

Travel

B.C. TRAVEL

Fort Steele -1

GHOSTS OF MOUNTIES AND HURDY GURDY GIRLS LIVE AGAIN AT  
RESTORED FORT STEELE

BY BRUCE RAMSEY

A rather embittered, or perhaps too honest but poor prospector, wrote a letter to the editor of an Idaho newspaper in which he said "one gold commissioner and two hurdy gurdy girls at Wild Horse Creek could take New York in ten days."

That was in 1865, more than a hundred years ago, when Wild Horse, near the East Kootenay city of Cranbrook, was experiencing a hectic gold rush. It is the duty of this chronicler to report that things have changed. A lot of things have changed on the banks of Wild Horse Creek in the last few years.

For instance, the gold commissioner isn't there anymore and, alas, neither are the hurdies who, for \$1, would dance with their feet on the ceiling. The best of the good news, however, is that old Fort Steele, the first outpost of the Northwest Mounted Police in B.C. has been restored as a "living ghost town".

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Museums can be frightfully dull places, but Fort Steele, like Barkerville in the Cariboo, doesn't fit into that category. Restored by the provincial government of B. C., and serving visitors travelling on Highway 93 to Banff and Jasper, it offers something for everybody in the family.

Nature began it millions of years ago by placing some of the world's most magnificent scenery on its doorstep. There are craggy mountain peaks and gentle hills, the broad Kootenay River and little creeks of which Wild Horse is but one. There's gold in them thar streams, and if you're prepared to work hard for little return, you can wash "colors" with a gold pan.

The days of '65 are over. The old miners left no easily accessible gold for this generation to find, but there is still a lure to these creeks, and a lure is exactly what is needed.

The fly fisherman will find the babbling streams which enter the Kootenay near the Fort a place which is near the accepted views of what a fisherman's paradise should be. There are rainbow trout, eastern brook trout, cutthroats, lake trout or char, Rocky Mountain whitefish and, in season, the hunter will encounter game which people write books and adventure stories about. That is the East Kootenay of British Columbia.

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You can also look for fossils, and you can search for the mythical Side-Hill Gauger, the strange animal with his left legs shorter than the right to enable him to get around the mountains. (Some say the right legs are the short ones, a subject which has been strongly debated in the Temples of Bacchus in the area.) You can also search for the legendary Lost Lemon mine, believed to be located somewhere east of Fort Steele in the heart of the Rockies.

While gold was the original attraction of the area, what really made it well known was the arrival of Red Coats at Galbraith's Landing -- later known as Fort Steele after the first North West Mounted Police commander.

And the only reason that Fort Steele isn't prominently displayed on a map today is the result of a dirty deal.

The Mounties had arrived to put down what might have been a serious Indian difficulty which, briefly put, was nothing more than comic opera.

Then came the discovery of the nearby Sullivan and North Star silver-lead-zinc mines, and Fort Steele emerged as the great metropolis of the East Kootenay. It had hotels which boasted, inevitably, of the finest cuisine north of San Francisco; it had saloons whose swinging doors never stopped swinging; it had churches, a newspaper, real estate promoters, land promoters, mining promoters and promoters who promoted promoters. If it hadn't been for the high mountains to port and starboard, the sun would never have set on Fort Steele.

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But then along came a military man, a colonel by the name of Baker who took up land on the other side of the Kootenay River. He was a persuasive chap, and he talked the railway into coming to his little townsite of Cranbrook. And thus did Fort Steele begin the downhill path.

By the end of the Second World War the population was down to 50 and most of the buildings had disappeared under the assault of fire, decay and vandalism.

During the late 1950s renewed interest in the townsite was shown. The provincial government made the townsite an historic park and in 1961 started to restore buildings.

Now Fort Steele has come back to life. The visitor can see the notorious gold commissioner's office, the original barracks of the NWMP, the old Windsor Hotel, the churches, homes and schools of a bygone era.

Time seems to stand still in Fort Steele, and a little time spent there roaming around breathing the sweet East Kootenay air, will be time worth spent.





Fort Steele once again bustles with activity, but this time instead of gold seekers and settlers it's an influx of tourists that's causing the commotion. Recently restored, Fort Steele was officially opened June 24 by British Columbia Premier W.A.C. Bennett.