

Gorge Bridge

THE GEOGRAPHIC CENTRE OF THE GORGE WATERWAY

OVER THE CENTURIES many people have enjoyed the beauty and tranquility of the Gorge Waterway. Ancestors of the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations relied on the waterway, referred to as “Camosack,” for hunting, fishing and travel. Settlers to the region enjoyed it in similar ways, but also embraced it for leisure activities such as summer swimming and ice skating.

Below:
Queen's Birthday Regatta, 1908.
Courtesy of Dennis Minaker.



The Gorge Waterway showing the crossing at The Gorge - 1893
M.W. Waitt & Co. Map of Victoria, British Columbia Showing Subdivisions on Official Record
Courtesy of University of Victoria Map Collection.

The Bridge

The Gorge Bridge crosses “the Gorge”, the narrowest section of the 10-kilometre-long Gorge Waterway. The Gorge was the geographical centre of many attractions and activities found along the Gorge Waterway during its historical heyday from 1880 to 1930 – a time when the waterway was renowned as one of Victoria’s main scenic attractions.

“The spot shown is a very favourite one with the dwellers in Victoria for picnics and similar junketing. It lies about two miles from the capital, on the Victoria Arm. The width of the stream at the point is only thirty feet. Through the narrow aperture, the water rushes with extreme violence. At times the tide is so strong as to render boating not only difficult but absolutely dangerous, venturesome people sometimes paying with their lives for the foolhardiness in braving the angry torrent.”

Canadian Illustrated News, April 5, 1873



Above:
This photo shows the rushing water where the Camosack stone was blasted away in June 1960. This area is also referred to as the rapids of the Concordia Arm, Gorge Rapids, and the reversing falls. Note in the photo, the boardwalk was removed during the era of this bridge – date unknown.
Courtesy of Saanich Archives, 1984-003-045.

Right:
Traditional war canoe race circa 1912 held annually from 1870-1950 at the Queen’s Birthday Regatta.
Courtesy of Esquimalt Archives, 016-04-020a.

To the East

To the east of the bridge there once were posh waterside mansions, bathhouse facilities for swimming and competition, the finish line for the Three Mile Swim, and dangerous high-diving towers.

Steam-powered launches once cruised up the waterway from Victoria carrying tourists to view the “reversing falls”, visit Esquimalt’s Gorge Amusement Park, and enjoy the two waterside taverns (the Victoria Gardens Resort and the Gorge Hotel). A key event, held almost annually for close to a century, was the legendary Queen’s Birthday Regatta at which hundreds of spectators gathered around the large basin below the Gorge Narrows to enjoy an afternoon of boat races and family picnics. The highest participation in the regatta was between 1890 and 1905. It was just one of the events held in celebration of Queen Victoria’s birthday in May.

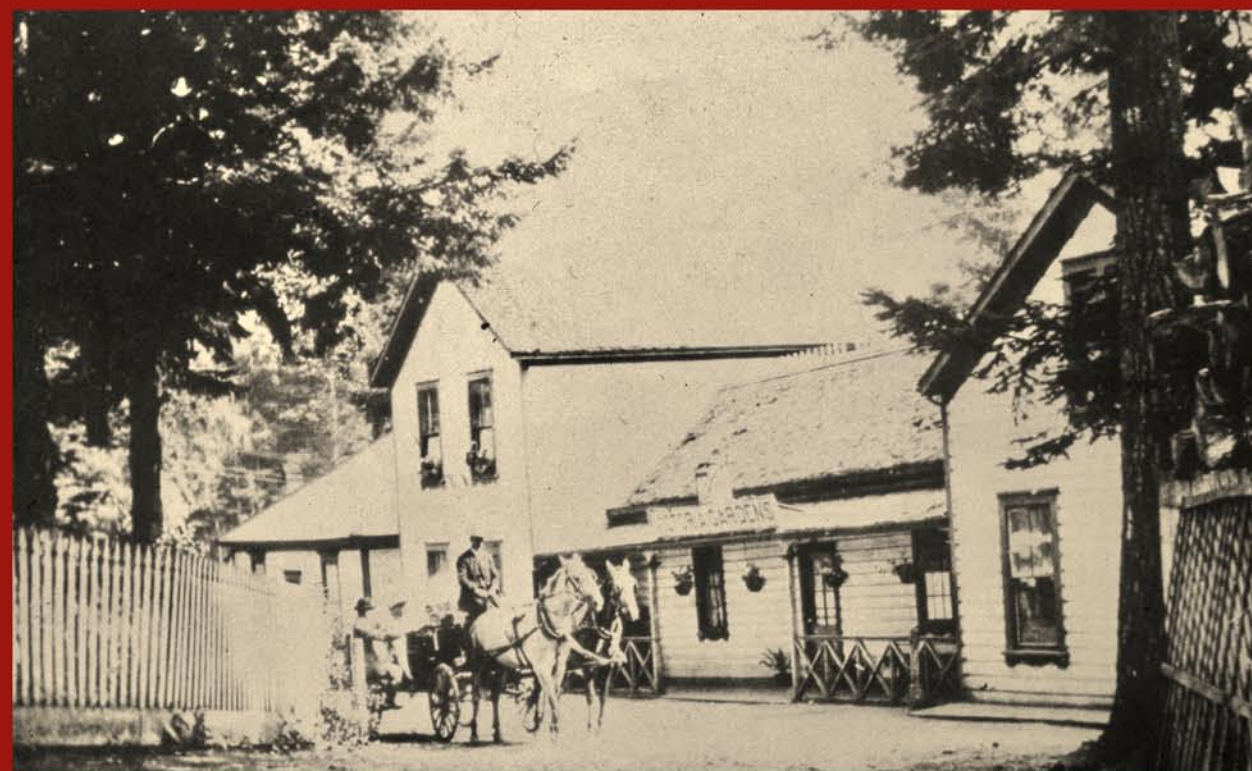
“Hundreds of spectators crowded onto the Gorge Bridge, which served as a grandstand for viewing the races”



Indian Canoes racing on Victoria Day at the Gorge, Victoria, B.C.

To the West

To the west of the bridge, day-trippers from town enjoyed the Gorge Amusement Park (now Esquimalt Gorge Park) that opened in 1905 with roller coaster rides, outdoor dances, variety shows and the ever-popular Japanese Tea Garden. Summer campers found available sites further on where couples took romantic “canoodles” along the wooded shores of Portage Inlet. In 1908 the sternwheeler Craigflower, drawing only six inches of water, boated through the narrows at high tide for tourist cruises beyond the Gorge Bridge.



Victoria Gardens Resort (intersection of Gorge and Tillicum), circa 1900.
Courtesy of Dennis Minaker.



Sailors gather at the Gorge Hotel (in location of Gorge Point Pub), circa 1916.
Courtesy of Esquimalt Archives V992-34-074.

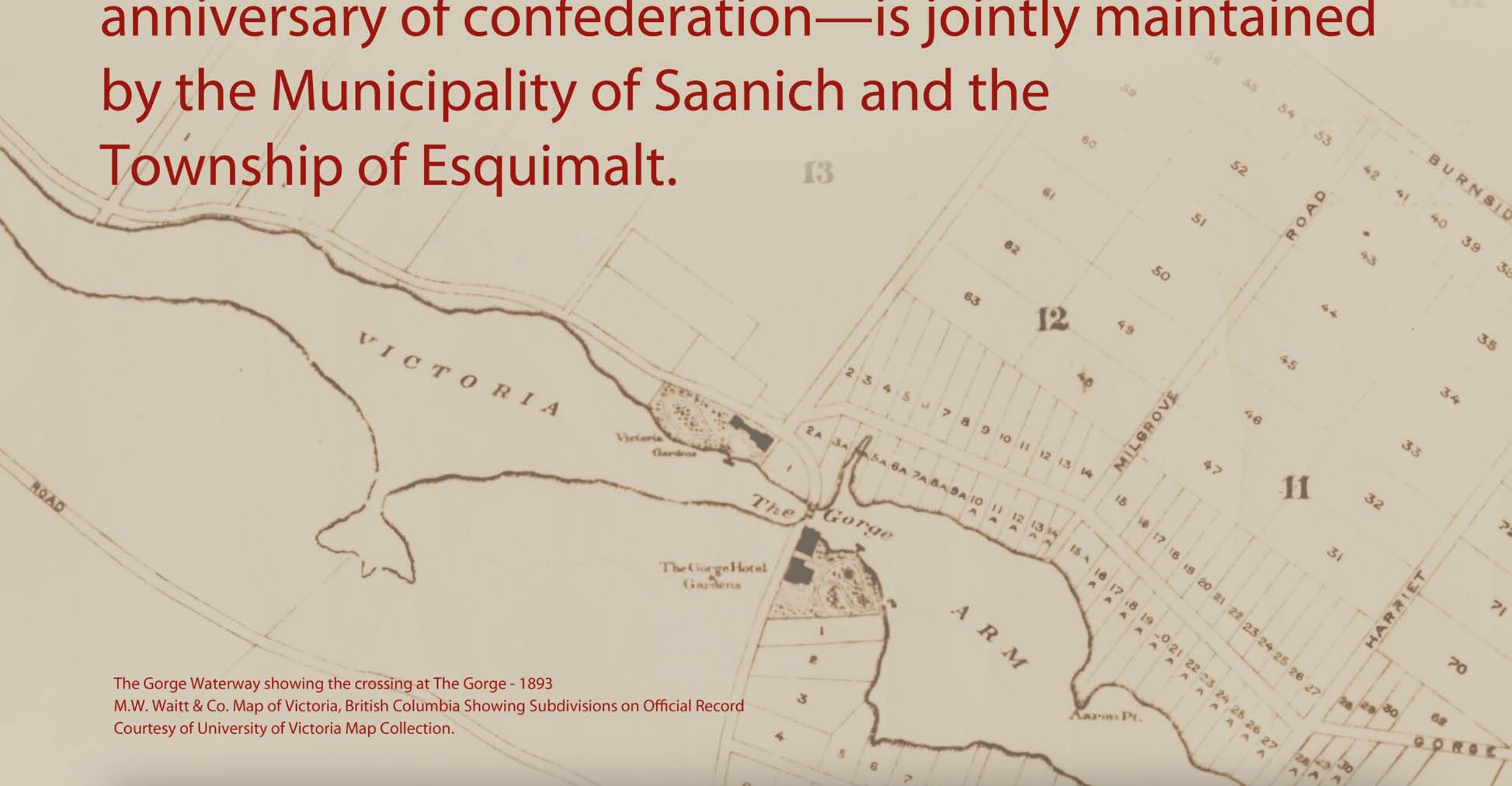
Below:
Local swimming star Audrey Griffin with friend and family at the conclusion of the Three Mile Swim.
“Other swimmers crowd the distant Free Bathing House located at the City Gorge Park (now Saanich Gorge Park).” This was Victoria’s most popular outdoor swimming site for many decades.



Gorge Bridge

A HISTORY OF TRANSFORMATION

SINCE THE FIRST BRIDGE WAS BUILT, the Gorge Bridge has undergone seven distinct transformations. The current bridge—completed in 1967, the year Canada celebrated its 100th anniversary of confederation—is jointly maintained by the Municipality of Saanich and the Township of Esquimalt.



The Gorge Waterway showing the crossing at The Gorge - 1893
M.W. Waite & Co. Map of Victoria, British Columbia Showing Subdivisions on Official Record
Courtesy of University of Victoria Map Collection.

Circa 1850 to 1867

This simple bridge lasted nearly 20 years.

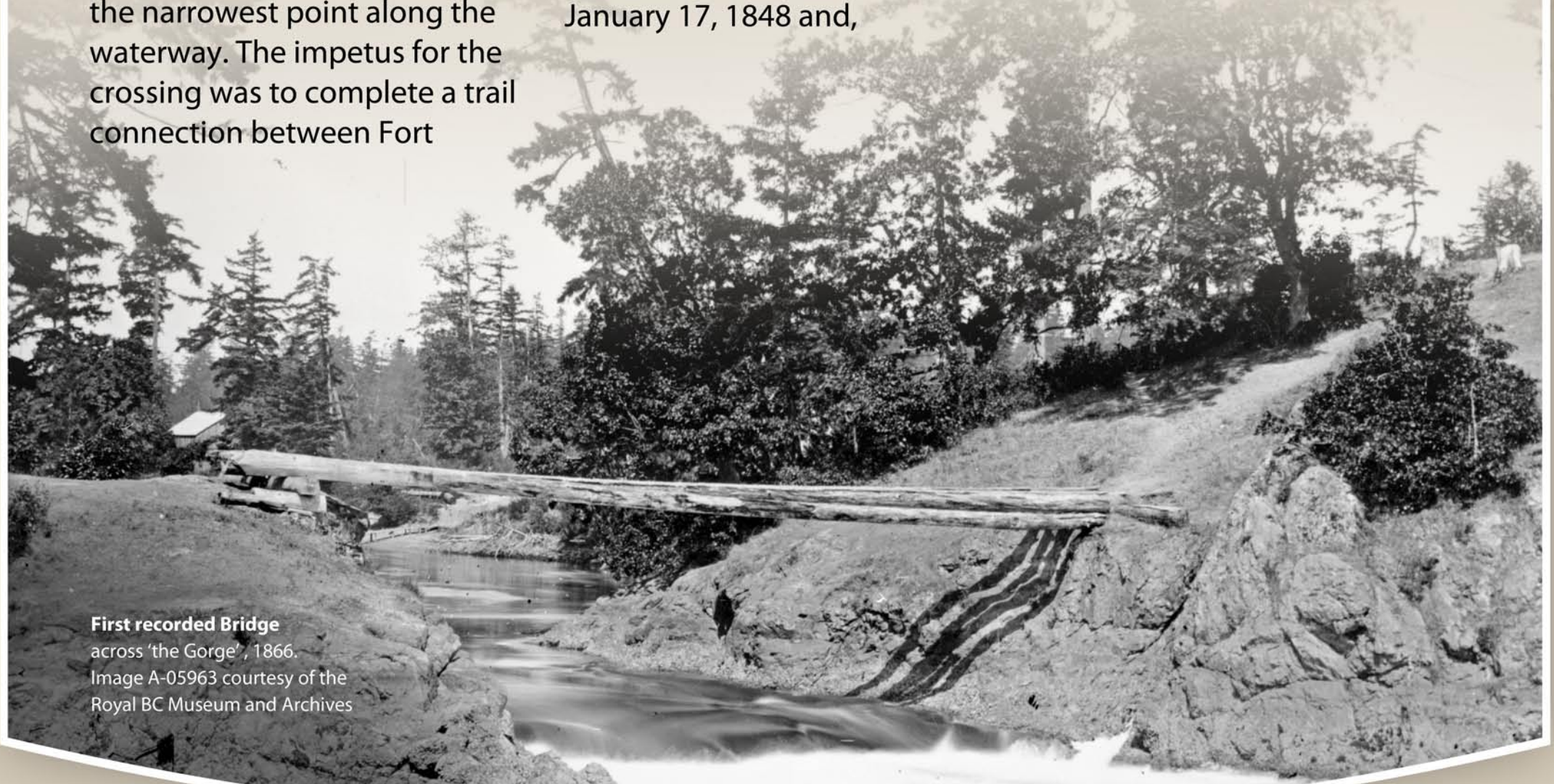
Fort Victoria's Clerk - Roderick Finlayson was the first colonist to orchestrate the building of a bridge to cross the Gorge Waterway. He accomplished this by laying down logs across the narrowest point along the waterway. The impetus for the crossing was to complete a trail connection between Fort

Victoria and the Company's sawmill on Esquimalt Harbour.

Finlayson noted in the Hudson's Bay Fort Victoria Journal that he and seventeen others, including members of the local First Nations, started work on the new trail on January 17, 1848 and,

Feb 2, 1848:

"The bridge across Concordia arm is now completed. I rode across it this morning on horseback..."



First recorded Bridge across 'the Gorge', 1866.
Image A-05963 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives

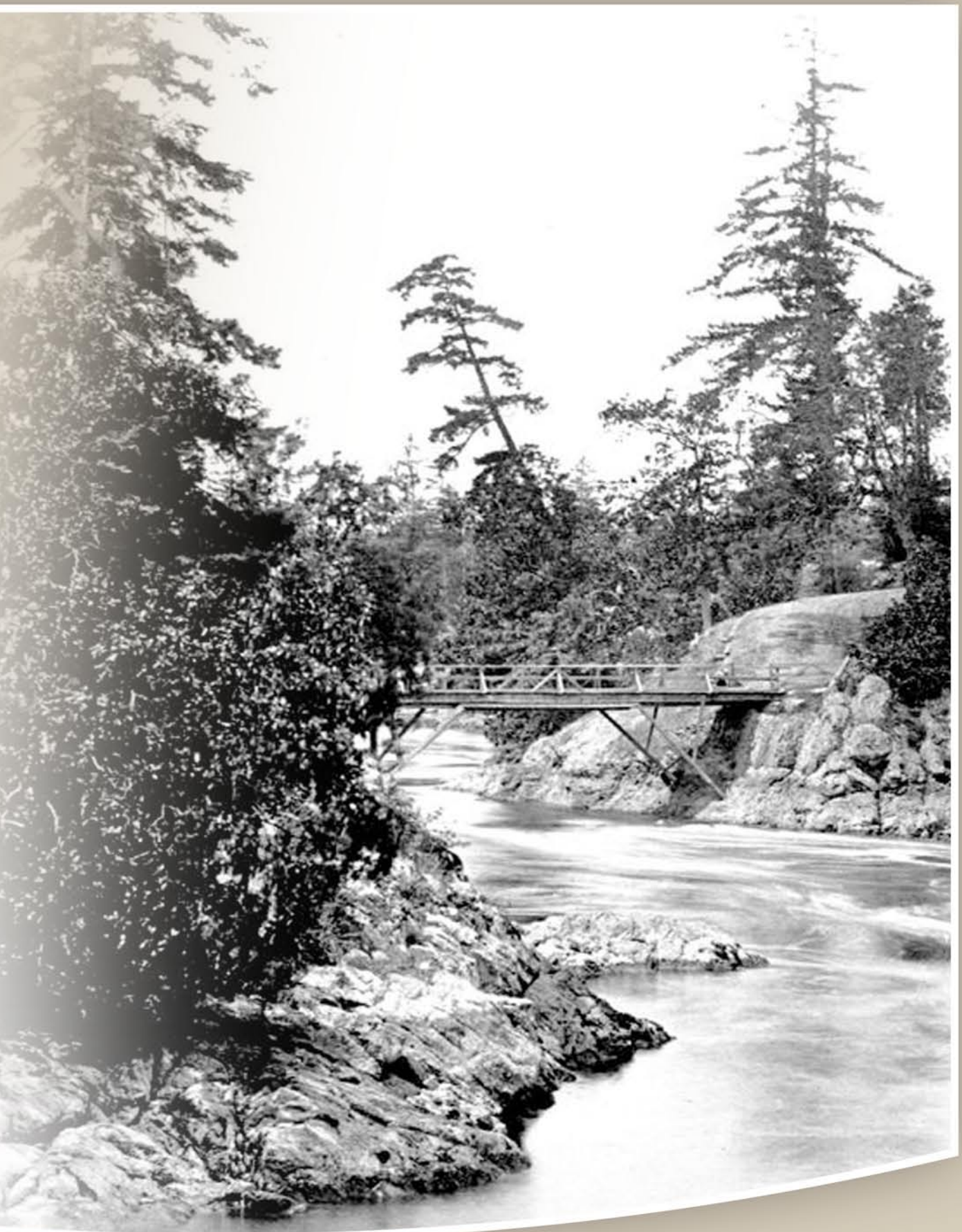
1867 to 1872

The logs of the original bridge were rotting, so a **second bridge** was built using diagonal trusses.

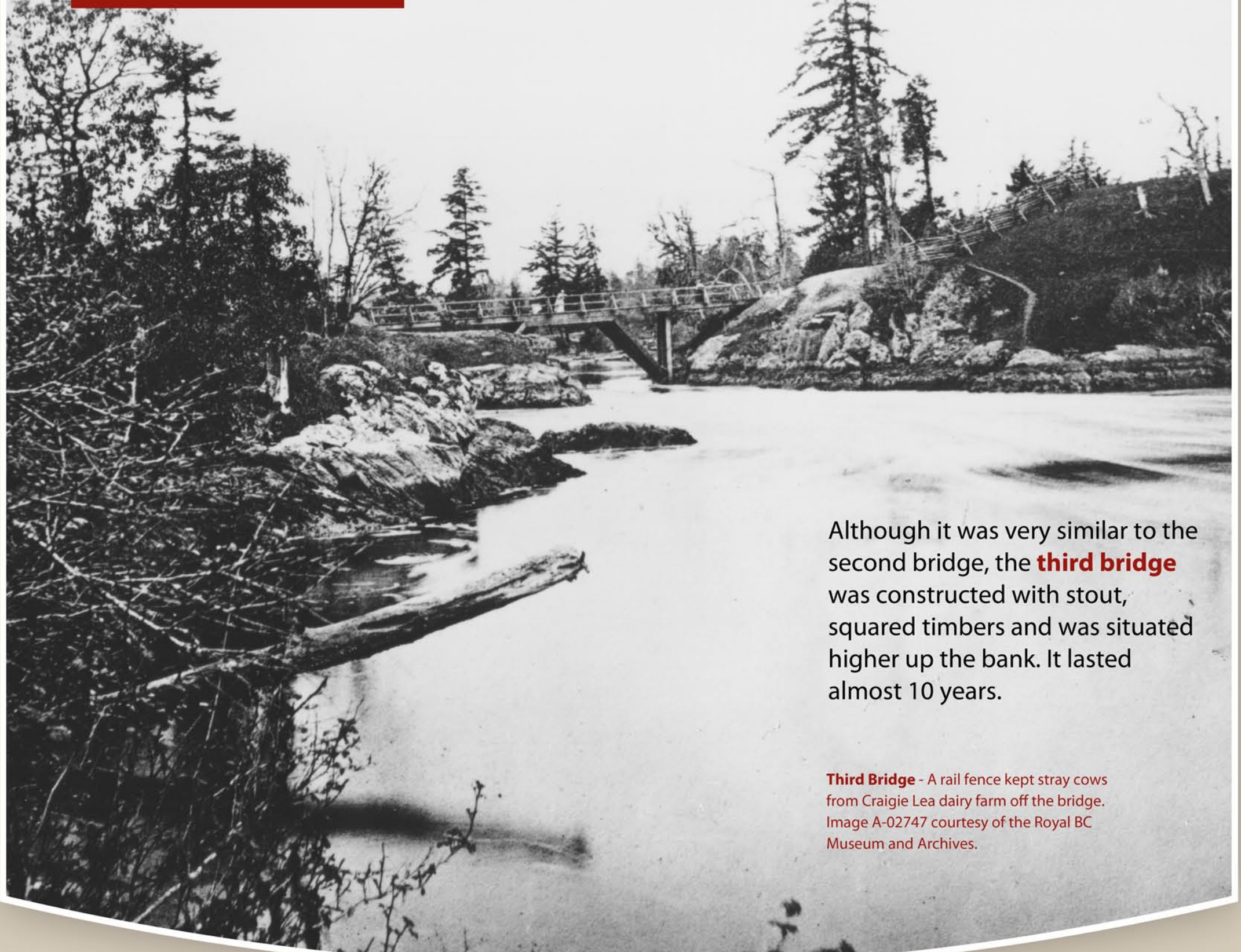
This second bridge was completed just hours before the opening race of the Queen's Birthday Regatta, held for the first time in 1867. This was a pivotal point when the bridge began to be used as a way to cross the Gorge and as the ultimate viewing point for the regatta's many spectators.

This bridge lasted only five years.

Second bridge at Gorge Narrows, circa 1870.
Image A-02744 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.



1872 to 1882



Although it was very similar to the second bridge, the **third bridge** was constructed with stout, squared timbers and was situated higher up the bank. It lasted almost 10 years.

Third Bridge - A rail fence kept stray cows from Craigie Lea dairy farm off the bridge.
Image A-02747 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.



Gorge Bridge

A HISTORY OF TRANSFORMATION

1882 to 1899

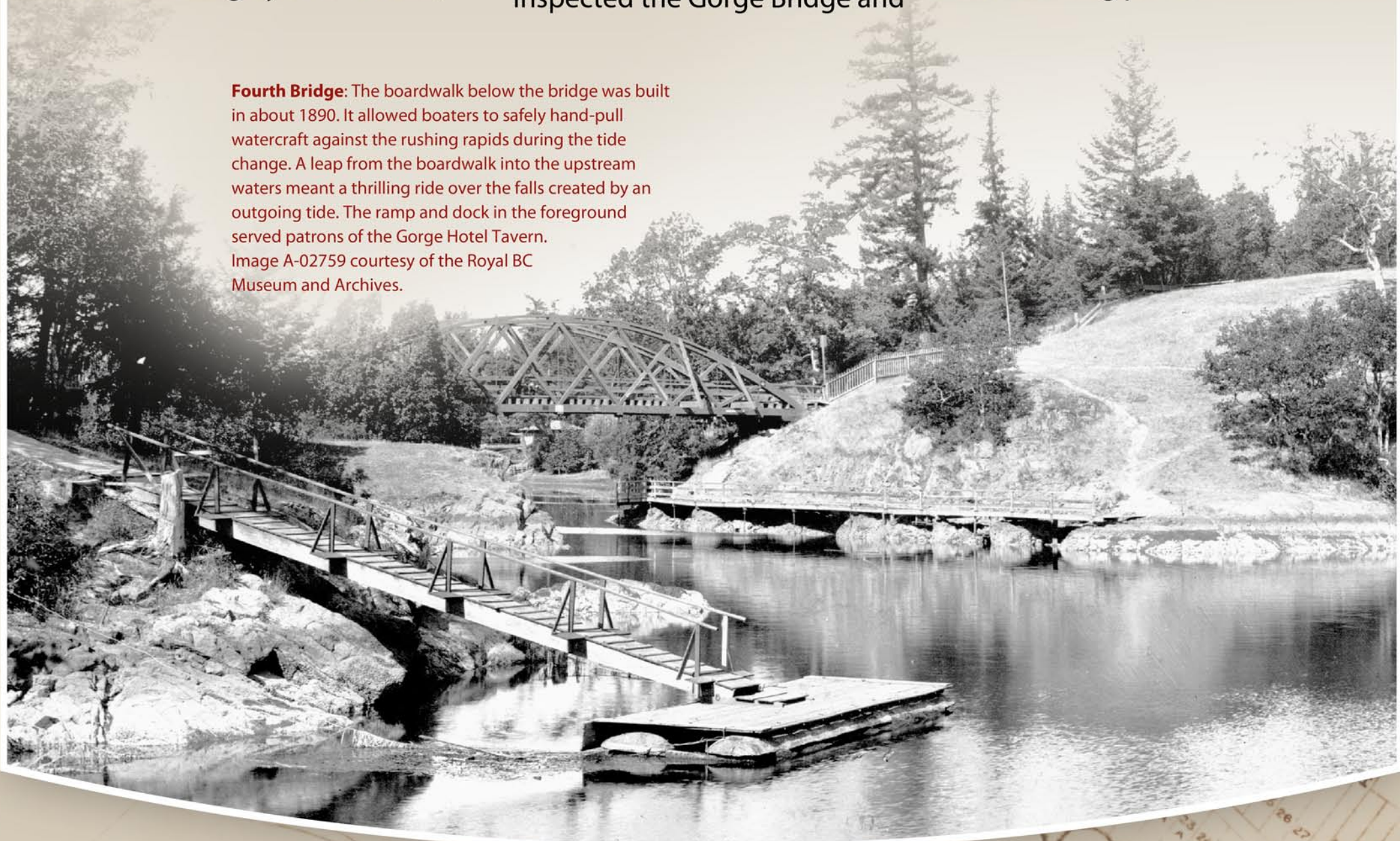
Daniel Adams, a resident of the Gorge Road neighbourhood, was contracted to build the **fourth bridge**. Designed with a bow-string span measuring 110 feet long by 13 feet wide,

the bridge, completed in November 1882, remained in use for 17 years.

After the collapse of the Point Ellice Bridge in 1886, officials inspected the Gorge Bridge and

determined that “until necessary repairs were completed, carriage operators would be fined for driving their horses over the bridge faster than a walking pace”.

Fourth Bridge: The boardwalk below the bridge was built in about 1890. It allowed boaters to safely hand-pull watercraft against the rushing rapids during the tide change. A leap from the boardwalk into the upstream waters meant a thrilling ride over the falls created by an outgoing tide. The ramp and dock in the foreground served patrons of the Gorge Hotel Tavern. Image A-02759 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.



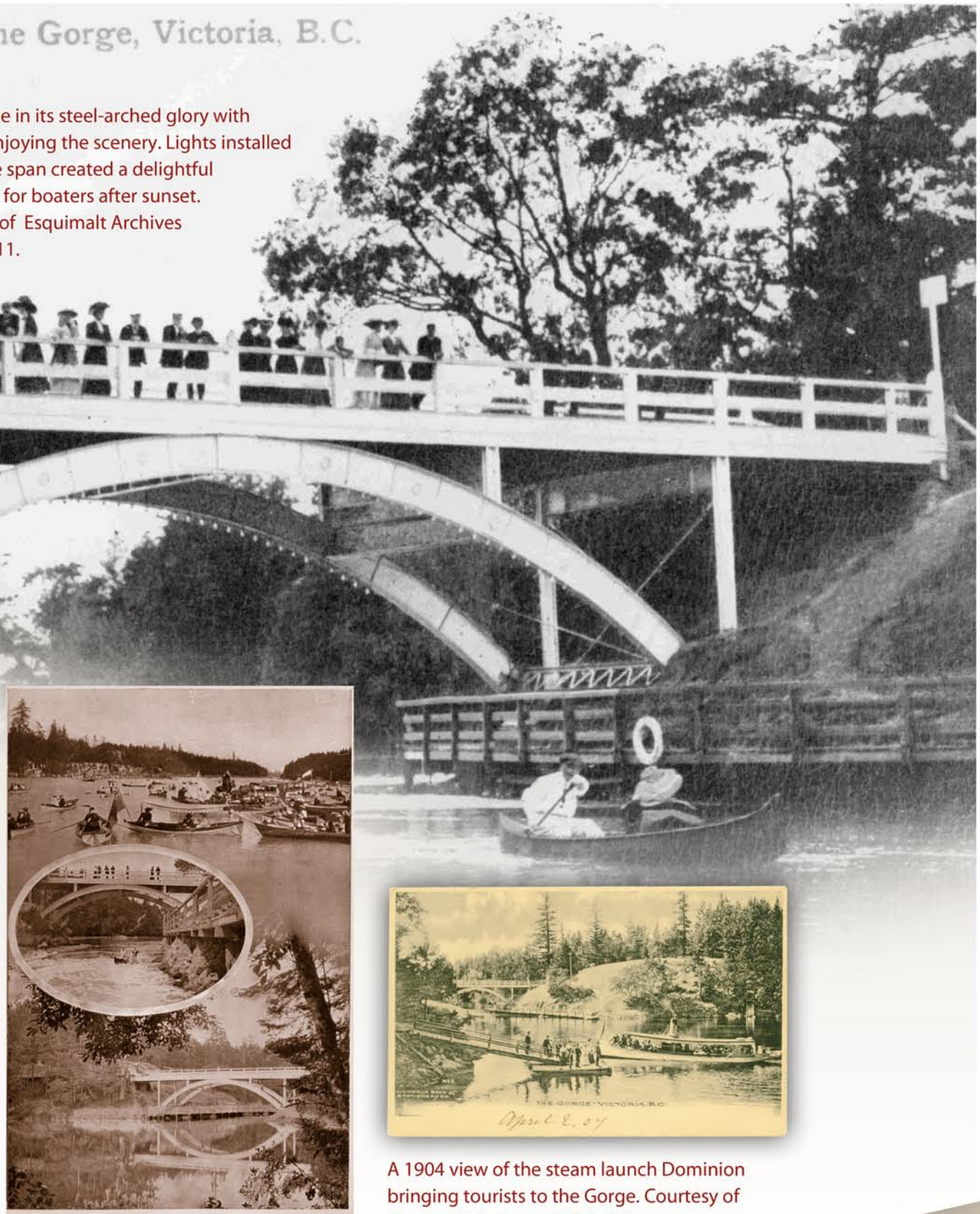
1899 to 1933

The Gorge, Victoria, B.C.

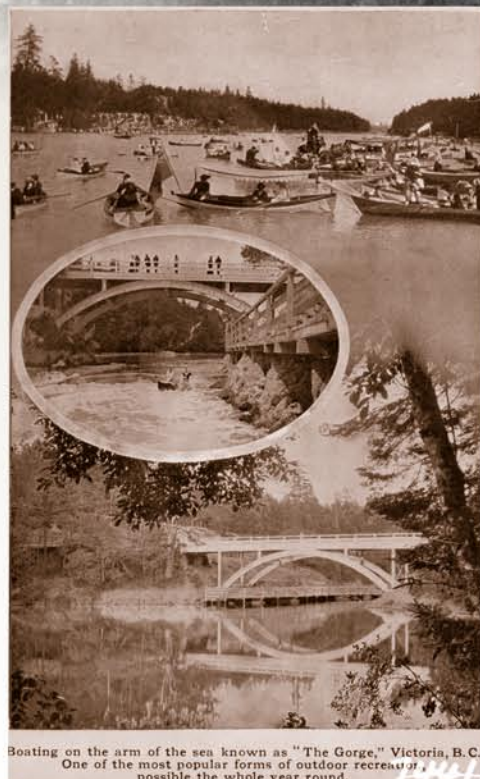
The bridge in its steel-arched glory with visitors enjoying the scenery. Lights installed under the span created a delightful landmark for boaters after sunset. Courtesy of Esquimalt Archives V986-16-11.

To reduce the steep approach, the **fifth bridge** was built at a greater height and was made five feet wider.

The bridge officially opened July 6, 1899, and remained in service for 34 years.



Right: Image D-08233 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.



A 1904 view of the steam launch Dominion bringing tourists to the Gorge. Courtesy of Esquimalt Archives 984-4-001.

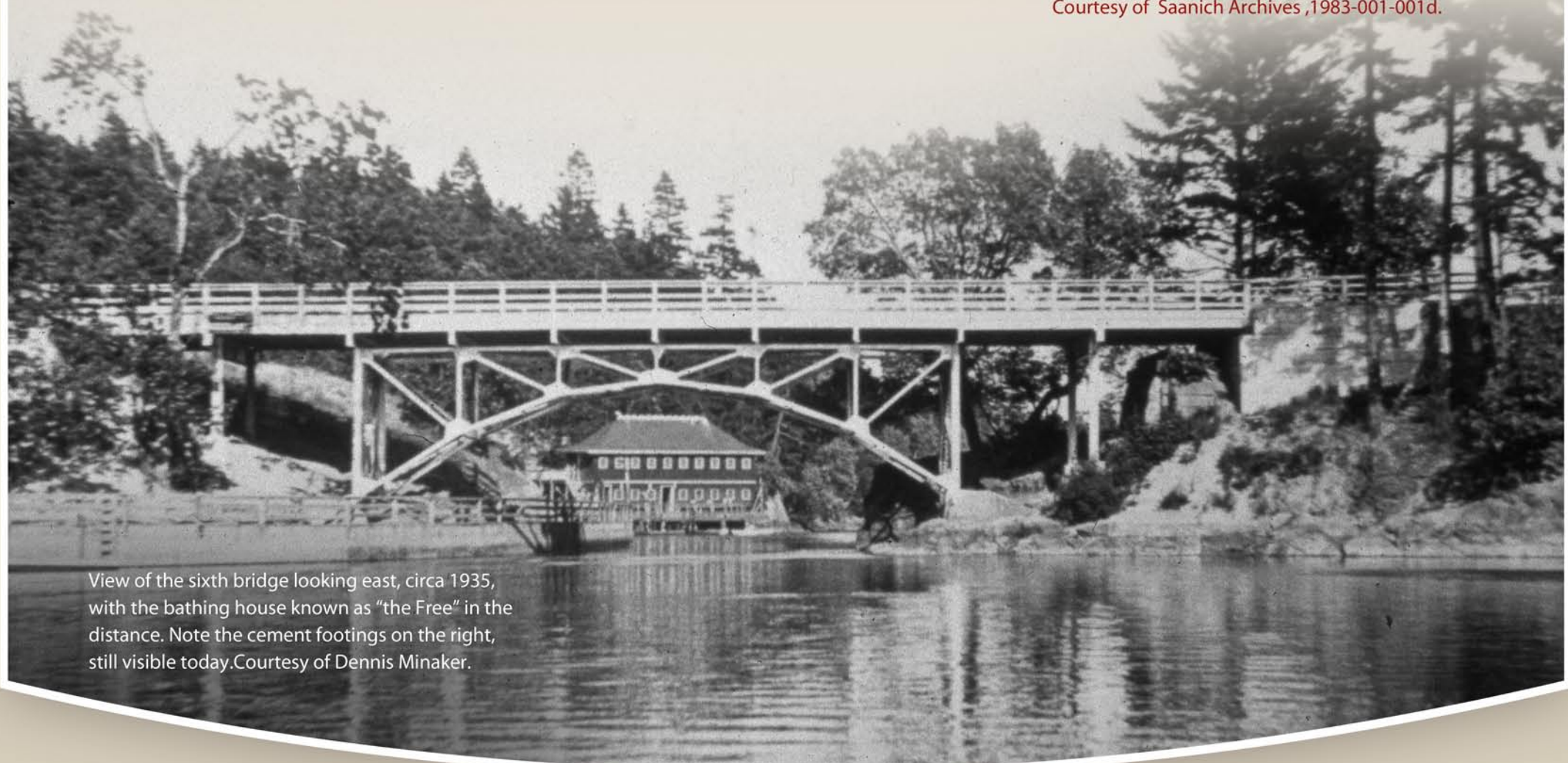
1933 to 1966

The **sixth bridge**, with its lighter, steel-framed structure, was completed in the Fall of 1933 and remained in use for 33 years.

During this period, the popularity of the Gorge Waterway waned due to increasing pollution and the wide use of the motorcar. Private vehicles offered easy access to other recreational opportunities on the island.



In honour of the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, the Gorge Bridge was decorated with a commemorative arch prepared by the District of Saanich. Courtesy of Saanich Archives ,1983-001-001d.



View of the bathing house looking east, circa 1935, with the bathing house known as “the Free” in the distance. Note the cement footings on the right, still visible today. Courtesy of Dennis Minaker.

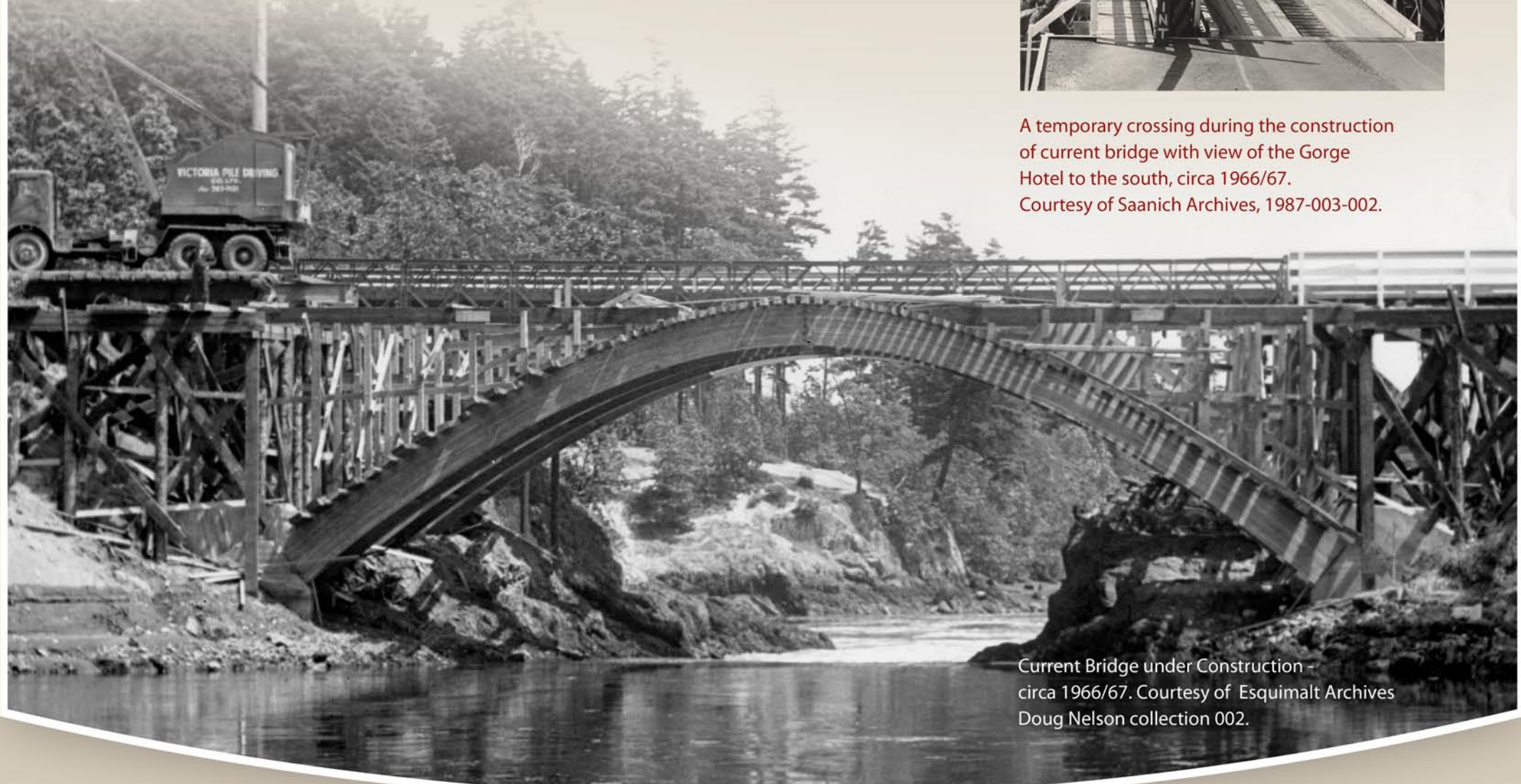
1967

The **current bridge** built with reinforced concrete is the largest and the longest bridge at 38 feet wide with a sidewalk on each side. Some of the footings from earlier bridges are still visible. From the Esquimalt side, cement footings from the original boardwalk can be seen.

As part of Tillicum Road, the Gorge Bridge is often mistakenly referred to as the Tillicum Bridge. 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of this bridge.



A temporary crossing during the construction of current bridge with view of the Gorge Hotel to the south, circa 1966/67. Courtesy of Saanich Archives, 1987-003-002.



Current Bridge under Construction - circa 1966/67. Courtesy of Esquimalt Archives Doug Nelson collection 002.



Excerpts from *The Gorge of Summers Gone*, by Dennis Minaker

Thank you to Richard M.L. Bouchard, Gorge-Tillicum community member for his inspiration for this sign.

Saanich Parks 250-475-5522 saanich.ca/parks

Concept and design: Lime Design Inc 2017