

# PRINTER'S DEVILS

How a Feisty Pioneer Newspaper  
Shaped the History of British Columbia,  
1895–1925

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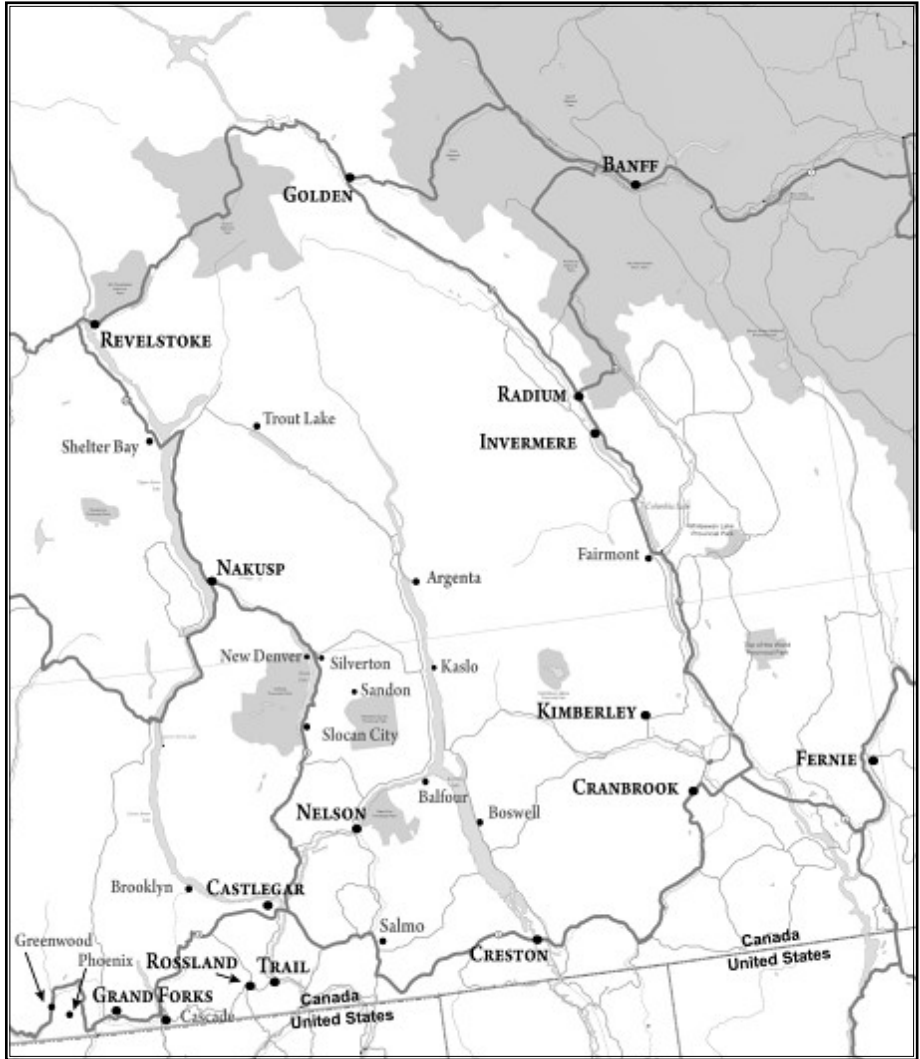
“Reading this book is like listening to Ron tell a story—it makes you want to lean in and pay close attention. This highly detailed examination of the *News* over a 30-year period combines stories of the mundane (such as barn painting, recipes and home remedies for your ailments) alongside events of international importance and entertaining editorials on almost every topic. In our fast-paced world of instant communication and information overload, it provides a welcome visit to the past, where the weekly or daily paper was the sole means of connection with the world beyond your front door and local community.”

—Takaia Larsen, Selkirk College, author of *Sowing the Seeds*

“From politics to enterprise, social standards and entertainment, *Printer’s Devils* reflects the issues of the day—overt boosterism, rivalries with other towns and newspapers, and political views that consistently favour business interests and conservatism are routine. In contrast, they pilloried the Chinese people and Doukhobors, the labour movement and its leaders, anything socialist and women’s suffrage. The book reminds us that history does indeed repeat, as with the anti-vaccination movements around the 1917 flu epidemic and subsequent smallpox episodes. It also confirms how much local interest we have lost with the transition from community-based news publications to the current consumption of media.”

—Joey Hartman, BC Labour Heritage Centre

# MAP



## PREFACE

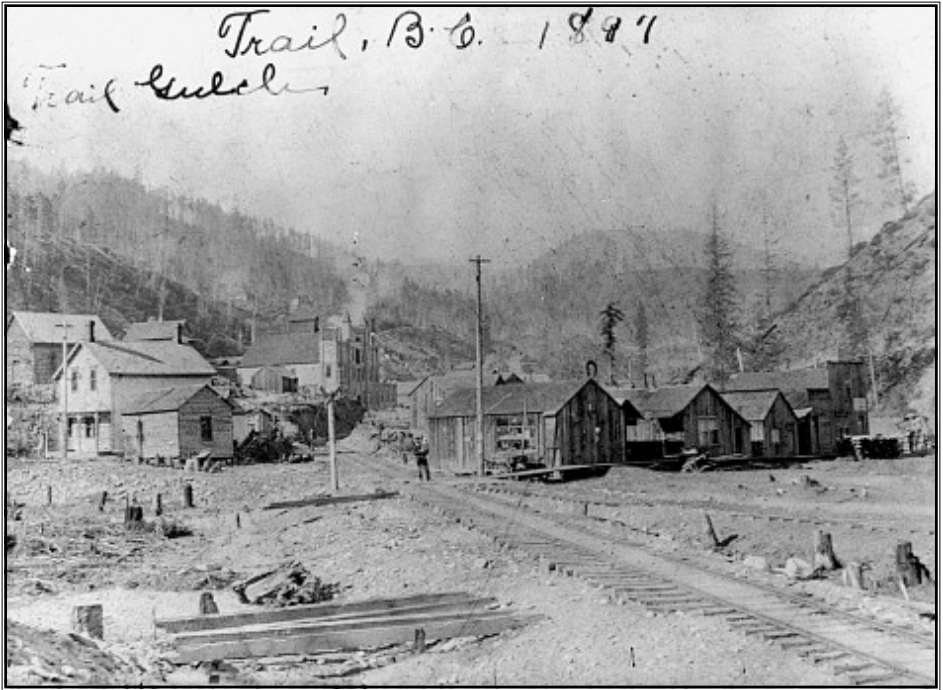
“What’s the Greek word for the number five?” Dad shouted from his worn-out old easy chair, his newspaper quarter-folded for a full view of the crossword puzzle. “I don’t know,” I shouted, to breach the hearing-aid barrier. “Maybe check your crossword dictionary?” Doing his local newspaper crossword was among Dad’s favourite pastimes, but not just any crossword. It had to be his local newspaper’s crossword. “It’s the best,” he would often say.

Actually, Dad had to wait to get his first crossword puzzle until the weekly newspaper in his hometown of Trail, British Columbia, finally became the *Trail Daily Times*. The *Times* would grow to be among the oldest continuously published newspapers in the province. But as we’ll see, it was the *Times*’s parents, the *Trail Creek News* and then *Trail News*, that informed Dad’s family and the rest of the isolated city as it entered the century that then prime minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier claimed would belong to Canada. The *News* served as their compass.

My grandfather was among the Croatian (Austro-Hungarian) immigrants that came north from the Montana mines and smelters to settle in the Trail area. He first arrived in North America in 1893. Seven years later, he migrated from his job as a labourer at the United S&R Company smelter in East Helena, Montana, to the West Kootenay, first to the Boundary Country at Grand Forks. The family would later settle in Trail, where Grandpa and three sons, Frank, Nick and Mike,



Trail Creek and smelter, ca. 1899. Courtesy Columbia Basin Institute of Regional History



Trail townsite, ca. 1897. Courtesy Moyie High House Museum

found work at the smelter.

Grandpa's time with the smelter ended after five years, and he eventually died of a lung ailment perhaps associated with the smelter workplaces at East Helena and Trail. Before succumbing, Grandpa was co-owner of the Victoria Hotel in Trail and later bought land in the area to plant an orchard. The weekly reported it all, including a front-page obituary. By then, Dad was working "up the Hill" and would log thirty-six years there. His older brother Frank was there for forty-four years. Their brother Nick died at twenty-six in an industrial accident in the 1920s.

Growing up in the Gulch, an immigrant enclave, the Verzuh kids would have had glimpses of the weekly newspaper that informed the small industrial community and guided the decisions of the smelter city's citizens. There were also other local newspapers, such as the three daily papers that were once published in Rossland: the *Evening Record*, the mining city's oldest, the *Miner*, and for a few years, the *Evening World*, a union-funded daily. But the *Trail News* was Trail's main source of local news, and it remained so until 1925 when it changed its frequency and became the *Trail Daily Bulletin* and later the *Trail Daily Times*.

Dad, his brothers and sisters, and the rest of the population of Trail, founded in 1901, learned about their city council's decisions, the guest evangelists at local churches, the latest offerings at the Star, Liberty and People's Preference Theatres, and the editor's opinion, usually pro-business and always supportive of the city's largest employer, the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada (CM&S).

Back then, the weekly, all four pages of it at first, offered Trailites everything from bad poetry and a few complaining letters to announcements of a new sewing shop or the arrival of Victor, the world-famous accordionist. Grandma couldn't read English, so she couldn't take advantage of the recipes that appeared in the Homemakers' Corner. Opinion columns from far-off commentators, usually American, were lost on my illiterate grandfather; so were the sharp-penned critiques from the editor's desk. And there was no extra money to buy the miracle cures that appeared in weekly advertisements for Tanlac, Adlerika, Vick's VapoRub, and many more.

Like the citizens of any other small town, Trailites got their weekly dose of news, gossip, and entertainment from the local paper. In fact, the Trail paper was essential reading in some homes, for few of them subscribed to the big coastal papers, the *Vancouver Sun*, *Province* or *Daily World*. Dad probably glimpsed a page of the *News* in the lunch box of one of Grandma's immigrant boarders.

Like the rest of town, the Verzuh men were sports minded. Dad was interested in hunting, fishing, hockey, curling, lacrosse, boxing and wrestling, and the *News* covered them all. When the First World War began, news of smelter workers enlisting was prominently displayed. The death of a local man on the battlefield was reported, as were acts of bravery in the fight against "the Hun." Wartime propaganda filled the editorial page, and the promotion of food, fuel and beer restrictions made for regular reading. Deaths at the smelter appeared all too regularly as well.

Policies like the Prohibition Act, Alien Labour Act or Idler's Act were presented, explained, and supported or opposed by strong editorial opinion. Changes in labour laws were followed, as were CM&S rulings on wage increases and benefits. Local 105 of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), predecessor to the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, (Mine-Mill) was accorded a minimum of space, often buried in the "In and Around Trail" column. When the Mine-Mill local went on strike in 1917, the *News* provided coverage amidst editorials that promoted anti-union views.

Dad and his brothers and sisters were enticed by *News* advertisements to attend the local cinema to see silent films featuring screen stars like William S. Hart, Douglas Fairbanks or Charlie Chaplin. These actors were joined by Fatty Arbuckle, Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford and Pola Negri. Mutt and Jeff cartoons were a favourite of the Verzuhs as was the unionized live orchestra. They also saw promotions for the latest dance crazes and craved tickets to hear a local band playing at Swartz Hall.

In addition to a source of entertainment, the *News* offered new ideas and opinions tailored to local tastes, be it about a court case, school board decision or a meeting of the Board of Trade. The *News*, and later the *Times*, were how residents learned about their community, and it shaped how they looked at the outside world. They learned about anarchism and socialism, always from a negative perspective. They learned that capitalism was good and communism was bad. They learned that unions made workers go on strike just to serve the leadership's selfish ends and that a vote for a Conservative politician was a vote for a stable community and a more secure livelihood.

In short, denizens of the smelter city grew up infused with the news, sports and entertainment choices, editorial opinions, snippets of humour and the vision of their town that the six editors who ran the *News* from 1895 to 1925 shaped in them. They grew up knowing every move of their fellow citizens, whether it was a stagecoach trip to Rossland or a motoring adventure to Nelson, a sojourn in the US or an unwanted stay in the local jail.

*Printer's Devils* is the story of that weekly newspaper and the town it served. Hopefully, it will be a pathway into the pre- and post-First World War generation through the lens of those six country newspaper editors. All but one was American. All were men, quite conservative in political outlook and often anti-union. All were against the Russian Revolution as it fully embraced communism and transformed Russia into the Soviet Union.

As we'll see, all the editors were struggling businessmen who were dependent on advertising from other businesses. They knew it was in their interest to promote the town and saw it as their role to help wean it from rough mining camp to prosperous Interior city. Along the way, we visit the cultures, institutions, politics, and social lives of a working-class community not much different from other such communities in single-industry towns anywhere.

In a way, *Printer's Devils* is a celebration of a long-dead weekly newspaper that served a bygone era. Nowadays, Trailites are likely to get their news and entertainment from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or TikTok. Still, there was nothing quite like reading the weekly newspaper's account of the drunken brawl on a Saturday night at the Legion Hall, finding out that a couple had eloped or cheering a young athlete on his or her way to the big leagues.

*Printer's Devils* is a look back at one weekly newspaper in one Canadian town, but it is also the story of all weekly newspapers. It is the tale of how the *News* influenced public opinion and how it tried to assist its readers as the town grew and prospered. It traces the editors of the weekly over twenty-five years with a view to identifying their backgrounds, editorial opinions and business priorities. *Printer's Devils* is a history of a dying institution in Canadian society as portrayed in one western industrial town. It is also an opportunity to vicariously visit the history of a Canadian town in transition.

It was fun to make that journey. I hope it will also be fun, informative, engaging and occasionally insightful for you as well.

Ron Verzuh  
Labour Day 2022