

THE POWER PLANT THAT RAN ITSELF

THE exterior of the hotel was in keeping with the dreary, dilapidated clapboard-look of the rest of Sandon. All the other buildings were empty. They leaned drunkenly against each other down the one ramshackle street, their windows giving a blank vacant stare. Only the old union hall gave any indication of earlier usefulness; it boasted a weather-beaten sign on which the words, "Western Federation of Miners" could still be discerned.

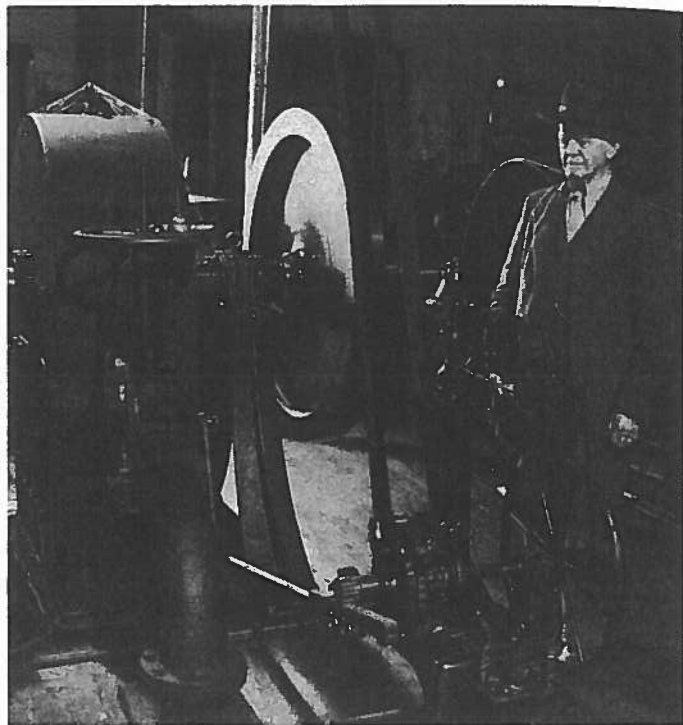
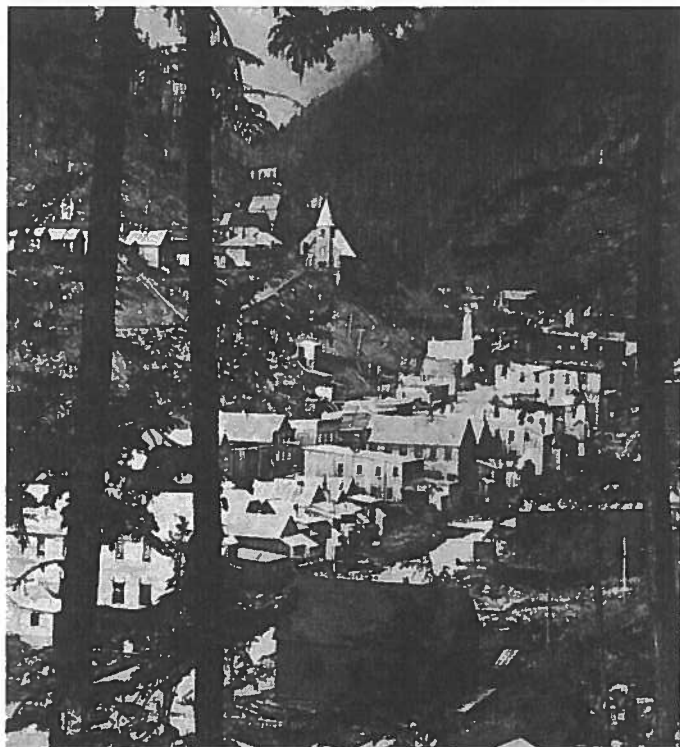
The street itself was of wood; it was even planked underfoot, because it had been built over the creek which bisected the canyon-like townsite. Broken rails between the buildings put out ghostly splintered hands as the gloom of twilight settled over the little Slocan mining town.

Inside the hotel, it was quite different. True, the great dining room had only one long table, but silver and glassware gleamed in the brightly-lit room, and the many-paned front windows produced almost a tropical effect from the profusion of orange and lemon trees grown in the window boxes. Many of the trees had fruit hanging plump and ripe from the branches.

Johnny Harris, the diminutive hotel proprietor, and the custodian of all that was left of Sandon, presided at the table in the slightly rusty but impressive dignity of a black dress suit dating from the nineties. Mrs. Harris, a comely, comfortable woman, was the gracious hostess. The remainder of the dinner party comprised Ross Thompson, the man who had staked the townsite of Rossland, B.C.; R. G. Joy, newspaperman, baker, raconteur, amateur historian, and Kootenay pioneer; and myself. The three of us had

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Now a flood-smashed ghost town, Sandon boasted the second hydro-electric plant in British Columbia. It began operating early in 1897.



The late Johnny Harris stands beside the Pelton wheel which activated the Sandon generator continuously for half a century.

COMINCO PHOTO

come to Sandon, on that brisk fall day in 1947, to give Ross Thompson, now 87, a nostalgic return to the prospecting grounds he had left over 50 years before.

Cigars and a liqueur followed dinner. Johnny Harris was close in years to craggy old Ross Thompson, and he had spent nearly 60 of those years in the Sandon area, but he had never forgotten the traditions of Kentucky, where he was born and spent his childhood. Veterans of the mining industry will attest to the fact that the Reco Hotel, in the time of Johnny Harris, offered the finest hospitality north of the blue grass state.

I had only to lean back and listen, once dinner was over, offering a word of prompting here and there, as stories and anecdotes flowed in a stream calculated to intoxicate even the most blase writer.

That is how I came to hear the story of what Johnny Harris referred to as British Columbia's first hydro-electric plant.*

The little plant was churning away in a sway-backed structure built on the creek only a few hundred yards from the hotel. The gentle hum of the generator could be heard from where we sat, and twinkling lights down the length of the deserted street had dispelled the gathering dark of night.

How did Johnny Harris come to build a hydro-electric plant?

*A plant at Nelson started in January, 1896. The Sandon plant started in March, 1897.

The question was almost offensive. In 1896 Sandon was the roaring centre of the Slocan mining boom, with hundreds of prospectors seeking the glassy galena containing silver, and parties of geologists, promoters and financiers moving daily through the town. Electricity was the latest thing in the United States and eastern Canada, and the Reco Hotel had the latest of everything; it was essential, therefore, that the hotel should have electric lights.

"It was a seven-day wonder, even though they were building a plant in Nelson too," Johnny mused. "Folks came from all over the Kootenays to see the lights turned on."

He hired two men as operators and the plant was on 24-hour duty from the start.

"Sandon was a 24-hour town in those days," Johnny said proudly.

He couldn't recall ever having any great trouble with the plant. Down through the years of boom and bust, prosperity and depression, Sandon prided itself on being one of the best-lit communities in Canada.

Then came the first war.

"That's when I lost one of my operators," said Johnny. "He went off to fight, and we cut the plant operation down to 16 hours. I didn't feel justified in hiring another man when there was a war on."

"That one never came back," Johnny told me, "and I had to let the other fellow go during the depression."

The old fellow's blue eyes, slightly clouded with cataract, twinkled perceptibly.

"It took me a long time to make up my mind that I had to learn to operate the plant myself," he said, "but I finally went in there one day and asked him to show me how to shut the plant down."

"He did—and then I asked him to start it up for me. He did that too, and then I asked him to shut it down again. Then I started it up myself and told him he could retire."

"And you've operated it yourself ever since?" asked Ross.

Johnny exploded in a loud guffaw. "I've never shut it down from that day to this. That plant has been turning over day and night for over 16 years, and I have never done anything but oil the bearings. If I had known it would run itself, I would have saved about \$50,000 in the wages I paid out."

It went on operating for a few years more, until Johnny died and the saga of Sandon neared its close.

The end came in September, 1955. Completely deserted now, and with the plank road rotting and falling into the creek bed beneath, Sandon was swept out of existence on the foaming crest of a freshet. Pilings crumbled under the force of the water, the ancient buildings toppled and were borne grinding and grumbling into a matchstick timber jam.

Underneath it lay the remains of that gallant little hydro-electric power plant, one of the first of its kind ever to be built in British Columbia. ✓



The Ruth Hope Mine, high on the background hill, overlooked the booming gulch town of Sandon in 1898. Johnny Harris's pioneer power plant was a community mainstay. Cody Creek divides the buildings at lower left.

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