

ORE LORE

Arrival of smelter, Japanese internees highlight Greenwood history

February 1901 marked the long-awaited day when the British Columbia Copper Co.'s smelter was blown-in at Greenwood, British Columbia. Originally intended to begin operations on the 15th of the month, the opening ceremony was delayed for a few days when coal needed for the blast furnace failed to arrive from Fernie. Built primarily to treat ore from the Mother Lode mine at Deadwood, the smelter was said by the province to be "one of the most complete and modern to be found in the world today. It is a model plant in every respect on which money has been spent unstintingly, and the machinery installed is the most modern known in engineering practice."

Situated on a 70-acre site on the outskirts of Greenwood—literally within a few minutes walk from the post office—it also enjoyed rail connection with eastern Canada via the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR). Designed for expansion as required, the smelter guaranteed, among other things, to render an ore sample "as pure as mechanical ingenuity has so far been capable of devising."

Within its first month of operation the smelter claimed a world's record for the amount of ore—420 tons—smelted by a single furnace in a 24-hour period. Paul Johnson, the widely respected manager, attributed the feat to the self-fluxing ore, most of which came from the Mother Lode.

The blowing-in of the smelter meant more than an increased payroll for Greenwood residents; it also meant recovery from the mild depression which had seized the town immediately upon the coming of the railway. For years the promise of rail connection had attracted thousands who, convinced that Greenwood would become the commercial capital of the richest copper country in the world, invested heavily in development. For almost 10 years, Greenwood had lived up to expectations; then had come the 20th century, the CPR, and near-ruin for many.

A combination of events conspired to all but halt the speculation fever throughout the region. With a handful of outstanding exceptions, such as the Mother Lode and the Phoenix mines, few of the promising copper properties entered production. The outbreak of the Boer War siphoned off most British investment. Those mines in production were hindered by labor unrest, a widespread smallpox epidemic slowed traffic, and an inflationary spiral (the inevitable camp follower of railway construction) further slowed investment.

These difficulties were all but forgotten when the smelter surpassed every expectation in its first 10 months of operation. In a front-page story, the *Boundary Creek Times* praised manager Johnson for "designing, constructing, and operating the smelter, which produced results that with regard to

quantity of ore treated are phenomenal in the history of copper smelting." In June, the second furnace was blown-in. In addition, the provincial government demonstrated its faith in Greenwood by constructing a C\$15,000 courthouse. The first official occupant was William G. McMynn, chief constable, gold commissioner, mining recorder, and registrar of the supreme and county courts.

A softer financial climate encouraged respectability as the more adventurous sought greener pastures. "Today," Percy Godenrath, editor of the *Times*, noted in June 1905, "Greenwood is not the city of the 'years of plenty,' streets alive with happy-go-lucky prospectors, speculators, and the crowd that follows in the wake of every mining boom. Instead, it strikes the casual visitor as infernally dull, relieved perhaps by the continual toot-toot of passing ore train and the rumble of powder blasts that come up from the earth and echo and re-echo throughout the valley."

"Look deeper, and one learns another story. Speculation has ceased; so too has the merry twinkle of the roulette wheel. More sober methods are in vogue. All down the line—banker, merchant, miner, clerk and even padre—are investing their dollars in 'high grade' prospects and mines."

Further evidence of this change in direction and tempo was the visit, in August, of several prominent Chicago investors, who arrived by private railway car. They expressed satisfaction with the way their mining properties had been developed, and stated that they would be investing on a broader scale.

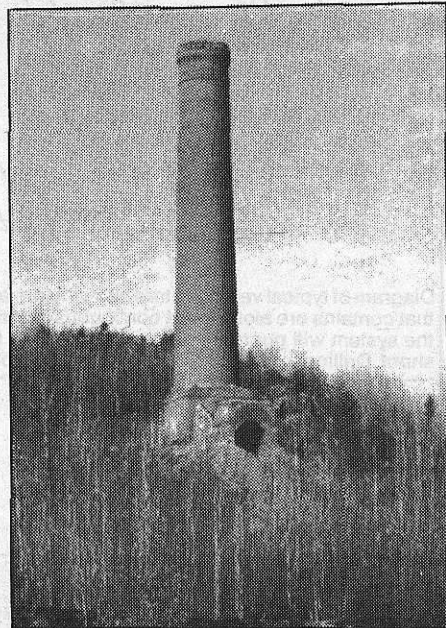
The march toward true respectability was marked in January 1906 by a move to expand the library and add a gymnasium.

By the close of 1907, Greenwood and the Boundary Country had bounced back from the doldrums, district mines having shipped almost 30 million tons of copper ore to American markets. More than 2,000 men earned their livelihoods from mining, 1,200 of whom resided in Greenwood. The average pay of a miner was C\$3.15 per eight-hour shift; how this equates with modern wages can be determined by the fact that, during winter, eggs sold for 75 cents a dozen, apples for C\$2 a box, and chickens for 60-odd cents a dozen.

In 1908 Greenwood residents were intrigued by a grand scheme to link their city with the richest mines of the district by tunnel. Not surprisingly, this mind-boggling idea had originated—18 years before—in the fertile mind of R.A. "Volcanic" Brown, of Copper Mountain fame. Never one to think in less-than-heroic dimensions, Brown proposed that a network of tunnels, in places almost a mile deep, be driven beneath the mountains and valleys to link the leading Boundary Country mines of Greenwood and Phoenix. Undaunted by the immensity of

such an undertaking, Brown blandly promised, "This tunnel would tap more blind ledges (deposits) than would make and equip the tunnel 10 times."

With the return of prosperity came further labor problems. In March the Greenwood Board of Trade unanimously passed the following resolution: "Whereas it has come to our attention through recent developments that we have in our midst those who seek to create dissension between employer and employees, it is hereby resolved that we, the undersigned members of the Greenwood Board of Trade and citizens of Greenwood, while being in hearty sympathy with properly directed organized labor, wish to place ourselves on record as opposed to any further attempt to create such strained relations, and we strongly oppose all efforts of the labor agitator and troublemaker tending toward industrial unrest, and, furthermore, will do our utmost not to harbor such characters in our community."



The flue of the Greenwood smelter, touted as the highest smokestack in the province.

September 1908 brought Greenwood's third major fire in nine years. Starting with a gasoline explosion in a dyeing and clothing shop, the blaze spread to the Victoria Hotel and the Jones' bakery. Homes' and Kennedy's grocery store, and the Palace livery stable; although heavily damaged, the latter two escaped complete destruction. Only the hotel was insured. Mrs. J. Darling, at work in the clothing shop, was badly burned.

When the economy suffered another turn-down the following spring, a Chicago promoter, Richard Armstrong, aroused the hopes of many with his proposal to make a reality of a Greenwood-Phoenix underground tramway. After boring two miles into the mountain, miners were supposed to tunnel up from beneath the Phoenix lode, thereby tapping previously inaccessible copper deposits; the tunnel would also serve as a tramway to transport the ore to the Greenwood smelter. The project was abandoned, some 3,000 feet into the mountain, after only one small vein was tapped.

For all of its claims to being the geographical, gravitational, and financial center of the Boundary district, much of Greenwood's revenue came from the Canadian Copper Co.'s smelter, and the smelter was dependent for much of its ore upon the Mother Lode mine. By late 1918, the tonnage of ore shipped to the smelter had been halved (the quality had also deteriorated), and two of the three blast furnaces were idled.

Phoenix, Greenwood's mountaintop neighbor, was faced with the same dilemma, but for the opposite reason. Whereas the Greenwood smelter starved for want of proper fluxing-ores (and its owners' eagerness to exploit their new property at Copper Mountain), the Phoenix mines had ample reserves, but closed because of a sagging market. The result for Phoenix was oblivion; for Greenwood, the closing of the smelter in November meant immediate unemployment, then the start of a 20-year decline that saw her reduced from city to almost-ghost town. In the early 1920s, a citizen's group spent a good deal of time and money in an attempt to find sufficient ore reserves in the area to justify construction of a reduction plant.

Abandoned mines were pumped dry and re-examined, but despite initially promising signs, did not justify further interest.

The passing of the copper industry also claimed Deadwood. But Greenwood, despite the loss of many of its residents and the Great Depression, survived. It remained for the Second World War to rejuvenate Greenwood's economy by expanding its population. Ironically, the hundreds of newcomers were not so by choice. In 1942, 1,000 Japanese-Canadians were interned in the former copper town's vacant buildings.

"Almost overnight," reported the *Canadian Press*, "this little town, quiescent since the copper boom, has undergone a five-fold population increase with the arrival of Japanese families moved from the coastal defense zone. Two months ago 200 persons lived here and many of the stores and residences had been boarded up for years. Since then 250 Japanese families—about 900 souls—have been quartered in Greenwood by the B.C. Security Commission."

"Only one of every five persons strolling Greenwood streets is white."

"Stores, closed for years, have been renovated to provide for the needs of the newcomers. Storekeepers are benefitting. A new store will be opened soon by one large firm, and other businesses are being established. As few of the new settlers speak English; store proprietors employ Japanese girl high school graduates to act as interpreter clerks."

Greenwood municipal council set another precedent later by formally denouncing a Victoria City Council resolution that a referendum be held to determine whether all Japanese internees be deported after the war. Greenwood had come to like and respect its wartime citizens: "We have watched their actions (for three years) and may say that their record has been very good. They have been law-abiding under very difficult conditions. Their homes and property were taken from them, many of them lost the savings of a lifetime, and they were herded around, more or less like cattle. (Despite this they) have been cheerfully waiting for the end of the war. We find that their children in school are splendid students, and we feel that given an opportunity (they) would be loyal citizens of Canada. They should be treated fairly and given the same rights and privileges accorded to other people."

In the last week of August 1947, Greenwood celebrated its golden jubilee. One of the many events to mark the occasion was particularly poignant for the town's old-timers: For the first time in 30 years, smoke again issued from the smelter smokestack.

Ten years later, Greenwood's 60th birthday festivities got off to an unexpectedly excited start when the traditional miner's salute, a dynamite blast, sparked brush fires on Jubilee Mountain that took firefighters three hours to get under control.

Today visitors to Greenwood are greeted, at its western approach, by a sign which announces that they are entering the "smallest city in Canada, incorporated 1897." Far more eye-arresting is the towering smokestack of the smelter on the hillside. It literally overshadows the town and is a haunting reminder of the role copper played in this region's development. Seventy years have passed since the smelter fires at Greenwood glowed red all day and night. Only the smokestack, the ruins of the power-house, and a desert of slag remain of the city's heyday as a copper smelting capital.

The modern Greenwood is considerably smaller than in its heyday, but gives every indication of reaching its centenary in 1997—and beyond.

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