

Britannia - The Story of a Mine

by Bruce Ramsay

Extract from book about life in Mount Sheer and Britannia Beach

“For two months of the year - from the end of November till the end of January no sun reaches the valley. You’ve heard of sun worshippers. Every year, about the 24th of January, we joined the cult. Everybody was elated when the sun hit the first house and as every other day another one or two houses were bathed in light the progress of the sun became the chief topic of conversation and our spirits were lifted.

Instead of getting rain in the winter we got snow - and more snow. And there was just no place to put it. The heaviest snowfall year I remember was when we got 35 feet. The walks to the houses had snow banks 10 feet high and many windows had to be boarded up to prevent the pressure of the snow from breaking them. A snow plow kept the skip track clear but the rest of the town had little more than trails. The snow usually lasted from Halloween till May.

But though the Beach was commonly known as the Banana Belt the Townsite was still able to produce lovely gardens after the snow. Many of the homes here have been beautified by plants and shrubs removed from the Townsite after the shutdown and the prolific raspberries up there are still enjoyed.

There was quite a pride taken in the homes. Originally all the ceilings were about 11 feet high and walls were all V-join. Many a decorating bee was held to lower ceilings or paper the walls; I don’t think many alterations could have been made in the houses before 1940 because I

know we moved three times and we covered the V-join in three houses. It makes me tired just thinking about it.

It was quite a procedure when anyone moved. One move regularly caused five others - sometimes more. Everybody would scramble after a better house - i.e. a house of the same original design but one which had more improvements made in it - the ceiling lowered, a partition moved or a lean-to added or a better garden. There were no moving vans of course or facilities for moving. Friends were rounded up who trundled the furniture up and down the hills and then a swinging party celebrated the occasion. I remember one girl, inexperienced in local moving who left everything in her refrigerator. Nobody thought to look inside. By the time the amateurs had it set up again in the new house - well, you never saw such a mess.

When I arrived - as a bride - at the Townsite in 1940 there were three bunkhouses, a cookhouse and hotel, and about 200 families making a total population of about 1200. The men worked a six day, 48 hour week with three holidays - Christmas, New Years and July 1. Boxing Day was taken off too but the men “paid” for it by working the Sunday before Christmas. Three whistles woke the camp at 6:00, two whistles at 6:30, one at 5 to 7 and one at 7:00 when work started. There were no alarm clocks needed.

There was a hospital - really little more than a first aid station but it did have a thriving maternity ward - a five room school with grades one to 12 (The Beach high school students commuted daily), a Protestant and Catholic church, a theatre offering two shows a week, a store and a clubhouse.

The store sold groceries, meat, patent medicines, hardware and drygoods. The drygoods consisted chiefly of men’s work clothes. Most of us shopped by catalogue. The service in the store - or lack of it - was unbelievable. We were a captive market and the supervisors were at the Beach. When old timers get together recollections of the store are a source of great merriment - but it wasn’t so funny then.