

The great Ymir Fire of 1904

By Edward L. Affleck

Nelson's distinctive courthouse, a noble edifice of native stone, projects our heritage of solid British justice. It is true that over the decades many interesting cases have been tried at the Supreme Court Assizes held in the confines of this building. It is also true that a number of controversial Supreme Court trials were held in Nelson's first courthouse, a Victorian Gothic frame building which was moved from the courthouse site to the foot of Ward Street, where for many years it served as Nelson's City Hall. In the Spring Assizes of 1905, two particularly interesting cases were tried in the old courthouse, one which impacted on the community of Ymir and the other which reverberated throughout the entire mining divisions of Nelson and Slocan. The case which set Ymir in turmoil was the trial for arson of pharmacist Thomas Henry Atkinson.



Town of Ymir 1904

Today's motorist beetling south on Highway 6 towards Salmo may give a passing glance to a road sign indicating a turn-off to the settlement of Ymir but he is unlikely to invest five or ten minutes viewing the remnants of what at the beginning of this century was just about the only bright spot in the somewhat dismal mining economy of the Nelson, Slocan and Lardeau camps. In the immediate vicinity of Nelson, about the only mines working were those leased by the dynamic mining operator Monty Davys, who had a gift for profitable operation of mines which others had closed down in despair.

The Klondike gold rush of 1898 prompted a mass exodus of the hordes of miners, prospectors and entrepreneurs who had created boom times in the West Kootenay from 1895 to 1897. Unrest over the "8-hr day amendment" to B.C. mining legislation served to close most of the remainder of those mining camps which had not already folded up prior to 1900. Activity picked up shortly after in the gold-rich Rossland camp and in the copper belt over in the Boundary district around Greenwood, but a weak market for silver, lead and zinc kept much of the Slocan, Lardeau and Kootenay Lake area in the doldrums. The Silver King group on Toad Mountain, which had earlier seemed to offer an inexhaustible bed of rich copper-silver ore, was already showing signs of playing out. Nelson maintained

her status as a distributing center for the West Kootenay, but the mining action shifted south to the goldbelt around Ymir and Salmo.

By 1904 Ymir boasted a population of about 1,100 souls. Those providing goods and services, numbering with their families about 350, resided in the village nestled on the west bank of the Salmon River, while the remaining 750, chiefly single men, boarded in the camps surrounding the village. Ymir did not lack enterprising merchants as well as medical, legal, assaying, undertaking and other professional services, but it must be admitted that First Avenue, Ymir's main street, did not offer an inspiring sight. The Palace Hotel stood demurely on Second Avenue, but the remainder of Ymir's hotels - the Cosmopolitan, the McLeod, the Miller, the Vancouver, the Ross House, the Windsor and the Ymir, hastily constructed false-front frame buildings all, loomed prominently on the First Avenue vista. Their capacious saloons reflected the insatiable thirst of the weary miners who descended on First Avenue after a monotonous shift underground in the various mining works in the surrounding hills.

Pool halls, cigar stores, barber shops and mining brokerage offices, similarly housed in rudimentary

buildings, also catered to the miners' demands. Each cigar store boasted a 'back room' which afforded the miner an opportunity of gambling away his day's wages at cards. Houses of prostitution? Yes indeed, but these did not line First Avenue! The 'Dew Drop Inn', located strategically on the east side of the river, in any event lacked the allure of Nelson's renowned fleshpots. The Great Northern Railway's 'Spokane Express' arriving in Nelson late Saturday afternoon would be jammed with miners boarding at Ymir for the 17-mile run down to the bright lights and the red lights. The same train leaving Nelson early Monday morning for the south would carry a somnolent, pauperized complement of miners bound for another week's grind underground in the Ymir camps. What money had not been spent on wine and women had likely been lost in one of the gambling dens situated in the back of cigar stores and hotels.

Ymir, in short, was a bustling mining settlement. It was certainly no haven of culture, but neither was it an unalloyed den of vice. Its saloons

were certainly prominent, but on the other hand, organized sports were available, a modest church had been erected away from First Avenue for a Presbyterian congregation thriving under the pastoral care of Rev. H. Young, a somewhat shambly one-room school built up the hill housed the school-aged children, a volunteer firefighting force had been formed, and a 50,000 gallon reservoir preserved the residents from the threat of a bathless existence. K.H. Steele, proprietor of a laundry and bathhouse, turned over as brisk a business as any of the saloons. Later improvements included a hospital located at the north entrance to the settlement as well as a Catholic church.

On the west side of First Avenue at the Willow Street intersection was situated one of Ymir's more up-and-coming business buildings, a three-story frame structure housing on the ground floor the post office as well as a stationary store and pharmacy operated by Thomas Henry (Harry) Atkinson. The second floor housed the Forester's Hall and the top floor, the living quarters of Henry Kearns. Harry Atkinson, a small slim mild-mannered man in his early thirties, had article as a druggist in Chelsey, Ontario and had brought his wife and baby daughter Gladys out to Ymir during the 1897 boom. In Ymir he had prospered, as much by his pawn-broking activities as by those in the pharmaceutical line. Much effort had to be expended to recover the debts owed to him by the free-spending miners, and as a result, he was not the most popular man in town.

His spouse was not particularly popular either. A large-boned, angular woman, Mrs. Atkinson never really accommodated herself to the life in a small mining town. She took no part in the Presbyterian church activities which formed a common bond for many of Ymir's married women. On occasion she would drop in for a cup of tea at the

home of an 'acceptable' matron and would invariably, in her voluble manner, inveigh against the stultifying environment of Ymir and express her desire to offer her young daughter Gladys the more promising surroundings of Victoria. "Harry has invested in a business property in Victoria," she would say, "and we plan to move there as soon as we can get a decent price for this good business he built up here. I tell him that if he can't sell out soon for a decent price, he should set a match to it."

Ymir might have continued to pay small regard to Mrs. Atkinson's grumbling, but around the middle of October 1904, both Henry Kearns, the third floor occupant of the Atkinson building, and S.H. Seaney, proprietor of a produce and confectionery store in the adjacent building, noted that Atkinson had hauled several wagonloads of his stock to his house. Was he planning to set fire to the business block and collect the insurance on the building and stock? Kearns and Seaney paid a visit to local Constable Fraser and urged him to keep a sharp lookout for any untoward activity, particularly on Hallowe'en night, which traditionally saw a lot of roistering from both Ymir's young fry and many of their elders who should have known better.

Inevitably a sharp wind and sleet struck Ymir on Hallowe'en, causing many of the pranksters to turn in relatively early. All was quiet by midnight but about 1:40 a.m. the fire alarm sounded. Fire was raging up the rear sides of both the Atkinson block and the adjacent Seaney block. The fire quickly engulfed the living quarters of Henry Kearns as well as those of livery owner Billy Wilson, who, with his wife Effie, and children Rachel and Fergus, occupied the second storey apartment in the Seaney building. These five individuals were left with nothing but a narrow escape for their lives in their night attire. Fanned by the wintry wind, the fire quickly swept along the west side of Block 19 of First Avenue, destroying the Ross House Hotel and other buildings and contents in its wake until the volunteer fireman succeeded in quelling it before it spread to Campbell's general store and the Ymir Hotel at the other end of the block. Firemen had responded promptly to the alarm turned in by Richard Keep, but on arriving at the firehall they discovered that all the nozzles for the fire hoses were missing. A frantic half-hour search uncovered the nozzles bunched together under the nearby printing office of the Ymir Herald.

A Hallowe'en prank by youngsters was at first thought to account for the missing nozzles which had permitted the fire to gain such a headway, but there were those who suspected it was a premeditated act of Atkinson. In the morning an efficient Constable Fraser proceeded to get a search warrant for Atkinson's house and in short order discovered a mass of stock and records stored in and under the dwelling.

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NEWS NOTES

Mrs. Collins will be pleased to see any of her Ymir friends when in Erie. The B.C. Hotel is the place.

The front appearance of the Vancouver hotel has been greatly improved by a fresh coat of paint.

Throw away your old pipe and get a 3 B or G B D at Campbell's. He keeps an endless variety to chose from.

Dr. Forin of Nelson will visit Ymir regularly ever Tuesday. May be visited at the Cosmopolitan Hotel between 12 and 5 o'clock.

A fine steel fishing rod was raffled at Wolfords on Thursday evening. Charlie Anderson held the lucky number and all hands smoked his health. It will be off with the fish now.

Mr. J.D. Anderson of Trail, who was in surveying some claims on Porcupine Creek, returned to Trail on Tuesday.

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