... everybody's piece of the puzzle. Cassiar has an enormous social fabric and it was also just really fun for people.

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People who used to work here are fairly bittersweet when they return. The bulk of the canning buildings are gone from the dock and the bunkhouses were destroyed prior to our stewardship, so it's different than what they remember. But they are always really happy it's being cared for. With the collapse of the BC fishing industry, Cassiar can't continue as a full-time fish processor. Realities change. It's time for re-invention and sometimes you have to be bold.

In the meantime, we've gotten to do lots of fun things. We've driven tugboats, met lots of interesting people from all over, and experienced numerous adventures. Every season we try to go fishing on a gillnetter during a commercial opening so Cassiar is still represented out there. Going fishing really helped us understand what Cassiar was all about—why it is here and how it functioned. The scene is fantastic: the parade of boats buzzing around the mother ship, the packer off-loading ice and the gillnetters off-loading their fish, all the extra nets, the boats tying up at high tide, the elders with their sons, all talking about who's getting what where, who scooped whose spot, gossiping...drama, drama, drama!

On the day of the very first 2010 spring salmon opening, Cassiar Cannery was amped. The drums were going on the boats, you could hear the hydraulics. We were out of bed about 6 a.m. and on the end of the dock and the whole place was vibrating like it wanted to go back to work. It really does...it wants to go back to work.

That energy is why we have really high hopes for this region. As we keep working through it, we see a really positive future for us, and we're glad that our region is lobbying against projects that offer short-term

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construction jobs but limited long-term employment. Even though there's been a little bit of strife between the various different areas, it's nice that everyone's uniting pretty solidly against some prospective projects, saying "no, we don't want this." But now the question is to say what do we want? Because you can't just say no. Alternatives need to be presented. Something has to happen. The North needs to get out of its boom and bust cycle with strategized long-term economic planning for the benefit of Northern residents.

It would be great to go back to when everything you needed was produced in the region. You had a candlestick maker, the baker, the food was produced here, and everybody had a job to do, something to produce. You weren't bringing in materials from so far away, like food from New Zealand or plywood made from Russian trees, milled in China and purchased in Prince Rupert.

One thing we could do is more tertiary manufacturing. It would be good for Canada to get more value out of all its resources rather than shipping everything out in primary form. For instance, right now we have so many logs that are going out to all of Asia—China, Korea, Japan. It's great that our forestry sector is picking up again, but it would be lovely if we could turn the raw wood into some sort of manufactured product rather than shipping it out. We're making furniture from salvaged wood. We started making furniture because we needed it for our houses. A lot of the trees in the river haven't been floating in the water that long. It's not like the driftwood you see on the beaches. The trees usually fall somewhere in the Skeena watershed, and we bolt out and grab them as they float by. Quite often, they have a big root ball on it, so they're pretty fresh trees.

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We were schooled more by log salvaging than anything in fifteen years. Mother Nature really puts you in your place—you are powerless in the force of a huge current, trying to drag a huge tree with limbs and a root ball and you can't go anywhere. It was humbling—definitely a lot of humbling experiences since we've been here. But it's rewarding to use something from start to finish, that's why we like making furniture with the milled lumber, tables with the root balls, and use the rest of the wood for heat or fire starter.

There is beautiful wood coming down the river. Log salvage is really fun, and we're going to try to fix this place without cutting one tree down. It actually makes Justine feel nauseous to cut trees down. In October 2010, we bought a sawmill for Cassiar to mill our salvaged cedar and spruce logs. Getting the mill is crucial to our restoration. Now we can build all the boardwalks again; we can get the houses stable, lifted, and painted; we can build greenhouses, restore our buildings, and repair our five-acre dock and the floats. We will keep aside the premium cedar for furniture. Actually, we read somewhere that one cannot have a town without a sawmill, so Cassiar is back on track following that philosophy.

Cassiar Cannery now hosts a fledgling Science and Research Program with local researchers and the University of Northern British Columbia. For the local scientists, we provide discounted accommodation and a base for them to execute their studies as well as indoor "lab" space. To date, we have participated in bird studies and a rapid assessment of Skeena estuary forage fish. We are now part of the curriculum with UNBC—biannually, students come to continue Dr. Darwyn Coxson's study of the plant life within the foreshore saltmarshes of the Skeena

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estuary. We have permanent markers established for the students and Dr. Coxson to monitor species diversity, density, and changes within our rare and unique ecosystem.

Cassiar Cannery is a great location for a field station—being located in an estuary. We're so geographically spread out in Northern BC but the rivers and the Pacific Ocean connects us all. Ali Howard swam from the headwaters of the Skeena to the ocean—610 km in freezing cold water—and had the same feeling as she was coming down that we have here: there's some funny things about this place. It's easy to die; you have serious consequences and you have to stay on your toes. We've used up maybe one or two of our nine lives! But, somehow, you know that, if treated right, it's going to take care of you.

Every day we try to do something and keep moving forward because we're committed to building something that's safe and sustainable for Cassiar, for the two of us, for people in the Skeena and the region. We're trying hard to make sure that we're living towards our long-term goal. Oftentimes, we still find ourselves driving down the road in the middle of the night wondering, "How did we end up out here at the mouth of the Skeena?" But, here we are. You just want to hang in there, be a part of the timelessness of this place.

The tide comes in, the tide goes out, and there were people sitting at a table in this house one hundred years ago looking at the same thing – probably talking about Cassiar Cannery and the Skeena River. Pretty neat. We were sort of the forgotten ones. Cassiar had a very dark cloud over its head for the longest time. But people are getting tuned in that something is happening here at the end of the road. ○