

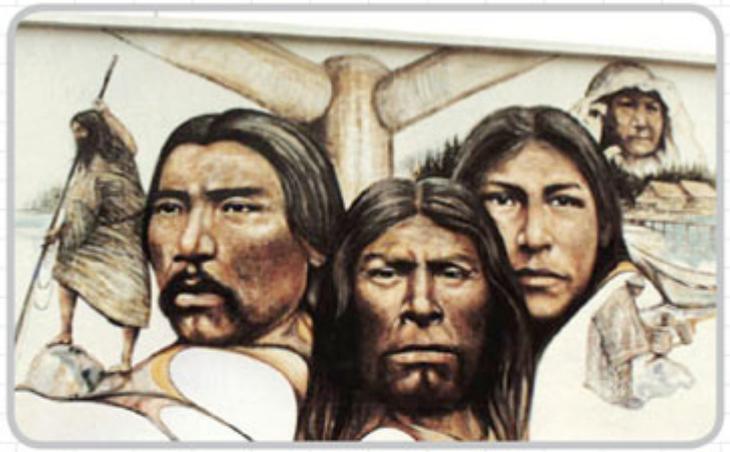
The town that (almost) died

Chemainus is a small Canadian town, on Vancouver Island's eastern shore. It is snuggled in between the ocean and a mountain range. Like many resource-based communities that are reliant on a single major employer, its long-term future used to be tied to the fluctuating successes of both employer and environmental resources—trees. Early Chemainus represented the typical mill town whose very existence was a result of the mill itself. While the mill was successful, the town thrived.

The timber industry was not sustainable indefinitely. In 1981, when the Canadian economy was in a recession, falling revenue from resources affected communities large and small. Chemainus, with the impending threat of closure of the town's major employer, was faced with the very real possibility of becoming another ghost mill town. Being off the main highway made it even more vulnerable.

To ease the financial pain, the government introduced a scheme of community initiative grants to assist towns to start revitalisation projects. The Chemainus mayor presented a unique proposal to the community, which then rallied together and became the first community to complete a revitalisation. The project also became a world-famous example of how a small town can create substantial change for survival.

What was the scheme? It was to create giant outdoor wall murals to attract tourists. Walls of shops and buildings became huge historical scenes depicting the town's rich, often harsh past. Mining, fishing and forestry were the original industries that gave work to many people from many nations who had settled in the town in a land that had been the home of



the First Nations* people and their ancestors for generations. The history and lives of the First Nations people became interwoven with the first white settlers in the area.

Other settlers included the Chinese who worked in 'bull gangs' and struggled to move huge timber planks onto the ships in the late 1800s. Later, First Nations people blended their cultures with Scots and Germans looking for riches in the mines and staying to work in the forests and on fishing boats.

When the natural resources failed to provide all the necessities of life, the inventive people of Chemainus envisioned a new future. Their scheme earned Chemainus fame as a memorable tourist venue. Mural painting is not a new concept—it goes back centuries and is prevalent in countries around the world—but as an economic development strategy this small town's mural project was unique, and it set up a standard that many towns across the world followed.

The murals inspired Chemainus to explore its roots, to beautify the town, and to be proud. As a town that once survived through the hands of its labourers, it showed the world its true spirit and determination, and was to achieve fame through the hands of its artists. Chemainus is the little town that refused to die.

*an indigenous people of Canada

Source: British Columbia Travel Guide,
Chemainus Travel and Tourism:
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