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NEW "RUSH" ON THE CARIBOO TRAIL

by Pete Loudon

BARKERVILLE - Just over a century ago, 30,000 American adventurers swarmed into Canada and followed the course of British Columbia's Fraser River to the new-found gold fields.

Now they are doing it again. But the trek up the gold rush trail today is a journey of comfort and beauty. And there is a new reward at the end of the trail -- a glimpse of history come to life. It is Barkerville, the town where it is always 1862.

Drawn to the Pacific Northwest by Seattle's Century 21, the two-week vacationer will find he can cover two centuries in the space of a few days if he goes on to Canada, to follow the Cariboo Trail.

Barkerville is 60 miles east of Quesnel, deep in interior B. C. A century ago, it was the largest town north of San Francisco and west of the Great Lakes. Three years ago it was all but a ghost town. But today it's jumping again.

The wooden, false-front buildings look down on plank sidewalks thronged once again with high-booted, bearded miners, mustachioed dandies from the saloons and gambling spots and frontier ladies in hoops and bustles. Barkerville is celebrating its centenary.

Wellington Moses' barber shop, where every miner stored his own monogrammed shaving mug, has mannequins acting out a famous Barkerville story of murder and retribution. A miner was bushwacked on his way into Barkerville. Moses had known him on the trail.

In the barbershop, Moses, a colored man, is depicted dressing the hair of one of the hurdy-gurdy (dancehall) girls and she is showing him a nugget tie pin given her by one James Barry. The barber recognized his friend's pin. This evidence led to the death by hanging of Barry later at nearby Richfield, just a short hike up William's Creek Canyon.

The Richfield Courthouse was included in the restoration program and the atmosphere of the day when the famed hanging judge, Matthew Bailie Begbie, held circuit court there, is being preserved. The grim gallows is gone, however, and so are the markers on the graves of Barry and another murderer who met justice there. The sensation seeker might unknowingly picnic on the spot where they lie.

Two old cemeteries can be seen. The one at Barkerville has been maintained. The headstones testify to the attraction the gold rush held.

There are names and places carved into the greying wood, which are representative of all parts of the United States, England, and even Australia. There's a heart-rending story for nearly every grave.

Many of the early miners were Chinese. They were brought here as cheap labor but struck out on their own when news of the Fraser strike came down river. A careful searcher can find their graveyard too. Their rotting headboards project through the hillside undergrowth, though most of their bones have been sent back to China.

The student of history can locate copies of the "Cariboo Sentinel", the \$1-per-four-pages newspaper which was turned out in Barkerville on one of the first presses in the West. It holds a thousand stories including detailed accounts of the celebrations of both Canadian and U. S. national holidays by the polygot community.

There is the story of Twelve Foot Davis, an American who arrived too late to stake any of the richer claims on the Creek. He had come from Vermont after hearing about nuggets as big as hens' eggs. But he found 3,000 claims had been staked, each just 100 feet wide and running back from the creek like house lots.

Unable to read or write, Davis could judge distances. He spotted an error. One claim was 12 feet wider than regulations permitted. He staked the 12-foot strip and took out \$12,000. Later owners boosted the take to \$65,000.

Other tales tell of Billy Barker who made the first big strike on the Creek and of John Cameron who promised to bury his wife in Ontario. He later hauled her to the Coast in an alcohol-filled lead-lined coffin by sled, which was also laden with 50 pounds of gold. It was a year after her death before Sophia Cameron reached her final resting place.

There are stories of haunted mines, barefisted prize fights, and love so devoted that one man had a piano packed in by six men to please his wife.

Some of the tales are spun by the people who serve visitors in the stores and eateries, such as the Wake-up-Jake Coffee Saloon. So authentic has been reconstruction of the latter that the builders even used the old-fashioned square nails of the period.

The Premier of British Columbia, W. A. C. Bennett, and his Cabinet Ministers will move the B. C. capital to Barkerville August 12 and 13. On Aug. 12 they will attend special church services and on August 13, commemorating Billy Barker's gold strike 100 years earlier, they will hold a Cabinet meeting and formally open the Barkerville Museum. It alone could hold a visitor spellbound for days.

The whole remarkable recreation of Barkerville has been a government project under direction of the Barkerville Restoration Advisory Committee, headed by Deputy Provincial Secretary, L. J. Wallace. Work has been carried out by the Department of Recreation and Conservation, and the town is now classified as an historic park.

Aside from a restaurant and restrooms, the Committee has allowed no modern accommodation to detract from the restoration project. But modern hotels, motels, and resorts ring the area. And there is a large camping ground at Barkerville, replete with all facilities. Quesnel is the closest town and the best place to get directions to other holiday accommodation. The area generally is noted for cattle ranching, logging, and mining, and provides rich fish and game harvests annually to sportsmen.

Half the fun in a Cariboo trip is the journey in. The highways are newly paved and engineered to the high standards of the Trans-Canada Highway, allowing leisurely driving through some of the most spectacular scenery in the world.

In the 1860's men went to Barkerville partly by boat, canoe, or raft, and later paddlewheelers. They used packhorses, oxen and one man tried to introduce camels. Later they devised a form of steam-driven tractor which proved uneconomic. Whatever methods were used, they were bone-wearying and slow.

Today you reach the Cariboo by air, train, bus or car, but the best of these, giving freer wandering, is by car. Highway 99 to Vancouver puts you quickly on the gold fields route. Highway 1 heads up the Fraser Valley through lush dairy and farm lands to Abbotsford, Chilliwack and Hope where the river bends north through Fraser Canyon and unparalleled mountain scenery. There are view and picnic points aplenty and many motels.

The village of Yale was a trouble spot in 1859. A Californian, Ned McGowan, who had earlier escaped the Vigilantes at San Francisco, had with his gang, all but taken control. Col. Richard Moody boated up to Yale on the ice-crusted river with a party of 37 Royal Engineers, sailors, and marines to "show the flag". The Ned McGowan War, as history records it, petered out immediately.

Lytton, Cache Creek, and Clinton are other towns on the route whose history is inseparable from the gold rush. The annual Clinton ball once was the social event of the Province. It often lasted six nights, miners and cattlemen being required to check their guns at the door. Dancers came in from points hundreds of miles away.

Cariboo roadhouses designated by their distance from the start of the Cariboo wagon road are often still existent. One town now bears the name 100-Mile House.

North of Cache Creek the country is high plateau, dry and sage-brushed in Summer, but more heavily timbered as the route wends northward.

Williams Lake and Quesnel offer all the modern amenities. Quesnel's reputation in this line goes back to 1860. One aging newspaper account claimed Quesnel figured not only in a gold rush but also in a turnip rush. In 1860, scurvy brought about by rough trail diets, was taking a toll. To avoid it, miners flocked to the Quesnel farm of Norwegian Charles Danielson who grew turnips. They paid 25 cents to \$1.00 per turnip. His vegetable patch outdid many of the river bank claims, clearing \$3,000. in one season.

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It's an easy two-day trip to Barkerville from the Coast, and the traveller finds history all along the way, history that belongs as much to the U. S. as the pioneers who made it belong now to Barkerville.

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