

VALLEY HISTORY AND THE WINDERMERE VALLEY MUSEUM

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WALTER STODDART

“BLOOD & MONEY AT THE CHILCO RANCH”

THE ISLANDER Nov. 29, 1987

The colorful history of the Chilco Ranch is characteristic of the vast Chilcotin country of B.C. and has been etched with the hardships of raising beef on the northern fringe.

Named after the nearby Chilcotin River, the ranch grew from a small homestead and herd of 20 cattle in the 1880's to a cattle operation spreading over 400,000 hectares eight decades later. Although smaller today than in the 1960's, the Chilco is an impressive cattle operation.

The original owners were an unlikely pair, a big good-humored Irishman named Mike Minton and his soft-spoken partner, Peter Bergault. They located their cabin on a fertile benchland above the Chilcotin River in 1884. Although the holding was small, its potential caught the eye of Claude Wilson and he bought the partners out in 1896. He gave the ranch its name.

Wilson registered his Circle-C brand at Barkerville at the lifetime rate of 50 cents and increased the herd on the ranch to 300 head. He was admired for his cattle sense but it was the social events that were held at the Chilco that insured his popularity with the locals. It was said a Claude Wilson party was worth a 70-km ride in good weather or bad. During his ownership of the Chilco, the ranch was the social hub of the area.

In 1909 Joe Tretheway purchased the Chilco and, although not as outgoing as Wilson, was one of the most successful owners. Tretheway increased the size of the

ranch and introduced the T2 brand. He sold out to Logan in 1922, who quickly realized he was unable to cope with the difficulties of ranch life and sold the Chilco a year later to the mysterious Cosen Spencer. This purchase led to a bizarre chapter in the Chilco's history.

Spencer's background is somewhat hazy though he is considered a B.C. pioneer, since he operated a store at Camp McKinney. He then travelled to Australia where it was reported that he became wealthy in the movie business. Returning to B.C. he purchased the Chilco in 1923. In his Camp McKinney days, he went by the name of Cosens but changed it to Spencer in Australia. He was known as Cosen Spencer during his ownership of the Chilco.

Known as a forceful businessman, Spencer expanded the ranch store to carry everything from needles to wagons. he planned a great circular 60 km aqueduct to irrigate all of the benchlands on the ranch and his plans included the construction of a second lake. Unfortunately, just after the water began to run, the bottom of the lake collapsed and the project appeared to be a failure.

Perhaps it was the irrigation system failure, the pressures of running the ranch or the onslaught of financial fears caused by the depression that began the process leading to Spencer's tragic end.

Spencer spent part of 1929 in the Quesnel Hospital because of a nervous breakdown. The winter of that year he and his wife stayed at the Hotel Georgia in Vancouver. The seriousness of Spencer's condition became apparent in September 1930. For some time, he had believed that

in the wainscot panelling of his living room, there was a strange grain in the wood that looked exactly like a devil. He confided this to his friend, Dr. G.R. Baker, explaining that you could make out the shape perfectly, including the eyes, tail, horns and cloven hoofs.

When the light from the fire danced along the walls, the figure in the wood changed shape so that Spencer was sure that the devil was actually after him. He told Baker that whenever he moved to another room he was sure that the devil would follow him.

During the early months of 1930, Spencer imagined the devil's power was growing stronger. He could see it crouched beside him, ready to spring, or running beside his saddle horse as he worked cattle. The rancher confided to Baker that he was going to try to trap the devil. By this time, Spencer was convinced that the devil could enter human bodies and peer through the eyes of other men.

On Sept. 10 1930, Spencer and two of his men were loading supplies into a truck at the Deer Creek section of the ranch. He must have thought he could see the devil in the eyes of his storekeeper, Edward Smith and his ranch manager, **Walter Stoddart**. He gunned down Smith with a shotgun blast and shattered Stoddart's arm with the second shot. Then Spencer ran into the bush towards the Chilcotin River.

Seriously wounded, Stoddart crawled into the truck and drove towards home ranch but lost control and crashed into a ditch. Fearful of Spencer's return, he hid in the bush in agony and shock from loss of blood. A second vehicle came by, driven by Christopher Vick, the ranch foreman and Spencer's wife who had become alarmed when the trio had failed to return. After finding Stoddart and hearing his tale, the police and coroner Rene Hance were

summoned from Williams Lake and they retrieved Smith's body from the road.

The Chilco cowboys were armed and given orders to shoot first if Spencer should appear. A 24-hour watch was posted and all the local residents locked their doors fearing a visit from Spencer. His wife posted a reward for the recovery of her husband's body and shotgun. Stoddart underwent surgery for the amputation of his wounded arm.

There were no witnesses to Spencer's death and how it took place is unknown. Several months later, an Indian from Anaheim Lake Reserve named Little Charlie, found Spencer's 16-gauge shotgun on the river bank. A short distance upstream he discovered the body of the 60 year old Spencer. According to the coroner, death had been caused by drowning.

Walter Stoddart was a pioneer of this valley along with his uncles Jim and Ed. The Stoddart brothers ran the Windermere Hotel. Walter Stoddart developed the Ellenvale Ranch with his partner, Charlie Ellis. This ranch is now known as the K2. When Ellis and Stoddart sold the ranch, Walter Stoddart went to the Cariboo and it was during that time that this incident occurred. He returned to this valley with his wife and two daughters and developed the Windermere Beach resort which they ran for many years. This property is now Terra Vista.

COLOURFUL CHARACTERS

JOCK WILSON

Jock Wilson, Wilmer B.C., laborer, was born in London, England. He early became a man who lived by his wits and in following his profession he became an able

boxer. He emigrated to Canada and at the time of reaching Golden, B.C., Tug Wilson, a well-known English boxer was at the height of his fame. Jock Wilson as he was called later, was on arrival known as Andrew Ant, but catching on to the name Tug Wilson as a boxer of fame, held to it as a non-de-plume and as such held boxing contests in which he made money. The name Wilson stuck to him and in time he was only known as such.

*information from B.G. Hamilton files
December 29, 1931*

DISCOVERY OF GYPSUM MINE ERNIE BRYAN *written 1949*

Any good prospector needs a combination of luck, knowledge and observation, and for Ernest Edward Bryan, a colony of ants helped too.

This white-haired old-timer of the Windermere District has been marking time throughout the long winter. The current revival of mining activity in this district has him “restless as a willow in a windstorm.”

When he speaks of spring the eyes of this 72-year old prospector light up and his shoulders lift as if he is already throwing over them his prospector’s pack ready to hit for the hills.

Ernie Bryan knows every mine in the country, found many of them and thinks he knows where there is enough mineral wealth in the valley to buy a Lincoln car for most of the residents.

He discovered the huge gypsum deposit in the Tegart Pass area near Windermere which is now owned by Columbia Gypsum Products Inc. of which he is a shareholder.

Twenty-six years ago Ernest Bryan mixed trapping with his yen for prospecting. He was on his trapline one winter day about a mile off the trail in the Tegart Pass when he came to a sharp declivity and decided to take a short cut

down and up it rather than to go the long way round.

It was steep for the showshoes he was wearing but he slid and slithered down it and started up the other side pulling himself up the other side by grasping soapberry bushes when the going got too hard. He was nearly at the top when a bush he grabbed gave way and he landed back at the bottom coughing and spluttering with the snow he had rolled in.

It was then that he saw the rock of gypsum, a great slab of it standing 30 feet high, covered with moss.

He took out his jackknife and cut pieces out of the rock then carefully replaced the moss he had disturbed in case anyone else might stumble on what he knew was a valuable deposit.

He had a jam pail with him in which he carried dead fish for trap bait so he filled the pail with his samples and before starting home blazed a tree so that he could find the place again.

Here the joke is on Ernie because he never did find that particular spot again although he knows it is within the claims of the Columbia Gypsum Products Company. The samples went to Ottawa to be assayed and the report came back that it was the purest gypsum known in Canada.

It wasn’t easy then to interest anyone in his find. There was a depression so the building industry was at a standstill and transportation into the Tegart Pass was a problem. Then came the war and no one bothered much about Ernie Bryan’s gypsum mine.

But with the peace came a tremendous building boom and wallboards were in great demand.

Ernie Bryan made another trip into the Tegart Pass. He knew there was gypsum there but wasn’t sure just where and he intended to search for the slab he had found many years before.

The colony of ants made his way easy. Resting from heavy climb with his pack, Ernie idly watched the ants weaving their busy way in and out of a heap of earth. It was just mountain soil or so it seemed until his keen prospector’s

eye noticed that in their tunnelling the ants turned up a white powder.

“Gypsite,” Ernie said to himself and he was right. The country around is rich in gypsum. Assays proved it to be exceptionally pure. Surveys proved it to be what is probably the third largest gypsum deposit in North America.

Shipping will start from the mine this spring.

newsclips from the past

Golden Star Aug. 10, 1928:

In the year 1291 on the 1st of August, the Austrian tyrants were chased out of Uri, Unterwalden and Schwyz on the shores of the Lake of the Four Cantons. This was the birthday of the tiny republic of Switzerland.

This anniversary was celebrated by the small Swiss Colony in the Lake Windermere District. Those in attendance were decorated with a medal representing the 3 founders of Switzerland with the Swiss flag.

The Swiss spent a happy evening singing, talking, laughing and recalling old events and happenings. Commander Powles and W.H. Cleland joined them at their celebration.

The Swiss settlers are happy that they found a new home in Canada and especially this district that resembles their homeland.

Golden Star Aug. 9, 1929:

The town of Canal Flat is rapidly growing in population. The residents have decided to build a school for the education of the children.

On July 27, an organizational meeting was held. All the prominent residents were present. Trustees were chosen by a vote: B. Luck; D. Greenwood; and Harry Burns. The meeting decided they would need \$700 for school purposes for the year.

Golden Star Aug. 30, 1929:

The Imperial Bank is calling for tenders for the erection of a handsome one-and-a-half

storey banking office to be situated at the corner of 3rd St. and Bruce Ave. It has not been fully decided as to whether the outside finish will be coast cedar or brick veneer. (*this is the CIBC*)

Golden Star Feb. 24, 1928:

The B.C. Game Board has imported three wild turkeys as an experiment. There are only 2 gobblers and a hen but it is hoped they will be the nucleus of a colony which in years to come will number thousands. The turkeys were brought from Ohio and let loose on Vancouver Island.

WHAT'S NEW AT THE MUSEUM

We had a very successful opening tea with the official opening of the new archival vault at the beginning of June. We are waiting for the humidity to come down before we move in.

Our student for the summer is Kristen Vogel. She has worked on many projects and has been of great assistance.

We had a team of young people from Yoho Park who worked for 3 days at the Museum doing painting, computer entry and other “odd jobs.” We appreciated all the work they did.

A small group had a field trip to Baptiste Lake. Many of our members were unable to attend so we will probably repeat the trip. We went to the site of the Ward Ranch.

We will be hosting a tea in September to launch the long-awaited book put out by the Brisco Hospital Aid. It is the history of the Brisco area and contains many photos of early days and families in the area. Watch for information in the Valley Echo and plan to join us.

At the end of September the Tues. evening work bees will begin. This is a fun way to learn more about our local history. Think about joining us.

Did you know?

In 1929 there was a Cricket Club in Invermere.

In 1929 renowned photographer, Byron Harmon owned the Coldstream Resort at Windermere.