



Original Ymir School, built in 1897. Barren hillsides in background are the result of a devastating forest fire in the 1880's.

Iva Lindow photo
Courtesy Salmo Museum

The great Ymir Fire of 1904

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Opinion wavered as to whether the fire started at the rear of the drug store or in the oil house at the rear of the Seaney building, but Fraser amassed sufficient evidence to warrant Harry Atkinson being charged with incendiaryism. He was released on \$500 bail pending a preliminary hearing in Nelson on November 13 before Magistrate E.A. Crease.

At the hearing it was discovered that Atkinson had insured his drug store stock for \$6,500. He claimed a \$10,000 loss from the fire. Much of the evidence heard centered on the considerable amount of stock which Atkinson had cached in his home. Salmo's respected merchant, Sid Ross, corroborated Atkinson's claim that it was standard practice in winter months to store stock subject to freezing in constantly heated quarters, but it was noted that the contents of the cellar contained items such as pocket watches not subject to freezing, as well as the bulk of the drugstore records. Atkinson was bound over on \$3,000 bail to be tried for arson at the spring assizes of the Supreme Court in Nelson.

Atkinson and his family faced a chill winter in Ymir. Since neither Atkinson nor his wife had ever been particularly popular in Ymir, it would be difficult to state that there was a marked cooling in the attitude of others toward them in the wake of the great sympathy felt for those who had lost all their belongings in the fire. By the middle of March 1905, a spring thaw portending the Supreme Court trial was underway in Ymir. At the noon-hour on Thursday, March 23, Mrs. Atkinson took 8-year-old Gladys into her bedroom and showed the child a number of rings which she had removed, strung on a ribbon and placed in a box in a bureau drawer. "Should anything ever happen to me, Gladys, these rings are yours," the mother cautioned the daughter as the child bent her way back to school. Gladys returned to the house after school to find it cold and deserted. No preparations for dinner were underway.

An immediate search was instigated, and in the failing light of the March afternoon, Ed Peters and R.Schrum discovered tracks leading to the reservoir. A shawl lay at the top of a ladder leading down into the reservoir, and four feet below the surface hung the body of Mrs. Atkinson, wedged into the braces supporting the ladder. District coroner Dr. E.A. Arthur, summoned from Nelson, was quickly satisfied that it was a case of suicide. No inquest was ordered. The body was sent to Nelson, where burial took place the following Tuesday under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church in Nelson. Reports in the Nelson Daily News were interpreted in Ymir to suggest that the uncharitable matrons of the mining settlement had driven the despairing matron to her death. A fierce rebuttal was published in the Ymir Herald thus assuring that there would be little let-up in the discussion of the Atkinson affair prior to the opening of the spring assizes in Nelson on May 9.

The Hon. Auley Morrison, surely one of the most caustic judges in the history of the B.C. Supreme Court, presided at the assizes. The outcome of the two trials preceding the Atkinson case was not such as to sooth his lordship's uncertain temper. The jury had brought down a controversial verdict of "not guilty" in the trial of Union Secretary John R. Roberts for the attempted murder of Monty Davys. A somewhat inebriated Roberts, wending his way down Lake Avenue in Silverton, had taken a pot shot at Davys through the plate glass dining room window of the Victoria Hotel but had missed. The second case, the trial of one Fera for fraud, had resulted in a hung jury. In the Atkinson case, much debate went on over the admissibility of evidence, and both W.A. Macdonald, K.C. for the prosecution and S.S. Taylor for the defence were subjected to much tongue-lashing from the exasperated bench. The number of witnesses called was so great that the learned judge at one time asked plaintively if a plan was afoot to call every person who had ever dealt at

Atkinson's store. In the midst of these hectic proceedings, the jury apparently gathered that there was strong evidence that the Hallowe'en fire had started in the oil house at the back of the Seaney building rather than in Atkinson's store, and that it had been standard practice for Atkinson at the onset of winter to remove just about everything but rolls of toilet paper from the frigid quarters of this store. At the conclusion of the proceedings, the jury pronounced Atkinson not guilty of arson. The Judge advised Atkinson that he left the court without the faintest cloud upon his character. The verdict notwithstanding, there were many in Ymir who retained an opinion that the fire which caused such hardship to those who had lost all their possessions resulted from a premeditated act of a henpecked pharmacist.

Atkinson moved to Vancouver, where for 48 years he operated a drug store in the vicinity of Nelson and Nicola Streets in Vancouver's West End. He was the oldest practicing pharmacist in British Columbia when he retired in 1953. One would rejoice in the happy outcome to the Ymir travails of Atkinson, were it not for the obituary, presumably contributed to the Vancouver Sun by his second wife, the widowed Florence Emily, after his death on December 4, 1959 at the age of 87. This obituary credits Atkinson with holding degrees from the University of Toronto in both medicine and pharmacy and relates his experiences in performing emergency operations on kitchen table tops in the Yukon during the period he is known to have been operating a drug store in Ymir. Did Atkinson draw on the experiences of his brother, a medical doctor, in accounting for the span of his life in Ymir? How strong was Atkinson's regard for the truth? Who knows?

Ymir's main street was never completely rebuilt after the 1904 fire, as the settlement was beginning to lose its pre-eminence in the Salmon River Valley. The Davies & Sayward sawmill interests closed their plant at Pilot Bay and centered their operations in Salmo, thus providing that strategically situated distribution center with a stable industry to counteract the shifting fortunes of mining. Bit by bit, Ymir ceded status to Salmo. When mining revived in the 1930's after the collapse of the gold standard, the improved highway built in 1923 to bridge the seventeen miles between Ymir and Nelson discouraged the re-establishment in Ymir of services readily available in the lake-side city. The Ymir Hotel, having escaped the 1904 fire, still stands on Ymir's First Avenue, but there remains little else to remind the viewer of the former glories of Ymir's business strip.

Ymir School Teachers 1897 - 1971

1897 - 1899	Miss E.M. Green
1900	Miss A. McLennan
1901	Miss A. McLennan
1902	Miss I.M. Urquhart
1903	Miss I.M. Urquhart
1904	Miss S.J. Sutherland
1906	Miss J.F. Clark
1907	Joseph Irwin
1908	Mrs. J.M. Heales
1909 - 1911	W.L. Rand
1912	Samuel Acheson
1913	Miss O.A. Macleod
1914	Miss V.I. Macleod
1915	Miss V.I. Macleod
1916	E.T. Oliver
1918	Mrs. A.R. Nicolls
1919	Miss A.E. Imlah
1921	Miss A.M. Orr
1922	R. Boswell, Sr.
1924 - 1925	H.H. Perkins
1926	Earl Marriott
1927	G.T. Harper
1928 - 1929	Miss E. Thompson
1930 - 1932	Miss G. Rendall
1933	Miss E.M. Alm
1935 - 1936	Miss M.H. Grayling
1937	Miss M.V. Webb
1938	F.C. Pritchard
1939	L.F. Spearing
1940	L.F. Spearing
1941	J. Campbell
1942	Mrs. M. Fleming
1943	Mr. M. Swanzy
1944 - 1945	Mr. M. Swanzy
1946	G.A. Dauphinas
1947	G.A. Dauphinas
1948 - 1950	Mrs. A.E. Halvorsen
1951	Miss Margaret Orman
1952	Lorna Lee
1953	Miss Nancy Bodnaruk
1954	Theresa Poje
1955	Floyd Searle
1956	Floyd Searle
1957 - 1958	Helen Maras
1959	G.J. Baerg
1960	Jack G. Denny
1961	N.J. Evans
1962	A.V. Stander
1963 - 1964	M.L. Leadbeater
1965	Mary Mang
1966	Mary Mang
1967 - 1970	Mrs. B. Todd
1971 - 1984	Hans Cunningham

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YMIR, British Columbia

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