Princeton & District Museum & Archives

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Message from the President
After a busy and successful summer and fall the Museum Board is hunkering down for its winter activities. We were very pleased to send our Manager, Robin Irwin, to the annual conference of the BC Museums Association. This is the first time the Princeton Museum has sent a representative to this event. Museums in small remote towns such as ours can often feel isolated so we look forward to the positive effects of the networking and learning that Robin did at the Conference.

With the addition of former school trustee Ken Heuser to the Board, our education committee has been busy. The Princeton Museum is a wonderful educational resource and we look forward to increased collaborations with our schools.

Museum Happenings
An Evening of Princeton Labour History
“Soviet Princeton: Slim Evans and the 1932/33 Miners’ Strike”

A presentation about the Princeton coal miners’ strike that involved a kidnapping, the Ku Klux Klan and police on horseback baton-charging women and children.

Come and find out all about these events at this presentation. Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat have just written a book about the strike, which will be available at the presentation.

Friday 27 November, 7 pm at the Princeton Museum
The first newspaper in Princeton, the Similkameen Star, began publication in 1900. Over the years in nearly every issue there were poems and songs about the lives of people in the valley. The poem below comes from World War II.

During the Depression, thousands of unemployed single men travelled across the country on the railways looking for work. They lived rough and were frequently tormented by the railway “bulls” (police) who kicked them off the trains. In 1931, the federal government established “relief camps” for single men in isolated locations, putting them to work for twenty-five cents a day. The camps also served to remove the men from the public eye, and to make it difficult for them to initiate any political reaction to their situation. Princeton had its own relief camp at the airport, a facility that the men camped who were there helped to build. They lived in tents through the winter.

The economic desperation of the Depression ended with the declaration of war in 1939. The poem below highlights the contrast between the treatment given to a hobo “riding the rods” during the Depression and the attention given him as a soldier a few years later, riding in the dining car.

Tommy Douglas made the same point in his The Making of a Socialist, where he contrasted the ease and speed of Parliament voting $1.5 billion to prosecute the war (15 minutes!) with the days of 1936-1938 where the CCF had “introduced motion after motion asking the government to issue money for the work and wages programme, and had asked for the trifling sum of 500 million dollars. (The) Minister of Finance had looked across at me and said, ‘I’d like to tell my young friend that money doesn’t grow on gooseberry bushes.’ I now had the satisfaction of watching (him) find the gooseberry bush.”

The Diner

He was dining on the diner; and the waiter called him “Sir”:
White linen decked his table and gleaming silverware.
They placed good food before him, he sat and ate his fill;
They paid him every service and his country paid the bill.
And he thought of another journey of a not far distant date,
When he passed through this same country, just a hobo on a freight.
His country did not need him, for he had no work to do
And he wore no service uniform of khaki, or of blue.
When his grim task is over, perhaps we’ll understand
That hungry mouths may all be fed from the plenty of our land.

The Similkameen Star, 5 October 1944
The 1932-3 Princeton Miners’ Strike

For a year, Princeton was convulsed in a labour crisis. Beginning in the fall of 1932, the crisis saw 40 police in town, rather than the regular two; mounted police charging picket lines of miners, their wives and children, and unemployed men; the creation of a local branch of the Ku Klux Klan; the kidnapping of the communist union organizer, and his eventual arrest, trial and sentence on a charge of conspiring to overthrow the state by force. Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat’s new book, Soviet Princeton, describes these events and the people at the centre of the crisis.

In the spring of 1932, the owners of the Tulameen Coal Mine told its eighty-odd miners that their wages were to be cut by 10%, and that the regular wage rate would return in the fall. The miners grudgingly accepted this, but when in September they asked for its restoration, they were told that it wouldn’t happen.

Some of the miners had experience of unions, and sent for an organizer from the Workers’ Unity League to advise and help them. Slim Evans arrived and asked how much work they had. “We’re working one day a week,” he was told. “When you’re working seven days a week,” he responded, “Give me a call, and I’ll come back and help you form a union.”

Towards the end of November, he returned, and immediately held a mass meeting of miners. It was held on a vacant lot near the tunnel, in the dark: many of the miners were from Eastern Europe, and were afraid of the consequences if they were identified by mine officials.

Evans immediately set about the job. Mass meetings of two to three hundred miners were held in various halls in town, and in short order, a union (a local of the Mine Workers Union of Canada) was formed, an ultimatum sent to the mine owners, and a strike called. Within a week, the company agreed to the union demands – the restoration of the 10% cut, and the recognition of the union.

But this was only the beginning of a contest between the miners and their organizer, Slim Evans, on the one hand, and Dave Taylor and Percy Gregory on the other. They were both officers of the Princeton Board of Trade, Gregory as President and Taylor as Secretary. Taylor was also the owner and editor of the local paper, the Princeton Star, and Gregory was a land surveyor with numerous other side jobs. They were incensed at the miners’ victory, and did all they could to reverse it. They went on the offensive, with allegations that it was all a communist plot.

Bartlett and Ruebsaat have researched these astonishing events through the pages of the Princeton Star and the Unemployed Worker (a Vancouver-based weekly newsletter), together with court documents and police reports from national and provincial archives. They will present the whole story on Friday 27 November at 7 pm at the Princeton Museum. Their talk will be accompanied by archival photos and songs made by the miners at the time. This fascinating story of Princeton’s early days deserves to be told!
A Poem from World War I

The First World War was touted as “the war to end all wars.” It was in fact that War that started nearly every war of the 20th and 21st centuries, for which we might justly blame the British government. Had that government not entered, in 1904, the “Entente Cordiale” with the French, there would have been no First World War - and thus no Lenin or Stalin or World War II: Hitler himself would have ended up a house painter or a designer of birthday cards.

No end to the Ottoman Empire either; no carving up of the Middle East by the British and French, no need to buy off European Jewry with the Balfour Declaration of a “Jewish Homeland” in return for financial support for the war. And finally no Afghanistan adventure, no invasion of Iraq, no Canadian jets bombing ISIS positions, and no consequent exodus of tens of thousands of Europe-bound refugees.

Those who started World War I, and those who entered into it with such enthusiasm, as did many British settlers in Canada, never knew, as we do, the unintended consequences. The “Jack” of the poem below, printed in the local paper in 1917, would never have left the Similkameen, and the family he never had - because of his death that year in France - might still be at his lakeside cottage, the Fisherman's, watching the fish rise to the fly.

A Fisherman's Rest

The bush-tails hold revel today, And Jack was so gentle and good -
Mid the dust fast mouldering there.
The coyotes pass on their way, He’d ever some homeless one there.
To hunt the deer from his lair.

He called it the Fisherman’s -
A real good rest you could take,
If you listened to Jack’s behest
To go to his home on the Lake.

And the snow drifts high on the door,
Where the fire is now quenched for aye,
For the Rest-maker comes no more.
He has gone to rest in the sky.

In France his body lies sleeping,
His soul was that Fisherman’s true,
Who Jack now surely is keeping,
To rest with a Fisherman too.

Similkameen Star, December 1917