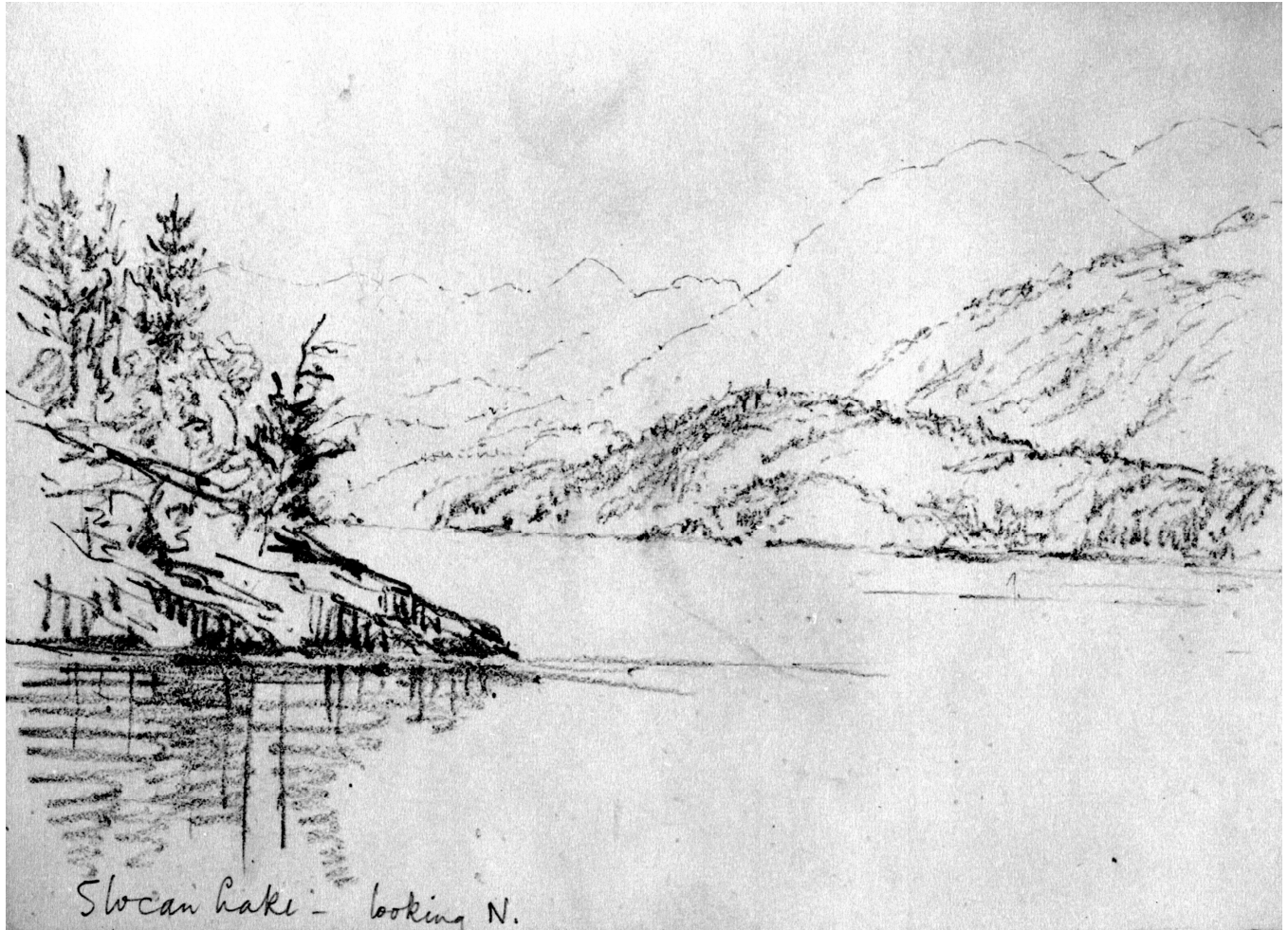


## INTRODUCTION



I-1 Slovan Lake looking north, c. 1897. Artist: Lindley Crease. Image courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives (PDP05106).

**Shorn of its rough edges, the life of a prospector is a poem ... What a grand persevering life of struggle and privation and poverty! With hope deferred from year to year, but always hopeful.**

**"The Prospector," *Nelson Miner*, 11 April 1891.**

The California gold rush of 1849 established the pattern – riches aplenty for those willing to venture into the vast, unexplored wilderness of western North America. There were plenty who were willing. Fortune seekers and adventurers set out in droves from the eastern United States and points further afield. California, Nevada, Colorado, Montana, Idaho and British Columbia (BC) – all had important gold or silver rushes in the latter half of the nineteenth century. California was followed by gold rushes in BC: Fraser River, Cariboo and Wild Horse Creek; Pike's Peak in Colorado; Boise and Owyhee in Idaho, and smaller rushes across North America's Pacific slope. There were silver rushes too: The Comstock Lode in Nevada in 1860; followed by Leadville and other Colorado sites; and the immediate precursor to silver discoveries in BC's West Kootenay region, Idaho's Coeur d'Alene silver rush of the late 1880s. From 1891 to 1900 West Kootenay's Slovan district pushed its way into the spotlight. Almost

completely unpopulated in early 1891, the Slocan attracted thousands of pilgrims over the next few years, lured by some of the richest silver ore deposits ever discovered. Despite several setbacks, the Slocan was by 1897 the most important and productive mining district in all BC.<sup>i</sup>

At the time of the discoveries, BC had been part of Canada for just twenty years. The legacies of the earlier Crown colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia lingered on. Many of the politicians, judges and civil administrators were part of that legacy. The new province's population was concentrated in Victoria and lower Vancouver Island, and on the mainland around New Westminster and upstart Vancouver. There were settlements in the goldfields of Cariboo and the Okanagan Valley, but the northern and southeastern portions of the province were sparsely populated, with vast tracts of largely unexplored territory. This was starting to change, however, as men and women looked to tap unexploited resource riches. As Judge Howay, an early historian of BC, put it, "the land was infected with prospectors."<sup>ii</sup> Thick forests of fir, pine and cedar, and rumours of rich galena ore – a potent amalgam of silver and lead – drew adventurers to West Kootenay. The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1885 gave ready access to the Columbia River and its Arrow Lakes to the south. Prospectors were trickling in too from south of the border in Washington and Idaho Territories.

These were "boom times." West Kootenay was just the latest extension of the western mining frontier. Soon all the familiar trappings were in place. A contemporary account described a "boom" as "a rush of people to any region offering new and enhanced possibilities of improvement in condition or estate."<sup>iii</sup> Wherever there was a mineral discovery a mining camp would spring up – often claiming to be a "city" but usually consisting, at least in the early days, of little more than a few tattered tents and perhaps a log building or two:

A mining camp is a district which depends for its existence upon the mining industry, and which, when the mines are exhausted, or closed down for any reason, vanishes off the map, after a life of anything from a few weeks up to a half a century or more. The buildings consist in the earlier stages of log cabins, and later on of substantial frame buildings of sawn lumber. The word 'camp' is also used in a narrower sense to describe the group of buildings at any particular mine, which in the case of some of the larger mines constitutes a town in itself.<sup>iv</sup>

Revelstoke, Nelson and Ainsworth – which started as Farwell, Stanley and Hot Springs Camp respectively – were the principal West Kootenay camps in 1890. Revelstoke, on the CPR mainline at the northern margin of West Kootenay, was removed from the silver mining districts but did serve as an important trans-shipment centre. Nelson was sustained by the silver mines on Toad Mountain, first discovered by the Hall brothers in 1886. Ainsworth got its start earlier, about the time an American prospector named Robert Sproule staked several claims on the eastern shore of Kootenay Lake in 1882. The most promising was the Blue Bell. The Blue Bell's lead deposits were well known to First Nations and a few trappers, but the district was so remote in the early 1880s that it was impractical for development.<sup>v</sup> This would change. Sproule's claim attracted other adventurers. In October 1882 when Sproule left his claim briefly, an Englishman named Thomas Hammill, relying on some restrictive regulations in the mining law, re-staked the claim and called it the Silver Queen. Sproule was incensed. The dispute went to court, and while Sproule won at trial and appeal, he was forced to sell an interest in his claim to cover his court costs. This interest eventually ended up in the hands of Thomas Hammill. Sproule was outraged and sought revenge. In the spring of 1885 he tracked Hammill down and murdered him with a well-placed rifle shot. Sproule was hanged the following year.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite a sensational murder, the “wild west” of legend and lore was waning in the years leading up to the Slocan rush, but the porous border and the chance to explore new territories lured many characters who loomed large in the tales told of pioneer days in the west. Men like Charlie Sands, and John Proctor, better known as “Death-on-the-Trail,” couldn’t resist the chance for one more adventure. Proctor was at Kootenay Lake in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the country was just opening up. Six feet six inches from tip to toe, with his wide-brimmed sombrero hat, beaded buckskin shirt, long hair and goatee, he must have seemed, to the more timid denizens of BC, like a relic from an age when giants walked the earth.<sup>vii</sup> His presence and that of others like him gave credibility to West Kootenay as a region to be reckoned with. Proctor – who had scouted for Custer in the Indian wars – rarely talked about the name he was better known by, but one of his contemporaries explained that in the 1880s Proctor had gone with a party of prospectors to explore the upper Kootenay country. A mixed group of Indians and whites attacked them, killing everyone but Proctor, who escaped. The attackers were all later found dead, the only clue to their demise, “death on the trail” carved into a piece of bark.<sup>viii</sup>

By the time that Robert Sproule dangled at the end of the hangman’s rope, steamboats were plying the waters of the upper Columbia River and the possibility of shipping ore out from West Kootenay was coming closer to reality. Wilbur “W.A.” Hendryx, a physician and capitalist from Grand Rapids, Michigan, had taken over Sproule’s interest in the Blue Bell and was putting money into development work. However, the location of the mine on the largely unpopulated eastern shore of Kootenay Lake hindered progress. Across the lake, Ainsworth served as the region’s de-facto commercial centre and became a jumping off point for prospectors eager to explore regions even more remote. The stage was being set for the Slocan discoveries.<sup>ix</sup>

Slocan Lake and valley are set in the Selkirk mountains in the narrow cleavage between Kootenay Lake and the Purcell mountains to the east, and the Monashee mountains and Arrow Lakes to the west. The area was little explored before 1891, but it was inevitable that the inexorable expansion of the western mining frontier would eventually reach the mountainous divide and thickly forested slopes between Slocan and Kootenay lakes. The Slocan wasn’t a complete mystery, though. In 1884 BC pioneer Gilbert Malcolm Sproat mentioned the lake in his official “Report on Kootenay” produced for the provincial government.<sup>x</sup> The province was interested in West Kootenay’s natural resources and how they could be exploited for profit. That interest was slow in developing, however. The *Nelson Miner* expressed it nicely in mid-October 1891 – at the time of the first rich discoveries – when it reported of Slocan Lake that “while the lake is well known by name, its location cannot be accurately stated.”<sup>xi</sup> So it wasn’t that Slocan Lake and the surrounding mountains were unknown or unexplored, just that there was no reason to go there. There had been excitement enough around Kootenay Lake. This was about to change.



While the geographical area covered by this book is centred around Slocan Lake and the mountains that rise above it to the east, the story of the Slocan rush cannot be told without wandering a bit beyond these confines. Noted Slocan newspaper editor Robert Thornton “R.T.” Lowery, was adamant that anything on the Kootenay Lake divide, sloping down to Kootenay Lake – mines and camps – was not properly in the Slocan.<sup>xiii</sup> This might strictly be true if the

respective watersheds of Slocan and Kootenay Lakes were the only criteria used to define the area. But these criteria do not suffice. Nor do the artificial boundaries imposed on the landscape by the provincial government when, for administrative purposes, it created mining districts. The boundaries of the Slocan must not be drawn so narrowly. People who worked at the Whitewater mine on the Kaslo slope in the 1890s would have considered themselves residents of the Slocan – despite the fact that the waters of Whitewater Creek were destined for Kootenay Lake. Kaslo and Nakusp, on Kootenay and Arrow Lakes respectively, clearly did not fit within Lowery's geographical construct. However, both were critically important to the early development of the Slocan. They were the principal gateways to the new district. The early history of Kaslo is inextricably linked to the Slocan. Most of the women and men who came looking for riches in the early 1890s did so by way of Kaslo, and many Slocan miners and mine owners took up permanent residence in the camp at the mouth of Kaslo Creek. It would be irresponsible to exclude mention of Kaslo's role in the development of the Slocan. We will venture further afield too. The population of West Kootenay throughout the 1890s was highly mobile. It was common to find prospectors, miners, merchants and capitalists moving from one camp to another, always looking for opportunities to get ahead. Nelson, Revelstoke and Rossland will figure in our journey, but our central focus will always be the Slocan heartland of New Denver, Sandon, Three Forks, Slocan City and their adjacent hinterlands.<sup>xiii</sup>

For all its renown, the Slocan mining rush was contained in a relatively brief window of time. There is mining activity there today, but the story included in these pages fades to black by 1900 – though, truth be told, the decline began in 1897. A precipitous drop in the price of silver, a unionized workforce at odds with stubborn mine owners, inept government management of the mining industry and the strong pull of the Klondike gold rush all contributed to the decline and denouement of the Slocan silver “rush.” There was a brief glimmer of hope in early 1900 when the labour troubles that had plagued the district for the better part of a year were resolved, but within weeks a devastating fire put an end to most hopes. The mining industry would recover from time to time over the next hundred years, but the glory days of the 1890s would never return.

Mining rushes present something of a challenge for historians and population analysts. In 1890 there were likely fewer than a dozen people living in the area where Kaslo and the Slocan mining camps first sprang up. As John Douglas Belshaw has noted in his study of population growth in BC, “a large Kootenay silver town might exist for fewer than ten years and thus fall completely between the cracks of decennial censuses.”<sup>xiv</sup> This was largely true of the Slocan. In 1890 there was likely no one living along the banks of Carpenter and Sandon creeks. Sandon, which Belshaw described as a “shooting star” in terms of population growth, had a population of between two and five thousand in 1898, but the numbers plummeted by the time of the 1901 census and fell steadily thereafter.<sup>xv</sup> It might seem that the Slocan silver rush has fallen through the cracks of history. I would argue that this is belied by its enduring but little-known legacy.

The last decade of the nineteenth century was a time of great change across North America and Europe. There had been a depression in 1873, but in the years that followed, technological innovation and invention advanced on all fronts, leading to what became known in retrospect as the “gilded age.” Electrification and telephone networks became commonplace; electric and gasoline cars began to replace horse-drawn carriages, the technology for sound recordings and moving pictures spread. In Germany, a physicist named Röntgen was systematically studying “x-ray” technology. In the world of art and design, Frank Lloyd Wright was developing the concepts that would revolutionize American architecture. New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz was championing the new pictorialist movement. In Europe,

impressionist artists like Pissarro, Renoir, Monet and Cassatt were still painting masterpieces, but in Barcelona, a young painter named Pablo Picasso was experimenting with traditions and developing theories that would lead to modernism. No one would suggest that the Slocan was at the forefront of any of these developments, but residents were not unaware of them either. Though grounded in the nineteenth century, many looked forward to the twentieth.

As the Slocan mining camps grew, they had dreams of grandeur. Why couldn't the wealth of the silver mines transform one or more of the camps into a city to rival Chicago – or at least Spokane? Those with a stake in the Slocan believed in these dreams. In the gravy days of 1897 and 1898 visitors too believed it just might be possible. One who was in Sandon in 1898 described the newly incorporated city as being “as cosmopolitan as was Venice in its later days.”<sup>xvi</sup> A woman who visited a few weeks later said she met more “cosmopolitan travelling companions” in Sandon than anywhere else in BC.<sup>xvii</sup> Business leaders and industrialists paid attention too. The trade of the new mining district was eagerly sought by merchants on both sides of the border. Capital flowed in from all over the United States and Britain. There were calls to build a railway from Vancouver or New Westminster to the mines. Then, during the mid-1890s, the Slocan proved a key battleground in the war for North American railway dominance between the CPR's William Cornelius Van Horne and the Great Northern Railway's James Jerome Hill.

Today, the Slocan seems a relative backwater, producing a few colourful and respected politicians but, as a district, not really drawing much attention. This was not the case in the 1890s, when the wealth of the Slocan and West Kootenay, and the growing population, could not be ignored by the more populous centres on the coast. Premiers and would-be premiers regularly trekked to the Slocan during elections. Given the preponderance of Americans in the Slocan – particularly during the early 1890s – it's not surprising that many residents closely followed American politics too. They were interested in the ongoing to and fro between Democrats and Republicans but were also eager for news of American adventures in foreign affairs, such as the annexation of Hawaii and the Spanish American war. There were British-born residents who were just as interested in foreign affairs as their American compatriots, but instead of the Spanish American War, they followed the Anglo Boer War and other adventures in which Britain had a hand.

Parts of the Slocan story have been told before in numerous histories, some of which are listed in the select bibliography at the back of this book. There is more to tell. I hope to fill in some of the gaps and perhaps correct a few misconceptions and myths that have crept into the historical record over the years (though I will likely introduce a few of my own). I had the good fortune to interview several Slocan “pioneers” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was a pleasure talking with them, and their stories were fascinating, but the early days that form the focus here were before their time. They had tales passed down to them from those who were there at the beginning, but those stories inevitably reflected the bias of the original tellers. They were often misremembered or embellished with each retelling. I was studying folklore at the time, so this wasn't a problem, it was what I expected. However, when I researched the early days of the Slocan rush through contemporary newspaper accounts – a resource not easily available to those long-time residents I interviewed – I found people and stories largely unknown to succeeding generations. Ed Vipond, one of the pioneers I interviewed, was well aware of the inconstancy of memory. His advice to another researcher has served as a guidepost to me: “I would still place most reliance on the printed records of the times, memories fade, as I find mine are...”<sup>xviii</sup> I am not so naïve, however, as to think newspaper accounts are entirely reliable either. They too are largely dependent on oral sources, the

diligence of reporters, and often mirror the political and social biases of their editors. Nevertheless, they allow us to at least get closer to versions of the truth.

The mining camps of West Kootenay were a magnet for itinerant newspapers. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to recount the district's history without them. At the time of the Slocan strikes, there were two newspapers in the silver districts of West Kootenay, both run by John Houston. Notoriously peripatetic in his early career, before settling down in Nelson in 1890 to start the *Nelson Miner*, Ontario-born Houston had worked on newspapers from Chicago to California. After a stint at the *Calgary Herald*, he started his own paper, the *Truth*, in Donald, BC. He later moved the paper to New Westminster – his last stop before Nelson.<sup>xix</sup> The other West Kootenay newspaper he ran at the time, the *Hot Springs News*, served the pioneer community of Ainsworth. Houston did not have the field to himself for long. After the Slocan discoveries and other mineral strikes, newspaper publishers, editors and type-setters flocked to West Kootenay hot on the heels of the prospectors and miners. Through it all, Houston would maintain a position of preeminence.

In his overview of the Fraser and Cariboo gold rushes, George Fetherling describes most accounts of these two primal BC mineral rushes as “extremely local in outlook.”<sup>xx</sup> This will also be the case here. However, I hope to at least touch on the broader social and political context that existed at the time. In a pioneering essay first published in 1985, noted Canadian geographer, historian and Slocan stalwart, Cole Harris, described “Industry and the good life around Idaho Peak.” He noted that in the 1890s, all the adults in the Slocan “lived with memories of somewhere else.”<sup>xxi</sup> Some of those memories stretched back to the middle of the nineteenth century. There were Americans who fought in the Civil War and, like Death-on-the-trail, scouted for General Custer. There were Canadians who had seen service in the Northwest Rebellions and watched Louis Riel hang. There were men who went to school with Rudyard Kipling and others who shared mining experiences with Mark Twain. From Europe came men who grew up in the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Sweden. There were men and women from Asia, Australia and Africa. For a few short years in the closing chapters of the nineteenth century, they all found themselves in a remote mountainous region of south-eastern BC. They came from various backgrounds, had differing interests and sometimes spoke different languages, but somehow, they all came together to create a dynamic and reasonably cohesive community. Certainly, there were disputes, disagreements and a fair share of tragedy – not unlike older, more established settlements. However, there was a remarkably strong sense of place and common cause. People cared for each other and cared about their community. And though the Slocan was geographically isolated and sometimes cut off from the rest of the world, residents were always part of that wider world. They were deeply interested in and affected by happenings outside their mountainous habitat. Newspapers were vital in keeping them connected. Cole Harris has noted that the pioneer newspapers of West Kootenay “enlarged the range and content of local information and introduced elements of a larger world outside.”<sup>xxii</sup> Readers could learn of happenings at the local mines, but could also read of adventures and misadventures in faraway places – Africa or Asia perhaps. For lighter fare, they could follow the serialized adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle’s super sleuth, Sherlock Holmes.

My goal in the pages that follow is to tell the story of the Slocan silver discoveries and the subsequent rush to cash in on them. This is not intended as an academic exercise – I don’t have a thesis to argue – though inevitably, I will have opinions and observations. My purpose instead, is to try to shed light on the women and men who made the Slocan what it became: The prospectors, miners, merchants, preachers and prostitutes who lived through uncertainty and hard times as often as good times and prosperity. Whether “stayers” or “leavers,” they were integral in transforming – in a few short years – a “howling wilderness”<sup>xxiii</sup> into a booming

district with steamboats, two continental railways, elegant hotels, unbridled saloons and brothels, tidy lakeside homes, curling and tennis clubs, vast underground mines and a population in the thousands. Simply stated, this is the story of a place, its niche in history; the people who lived there, and their interactions with each other and the wider world.

Many early mainstays of the Slocan died before they could pass on their stories. Others left when times were tough in the late 1890s. Crowds of prospectors and miners abandoned the Slocan for the Klondike goldfields in 1897 and 1898 and never returned. On the other hand, there were a few pioneers of the 1890s who stuck with the Slocan through thick and thin and had ample opportunity to tell their stories. Johnny Harris, the “King” of Sandon, appears in virtually every history of the Slocan. This is entirely appropriate, as Harris played an immensely important role in developing Sandon and the Slocan. However, there are others who played important roles in the early years who are barely – if at all – remembered today, and who rarely appear in local histories. I hope to bring some of these women and men back into the light, pioneers and characters like George W. Hughes, “Count” Bielenberg, Curly Robinson, Charlie Chambers, M.A. Bucke, David Bremner, Nick Palorcia, Caroline “Fool Hen” Anderson, Sarah Thorburn, Alex and Maud Sproat and others who helped “make” the Slocan rush. Their stories deserve to be told.



AN OLD PIONEER.

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## ENDNOTES

### INTRODUCTION

P. Donan, *The New Bonanzaland: With a Brief Dissertation on Booms*, (Portland, Or.: Passenger Department of the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company, 1897).

C.F.J. Galloway, *The Call of the West*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1917).

<sup>v</sup> The terminology used to describe indigenous populations in Canada has changed often over the last two centuries. Current (2019) usage favours “First Nation” to describe a distinct cultural, ethnic or linguistic grouping. Contemporary descriptions from the 1890s are left as is for historical accuracy, though some will be considered offensive by contemporary standards.

<sup>vi</sup> Garnet Basque, *West Kootenay: The Pioneer Years*, (Langley, BC: Sunfire Publications, 1990). For an account of early Kootenay Mines – in both fact and fiction – see Elsie Turnbull, “Old Mines in the West Kootenay,” *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, vol 20 nos. 3 & 4, (July-October 1956).

<sup>vii</sup> Weights and measures in West Kootenay in the 1890s were a mix of British Imperial and American. Feet, inches and pounds were consistent but tons could have been Imperial or American. For the sake of consistency, I have left all weights and measures as originally used.

<sup>viii</sup> *Anaconda Standard*, 25 August 1890. There are many tales of “Death-on-the-Trail’s” exploits – see for example: *Spokane Review*, 18 December 1892; *Pullman Herald*, 5 June 1892, 6 July 1895; *Boundary Creek Times*, 9 January 1897; *The Advance* (Midway, BC), 22 March 1897; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 31 March 1893; *Kootenai Herald*, 11 November 1893; *Tacoma Morning Union*, 4 January 1897. Some today, as others did at the time, would cast doubt on Sproule’s guilt.

<sup>ix</sup> A. Terry Turner, *Bluebell Memories: A Pictorial History of the Bluebell Mine, Riondel, British Columbia*, (Riondel, BC: The Riondel Historical Society, 1997).

<sup>x</sup> British Columbia Legislative Assembly, “Return to an Order of the House for a Copy of Instructions to Messrs. Farwell and Sproat, before Leaving for Kootenay, and a Copy of Their Report on the Mining, Agricultural and Timber Resources of That District,” *British Columbia Sessional Papers*, (Victoria: Government Printer, 1884).

<sup>xi</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 17 October 1891.

<sup>xii</sup> *The Ledge*, 18 March 1897.

<sup>xiii</sup> For many anecdotes specific to Rossland, see Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland’s Mines and History of British Columbia*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995).

<sup>xiv</sup> John Douglas Belshaw, *Becoming British Columbia: A Population History*, (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2009).

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvi</sup> *Sandon Mining Review*, 5 November 1898.

<sup>xvii</sup> *The Ledge*, 29 December 1898.

<sup>xviii</sup> Vipond to MR.B.A. Little, 8 April 1973. Author’s collection.

<sup>xix</sup> John Norris, *Historic Nelson: The Early Years*, (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Press, 1995); Patrick Wolfe, “Tramp Printer Extraordinary: British Columbia’s John ‘Truth’ Houston,” *BC Studies*, no. 40 (1978/79).

<sup>xx</sup> George Fetherling, *River of Gold: The Fraser and Cariboo Gold Rushes*, (Vancouver: Subway, 2009).

<sup>xxi</sup> Cole Harris, “Industry and the Good Life around Idaho Peak,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 66 no. 3 (1985).

<sup>xxii</sup> Cole Harris, *Newspapers & the Slocan in the 1890s*, Booklet 5 of the Slocan History Series, (New Denver, BC: Chameleon Fire Editions, 2016).

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 22 October 1892.

### THE NEW ELDORADO

<sup>xxiv</sup> C.H. Macintosh, “British America’s Golden Gateway to the Orient: Rossland and the Kootenay Mining Centres,” *Canadian Magazine*, vol. 8 no. 4, (February 1897).