

# LYTTON MUSEUM

## and ARCHIVES

December 2002

420 Fraser Street, Lytton, B.C.

Issue 3 Number 3

## A 1924 Railway Christmas Eve Miracle

I first heard this story while quaffing a cool one in the Lytton Pub, soon after I drifted into town, and even if I had been telling the story to me, I wouldn't have believed me either. Years later, while reading the history of the Kettle Valley Railway, I found three accounts of the same story.

This account is based upon Barrie Sanford's version in his book "McCulloch's Wonder" with a new twist added this past summer.

The Kettle Valley Line was an amalgamation of several smaller lines running between the mines and smelters east of the Okanagan Valley along the American Boarder.

The line was operated by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), joining their mainline at Hope and Spence's Bridge.

The most difficult construction and operational section was the Coquihalla portion, carved through the rugged Cascade Mountains, between Hope and the Brookmere junction south of Merritt.

That section of the line was closed 5 out of the first 7 years of operation, due to heavy snowfall, avalanches, washouts and rockslides.

During the rainy fall of 1924, numer-

ous rockslides had blocked or damaged the track, injuring several workers and blocking a tunnel near the Romeo station, (McCulloch, the construction engineer, named the stations east of Hope after Shakespearean characters).

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, a warm Chinook wind hit the area melting much of the recent heavy snowfall. The resulting floods took out a bridge near Portia, and damaged several others. The numerous washouts trapped 2 freight trains in the area. Between December 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> the temperature dropped from 40° F above to 40° F below, freezing the trains in until spring. The CPR conceded the KVR to nature and diverted all westbound traffic north to Merritt then west to the main line at Spence's Bridge.

Nature set the final stage for an unimaginable Christmas Eve CPR disaster/miracle.

The CPR's Trans-Continental "Imperial" passenger train, a Christmas Special with about 200 passenger on board, was west bound out of Ashcroft trying to make-up for lost time due to the weather in the Columbia Mountains. The KVR's local "milk-run, passenger car" out of Midway, Rock Creek, Pentiction, and Princeton was diverted to Merritt, thence to Spence's Bridge on the CPR's mainline.

Angus Gilles and his crew in engine number 3267 arrived at Spence's Bridge around midnight on Christmas Eve 1924 after about 16 hours on duty. It would be another 16 hours before they would be back home. Their first and only thought was to grab 40 winks in the bunkhouse, before the westbound "Imperial" arrived around 2 a.m. Locomotive number 3267 was wyed (turned around on an Y track), then parked on the house siding. The fire was banked and covered with fresh coal to ensure a ready supply of steam for the trip home. Unfortunately, the crew failed to notice that the throttle valve had not been completely set closed.

Around 1 a.m. the fire in the engine box burnt through the new coal to leak steam from the boiler into the cylinders, putting the big driving wheels in motion. A little later, neither the station agent, Gillis, nor his crew, nor the waiting passengers heard the blackened out locomotive as it began to slowly creep out onto the CPR main line, east bound towards Ashcroft and the "Imperial" racing westward on the same track.

The last set of circumstances for one of Canada's strangest and most unimaginable railway disaster/miracles were set in place.

... continued on page 2

Aboard the “Imperial Christmas Special” the engineer and conductor were trying to get their beleaguered train back on time, to deliver their some 200 passengers home to Vancouver early on Christmas morning.

As the passenger liner sped along the straight stretch towards the Toketic mile board, 8 miles east of Spence’s Bridge, the engine crew heard 3 distinct rings on their engine train line communication system, meaning, “Stop at next station”. The engineer yanked the throttle closed to slow his high-stepping locomotive to a soft purr, then to stop it by the Toketic’s deserted station platform.

“That’s strange”, the engineer remarked looking back, “no one seems to be getting off here”. The conductor, tramping through the snow covered the platform to the engine, shouted above the wind. “What the hell you stopping here for, that second section is hot on our tail.”

The engineer replied, “Because you signalled me to stop, My shovel boy will vouch for that”

“The hell you say!” snapped the conductor, “Get this damn thing moving again.”

The hogger sat back in his seat, kicked the Johnston bar down, and yarded back on the throttle. No sooner had the passenger train started to move forward than the fireman shouted, “Plug her”, (the universal warning of an impending crash) and disappeared out the gangway into the black night above the icy Thompson River.

The engineer slammed home the throttle, set the brakes to emergency, and followed his fireman out into the storm. Seconds later the Imperial’s engine gently banged into 3267’s front coupler.

The two head-end crewmen were unin-

jured in their leap to safety. As they walked forward they both turned as white as the snow banks they had crawled out of. That unexplained train line signal, a few seconds earlier, had averted a catastrophic accident of unimaginable proportions.

The official investigation following the incident was never able to determine why the bell had sounded, all the crew members on the passenger train denied pulling the signal cord, but they were forever convinced that it was the “Great Dispatcher” looking after His crews on Christmas Eve.

Thus ends the accepted and published account of the Spence’s Bridge CPR miracle of Christmas Eve 1924. Now for the untold remainder of the story:

This past summer the author included the above story at his evening campfire programs at Skihist Park.

One Saturday evening in late last August a camper arrived early at the site and apologized for having to leave early due to a previous commitment. Mid way through the evening, as I told this story, he suddenly sat upright with a most shocked expression on his face. After all the other guests had retired, he introduced himself as a retired Lytton Station Agent (of the Dan Horning, telegrapher’s era). He had spoken to the surviving relatives of the trainman involved in the above and is publishing an article in “The Beaver,” Canada’s premier history magazine.

Later we sat around the dying embers of the campfire chatting and he related how the “Imperial’s” conductor’s grandson had told him that when his grandfather returned to the train at Toketic the vestibule door on the off side was open but the floor cover was still down in place, indicating some one had opened the door and jumped out on the off-side of the train. The blowing snow

had obliterated any sign of footprints.

My guest concluded that some unknown rancher, section hand, native, cowboy, or farmer coming home on Christmas eve, wise in the ways of the CPR, with an arm full of presents for his wife and kids pulled the “stop” signal and inadvertently prevented a major Christmas eve disaster.

As our campfire burned down that summer evening, the lonesome call of a train whistle echoed up the canyon.

Now you know the rest of the story.

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## **McCulloch’s Wonder**

by Barrie Sanford

*is published by:*

WHITECAP BOOKS LTD.  
2229 Jefferson Avenue  
West Vancouver, B.C., V7V 2A9

*(excerpts used with permission)*



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## **BOSTON BAR/NORTH BEND ENHANCEMENT SOCIETY**

We have decided to organize a community reunion next year for both Boston Bar and North Bend.

It will be held on the May 24th weekend along with the May Day Celebrations. Everyone is welcome!

I will include a contact in the next Newsletter for all former Boston Bar/North Bend families.

The Pythian sisters will provide a cold lunch for the guests. We will have a May Queen slide show along with two

browse binders and some historic pictures on display.

Our May Queen list is still growing, and we now have photo's of the 1928 Queen Olive Gisby, 1929 Queen Edith Mercer, 1940 Queen Adele Young, and the 1957 Queen Ann Martin. We are missing the queen's names from 1931-1935, 1939, and possibly 1953. We are still trying to identify two pictures and we are not positive we have everyone in the right order up to 1960.

We are looking for stories and photographs about the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers that served in Lytton and Boston Bar during the war. So far, I have just found some write-ups about them in general as to how they were formed and why.

I have been e-mailing Mr. Bill Young, the author of articles for our local newsletter. I have also found pictures and local history on the web page of [www.michaelkluckner.com](http://www.michaelkluckner.com). He has done water colours of buildings and scenery throughout the Fraser Canyon.

Families can put inquiries at this site as well. At present there are two such inquiries regarding former residents of Boston Bar. I was able to answer them with the assistance of Clifford Fisher from North Bend, as he knew both families.

Mr. Fisher recently obtained a photograph of engine #5334, and their crew. They were heading up to China Bar when the train hit a rock slide at mile 10.0. The only survivor of the crash was Walter Paffard from North Bend. The crew members were engineer Chick Cunningham, fireman Vinnie Firkins, head break man Alex Hamilton, and conductors Sparky Marks and Walter Paffard.

Joan Blakeborough.



## LYTTON MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES CURATOR'S ANNUAL REPORT Nov. 26, 2002

The year 2002 brought over 1200 visitors to our museum from all over the world. We have done several genealogical searches and have received much information in return. We are presently working with the Secondary school on a Native history project. Also on the agenda is a project for the village council to supply pictures of all our previous Mayors for the walls of the Council Chambers.

New items in the museum include all the St. Bartholomew's hospital artifacts, due to the closing of the hospital. It has taken several months to accession these items. Also, because the old Repeater Station is going to be demolished, we were given boxes of railway artifacts that still need to be cleaned and accessioned. One of these items is a beautiful clock made by a former Lytton resident, Brian Riley. Other misc. items from former residents have also been received, as well as several photographs.

The Village Council has continued to support the Museum fully, and last summer hired a student for the months of July and August. This enabled us to keep our museum open for regular hours and increased our visitor count by approximately 400% for those months. A big 'thankyou' goes to the Village staff and particularly the Village Maintenance crew, who were always there to answer my cries for help!

Heritage Week 'Tea and Talk' in February was again very successful. Many Seniors came and the stories 'flowed like wine'! Pictures were brought and shared, and some were donated to the museum collection. This is a fun afternoon and everyone is welcome to attend. Watch for posters in 2003 for the date of our next 'Tea and Talk'.

We have published three issues of the Museum and Archives Newsletter, which

includes stories of our past and our pioneers. Graham Everett is an important contributor to our paper, and lately we have invited the Boston Bar Museum Committee to contribute their news. We are very lucky to have Richard Forrest of Freedom Graphics to set up and publish our paper, and please remember, if you have difficulty finding copies, they are available at the museum for 50 cents each. Better still, become a member of the museum and have each issue sent you free of charge!

We now have a membership of 32, some from as far away as Summerland and Vancouver. Memberships and renewals will be available at the Christmas Market on Dec. 11, or from Joan Craig at the Doctor's office or D. Dodge at the Museum.

Last year's Christmas Market was very successful, with many fine local products on display, and a great lunch was available. This year's Christmas Market will be held at the Parish Hall on Wednesday, December 11, from 11 am to 2 pm. A fabulous lunch of homemade soups, sandwiches and sweets will be available, and at least five tables of local crafts and produce for Christmas shopping will be there to tempt you. As this is our main fundraising event we encourage you to please come and enjoy good food, good company, and good shopping!

The Museum is definitely a local project that adds to the pride and education of our citizens. However, volunteers make the difference between success and failure, and we need those volunteers. Our lady volunteers, Dorothy Share, Mona Crowston, Shirley Dimond and Marie Heaster, are doing a marvelous job inside the museum. Now we need carpenters! We need a shelter on the museum grounds to house several large articles that have been donated. Carpenters, where are you??

Respectfully submitted,

Dorothy Dodge, **Curator.**



*Loretta Webster, Norma Webster holding Margaret, Corporal Fred Webster and Lily Webster*

Photo courtesy of Thomas Andrew

It is always interesting to find items that individuals will keep stored and treasured away.

The late Emily Martin, a treasure herself, kept many things that were near and dear to her. As part of her legacy she left behind these wonderful letters that are a part of a collection of five from Corporal Fred Webster, K76078 who served with the Seaforths of Canada during WWII.

In one of his letters Fred, who was always appreciative of Emily's kind thoughts, deeds and letters, expresses himself this way: "I certainly appreciate every bit you two are doing for me may be someday I'll get an opportunity to do same for youse (sic) somehow I

wish with all my heart to get such an opportunity...". The other person Fred is referring to is Emily's older brother Richie Munro who was also in the Canadian Army.

The letter reproduced on the following pages, dated November 18, 1944, seems very appropriate to include in this edition of the Museum newsletter, as it talks about Christmas getting closer and closer.

These actual letters are what inspired me to look into what individuals have in their family albums and such because quite a few years ago the federal government sent someone looking for photos and other items that people had on Corporal Fred Webster. At that time not

many interesting items were discovered. However, just recently, several photos of Fred in uniform were located.

One owner of a photo did not know the individuals in the group family photo, so even getting names to faces in unknown photographs has been rewarding.

The photos gathered so far have been copied onto CD for future work and photos themselves will be returned to their owners.

What is hoped for is that enough material can be collected for publication. It is hoped if you have a story, recollection, photo or any useful information that you will contact:

John Haugen at 250-455-0091  
or by email tuckozap@yahoo.ca

Thankyou for all of your help and assistance thus far.



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### **Editor's Note:**

John Haugen has been collecting a wealth of information about the valuable contributions of the First Nations of the Lytton area towards Canada's war effort.

This project is both fascinating and historically important, as many of the people involved are in their seventies and eighties and there is a closing window of time to record this information.

If anyone has photos, letters, stories, medals or any other memorabilia, please contact John. Your contributions will be recorded and returned.

John is hoping to collect enough information to record his findings permanently in a book.

676078 Cpl. Webster Fred  
Scarth of Canada  
C.A.D. C.M.G.

Nov 18, 1944

Dear Sis

Writing a few lines to say I am doing well right now which is more than I can say for myself some little time in the past and and very sorry not to have written any sooner but was unable to do so owing to getting wounded a bit and on top of that I took sick I have quite recovered from both now this is the first day I've actually stayed out of bed although I'm still a bit shaky on the bones I'll be out and around again soon I don't know when they'll boot me out of the hospital I'm sure going to miss these nice white sheets and a bed to sleep in that is some thing we see very little of in army life well christmas is

2  
coming in the distance is close and ever closer but only you lucky people can look forward to such good days but as we can only look forward to the day when this thing will be over so that we may go home and enjoy such a thing as christmas dinner and such I can still remember the last Xmas dinner I had at home back in 1940 it sure seems years & years ago since then. The weather over here is getting rather cold even though the sun shines during the day when the weather man permits as a clear day it has been quite fair lately but I am afraid that is not going to last very long now I am quite aways in the southern part still it gets chilly in the evenings

3

so I can imagine just how chilly  
 it must be up north where I  
 was - very near a month ago since  
 I left I suppose everybody is  
 in bed by now with a cold home  
 and Willie is still working down  
 at Inkittaph or was it Boothroyd  
 its funny their names seem to sound  
 funny now for its a long while since  
 I use to hear them in fact I use to see  
 them both - quite a lot at one time  
 there use to be a lot of dancing  
 around Boothroyd one time and of  
 course I use to like dancing them  
 days when I was a young fellow  
 I suppose they still have the odd  
 dance around Lyton well it  
 looks like I have to start up my new  
 dance not recued pencils up my way  
 but it must be chasing me around  
 for I had been moving ahead must say  
 Good Bye everybody for now. (2)

First fold here

BY AIR MAIL

AIR LETTER

IF ANYTHING IS ENCLOSED  
THIS LETTER WILL BE SENT  
BY ORDINARY MAIL



Miss. Emily Murray  
 Lyton B.C.  
Canada

Army form W 927

To open cut here

81096-X

Lyton B.C. Canada

I believe my honor now that the  
 contents of this envelope refer  
 to nothing but private and family  
 matters

To open cut here

## LYTTON MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT 2002

Welcome to the Annual General Meeting for 2002. Once again it is time to report on the past year and look forward to the next. I would like to start by mentioning that I have enjoyed the past eight years as Chair of the Museum.

I remember when Joe Chute, Tom Wright, Hedley Crowther, Joan Craig, Kim Husilack and I met in what is now our Green Room and dreamed of renovating the old house into a community museum. Many hours of volunteer work later, by many different people including those at that early meeting and many more here tonight, and now we have a museum that any community would be proud of.

Our biggest problem in 2002 seems to be that we are growing too fast.

With the closing of St. Bartholomew's as a hospital facility this spring, our little museum became the repository for a huge collection of medical related arti-

facts, as well as volumes of society meeting records and other related documents. This material has been a burden on our volunteer staff, but we feel that it is important to keep this material in the Village.

Recently, we have received a donation of railway related artifacts, and these will be sorted out in the new year. All of this is in addition to the constant influx of material from the community.

The coming year, 2003, will be a year of change for Lytton and the Museum. Our Village liaison, Kathryn Brooks, will be replaced by a new Councillor by the end of November. I would like to thank Kathryn for her constant work on our behalf in dealing with the Village Council and administration.

I hope that the new year will allow the Museum to continue on with its service to Lytton and the area, growing steadily and becoming an even more important part of the community. There are several projects that we have been planning for some time that we hope will

get underway this winter and spring. Among these are the outdoor display area and the new display cabinets.

I would like to take a moment to thank all of the volunteers who have made our Museum a success. I will apologise in advance if I have forgotten anyone.

Thanks to Joe and Peggy Chute, Lloyd Dodge, Dorothy Share, Marie Heaster, Mona Crowston, Lois and Wayne Brooks, Chuck Keeble, Lawrence Haugen, Eli Makeiv, Joan Craig, Val Ablett, Jim and Irene Steer, Graham Everett, Gwendy Lamont, Joan Blakeborough, Shirley Dimond and, of course, Dorothy Dodge.

I truly appreciate the effort all of you have put towards the success of the Lytton Museum and Archives.

Richard Forrest, **Chairperson**



## Volunteers

A few of the people who have helped out the Museum over the last year.

Top left — Wayne Brooks  
Top Center — Joan Craig  
Top Right — Mona Crowston  
Bottom Left — Lois Brooks  
Bottom Center — Peggy Chute  
Bottom Right — Dorothy Share

We would like to remind everyone that Lytton is very lucky to have a museum for such a small community. However, it will only exist as long as there are volunteers and a much larger membership.

Memberships for the year 2003 are available at the museum (455-2254), from Dorothy Dodge (455-2268) or from Joan Craig (455-6658 or 455-2202).





*Visitors to our Museum this past summer.*

## MUSEUM ELECTIONS

The Museum Annual General meeting was held on November 26, 2002, at the Parish Hall. The elections were held, and the current executive was returned by acclamation:

Chairperson: Richard Forrest  
Vicechair: Joe Chute  
Secretary: Peggy Chute  
Treasurer: Joan Craig

### *Correction: Sept. 2002 issue*

We apologize for the error in the story "The Phillips Brothers Wound a Deer". The brothers are Simon and Qwilym Phillips. The photograph is of William, Simon's son. We're very sorry. I guess we can chalk one up for the gremlins this time!

## **LYTTON MUSEUM** and ARCHIVES

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