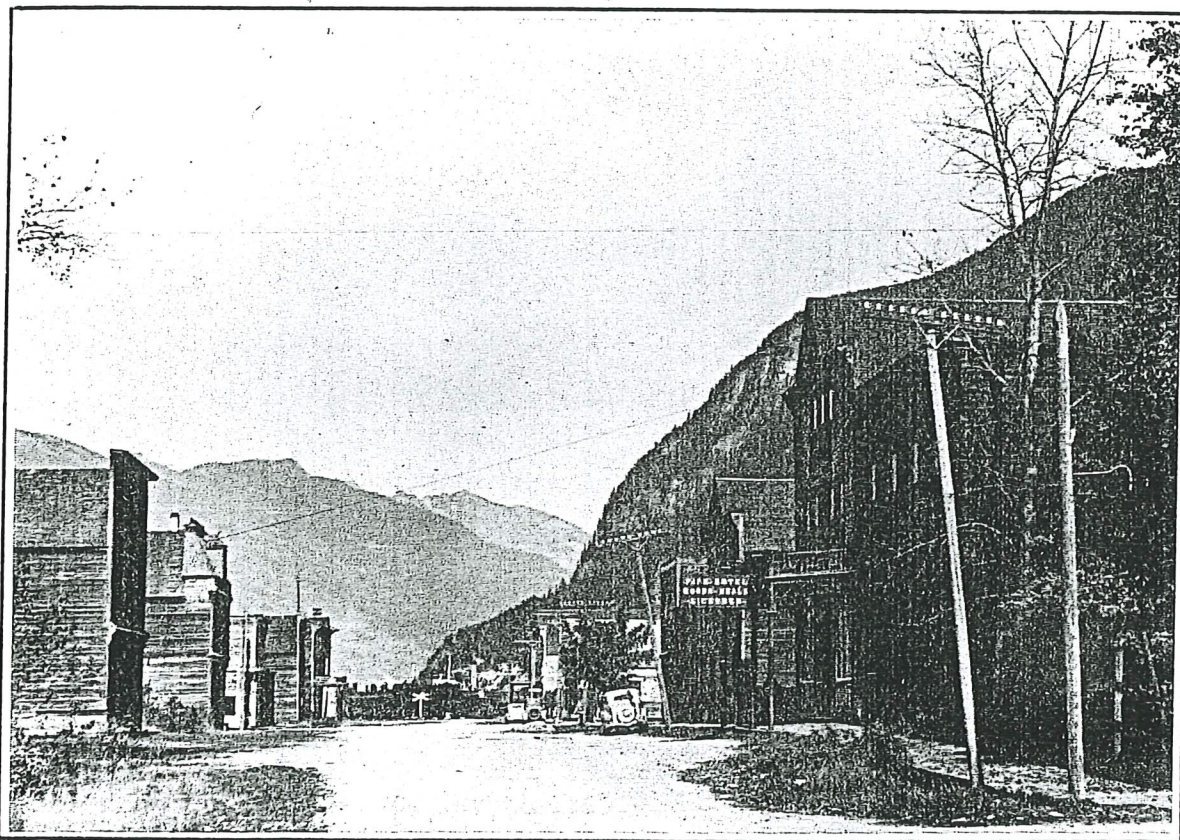


# SLOCAN CITY

A solitary walk along the spacious streets of this quiet little town deceives the eye because it seldom reveals its colourful past. The scores of grand hotels and businesses that once lined its streets have vanished and so have those years when silver was king of the Slocan.

Today the town is called simply "Slocan," but there was a time, nearly ninety years ago, when it was known throughout the Kootenays as "Slocan City." And what a city it was.

In those days, in the 1890s, the corner of Main and Delaney was humming with activity. With CPR trains arriving daily with hordes of eager-eyed optimists and sternwheelers from Silverton and New Denver down at the landing disgorging their loads of silver ore and taking on passengers and freight for the return trip, the whole town was jumping. The streets were jammed with mining men of all descriptions, drifters, gamblers and every other calling of the old West. The "Yellow Kid" was there and so were an assortment of other characters with unusual names like "Cayuse" Brown, "Roughlock" Perry, "Weary Willie" Howarth and a host of other equally fascinating individuals.



Main Street in Slocan City in 1940, looking north. The old town was far past its best years by that date, although the majority of the false-front buildings were still standing. (CVA 260-1391)

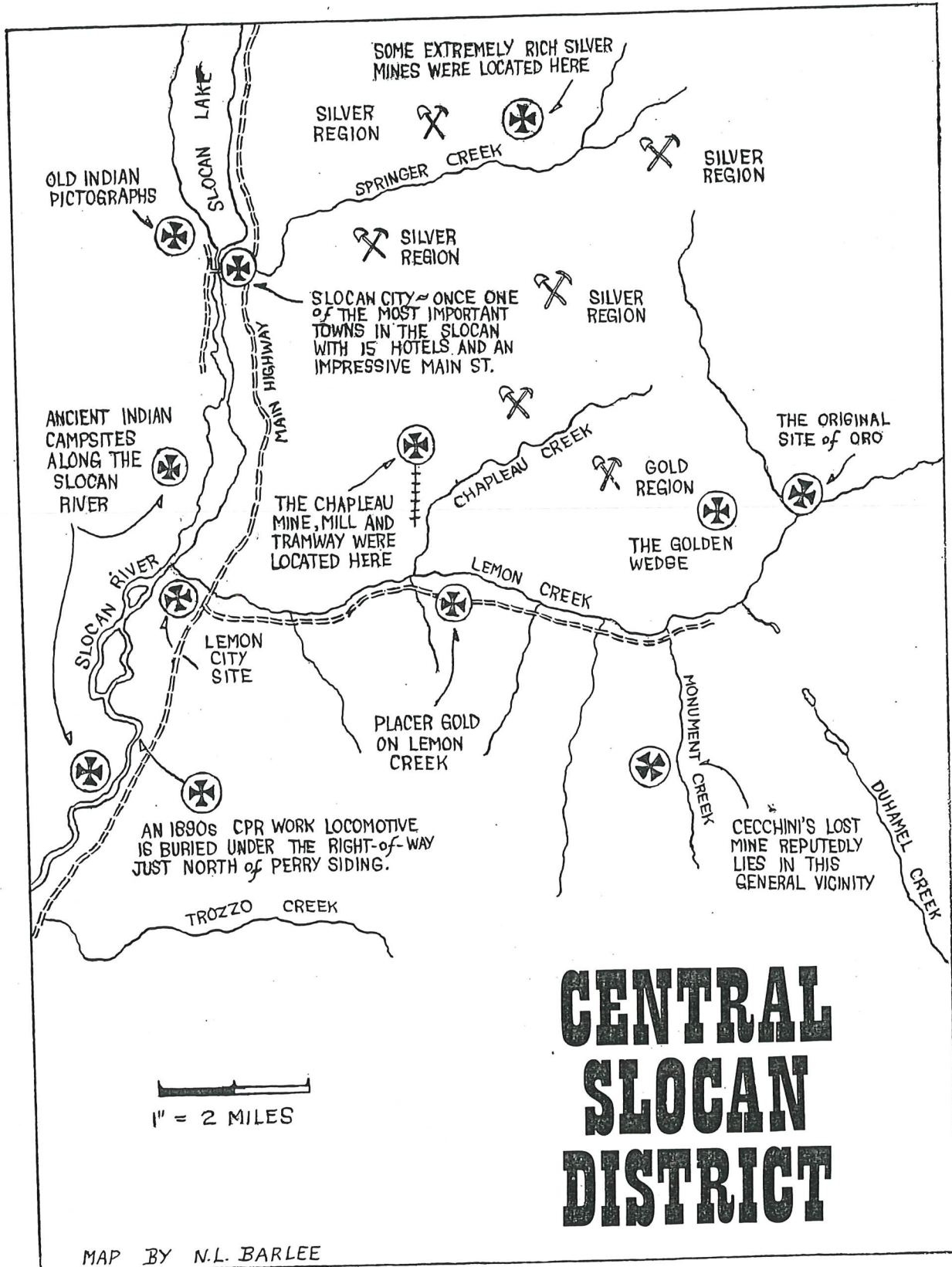
It was a time when Slocan was on the move and it stayed that way for almost a decade. Situated on the southern end of Lake Slocan, it was strategically located; the natural jumping off place to the rich Slocan Mining District. Oh yes, there were rivals, Kaslo, to the east on Kootenay Lake, was older and well established and so was Sandon, the mountain city right in the centre of the silver country. But the boosters of Slocan, and the town was full of them, were certain that their town would ultimately become the leading town of the Slocan.

Certainly it had every appearance of prosperity. A dozen or more bona fide hotels were doing a roaring business and all of the traffic was one way - in. Main Street was a glittering showcase of what a boom town looked like and the Slocan Slope was rapidly becoming one of the most famous mining oddities in the entire West. By 1901, when the population edged past the 1,500 mark and the town officially became "Slocan City," the future seemed assured.

For a while it appeared that Slocan City would fulfill its early promise. Ore was flowing in from Sandon, Silverton and other northern areas and in the nearby Arlington Basin mines like the Black Prince, Arlington, Ottawa, Two Friends and dozens more were shipping steadily



Slocan City, 1899. At its peak then, it had more than a dozen hotels, scores of other businesses, a railroad and a sternwheeler landing. It was recognized as one of the leading cities in the Silvery Slocan, in those years when silver was the magic metal. But lean years descended on this historic city and it eventually declined to a fraction of its former population and finally reverted to village status. (Ed Clough)



and contributing to the general prosperity of Slocan City. And from the Lemon Creek region, south-east of town, gold and silver properties were adding more wealth to the already overflowing coffers. Slocan City was on the move and all seemed well.

By 1901 between 600 and 700 miners were at work along the famous "Slocan Slope" while another 150 to 200 prospectors were out combing the mountains or doing assessment work on their claims. It was a prosperous year but over it all loomed the ever present possibility of lower silver prices, or worse yet, a collapse of the market.

But 1901 was the high-water mark for the city. Things didn't seem to change much after that. The backrooms of the hotels were still used for high stakes card games; the bets weren't quite as high and a few of the players had moved on but the games were almost as big as they once had been. Labour Day was still the holiday of the year; the prize money wasn't quite as good or the events as numerous and a discerning onlooker would have noticed that the crowds were down. The SLOCAN DRILL continued to joust with the newspapers from Sandon and New Denver, as it had done in other years, but the old rivalry seemed to lack the fire it once had. Everything, it seemed, was a little less elegant. The high optimism and confidence of the early years had gone.

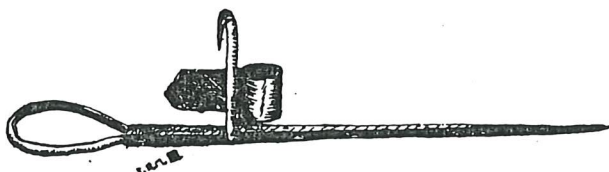
Minor setbacks were occurring with increasing frequency. The huge Ontario-Slocan Lumber Company closed down their operations in 1904 and that blow was followed by a dip in the price of silver. Any slide in the

silver price was serious but when it was found that the ore bodies didn't extend to depth, it was the death knell of Slocan City.

By 1906 many of the mines had shut down and the number of miners employed began to decline. By the end of the year only 327 miners, a

drop of nearly fifty per cent from only five years earlier, were still working. These blows had a calamitous effect on the city. In remarkably short time the local businesses began to mirror the depression. One by one the hotels and stores began to close their doors and the departing trains, for the first time, carried more passengers who were leaving than were arriving. The finances of the city were soon in such straits that towards the end of the year the province was forced to place the city in receivership. It was the blackest day in Slocan City's history, and a setback from which it never recovered. The mines never again hit the production peaks of the 1890s and as the years slipped by even the city's most ardent supporters found themselves hard pressed to be optimistic - everything seemed to be downhill. From time to time new ore bodies were found on old properties or there would be a brief flurry of excitement as a new mine came into production, but it never lasted.

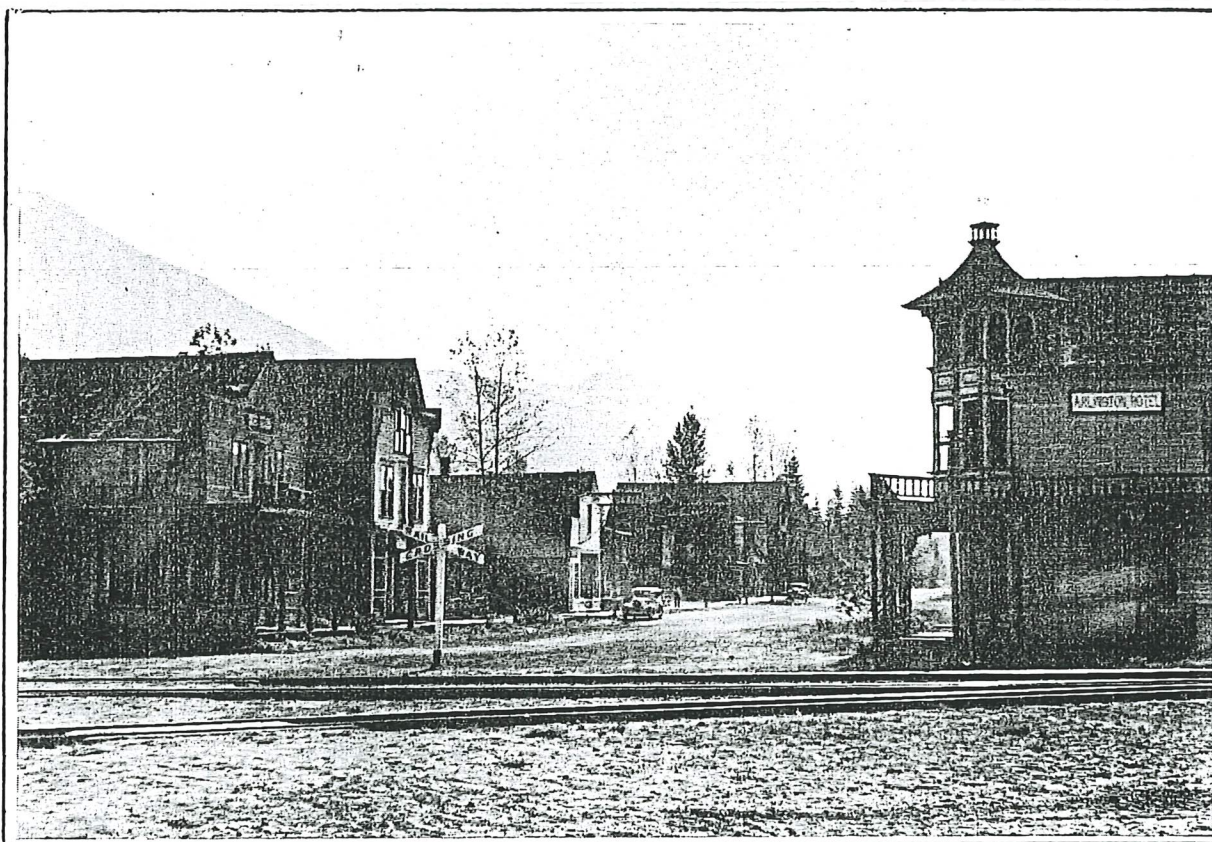
So Slocan City struggled on into the twenties, the majority of its businesses had closed down by then, even the SLOCAN DRILL, an ominous sign because the newspaper was always the bellweather of any camp, and when it closed up shop it invariably signalled the demise of the town. The depression of the thirties didn't seem to have much of an impact on



the city because it had been in a depressed state for nearly a quarter of a century. By 1931 there were only 202 residents in the city and a decade later this figure had slipped to 177.

There was a brief revival when the Japanese were expelled from the lower mainland in 1942 and hundreds were lodged in the old city for the duration of the war. It was, however, only a temporary respite because by the mid-fifties the city was once again barely solvent. Finally, in 1958, it applied for Village Status and was granted its request by the Province. So the smallest city in Canada lost its unique distinction, and reverted to village status, resuming once again the name 'Slocan.' It was a humiliating reverse for a once proud city.

The scenery is still magnificent but nearly everything else in the old city has changed. The Ottawa, Arlington, IXL, Bondholder, Exchange, Black Prince, Chapleau and dozens of other historic old properties lie quiet now, they stand decaying and deserted on the slopes above Lemon and Springer creeks; there are no crowds to greet the stately SLOCAN as there once was; and Main Street, which once rang with sounds, is barely recognizable. The place once known as "Slocan City," when the phrase, "Silvery Slocan" was on everyone's lips, is far different today than it was almost ninety years ago.



Looking south on Main Street in Slocan City in 1940. To the right is the elegant Arlington, the first of the hotels on "Hotel Row." Only one of the buildings visible in this photograph is still standing, a sad statement on the preservation of our mining towns. (CVA #1394)



*(Above) The famous Arlington Hotel in Slocan City—circa 1900.*

*(Right) The Two Friends Hotel on Main Street in 1924. This building stood until the 1960s when it was razed by fire.*



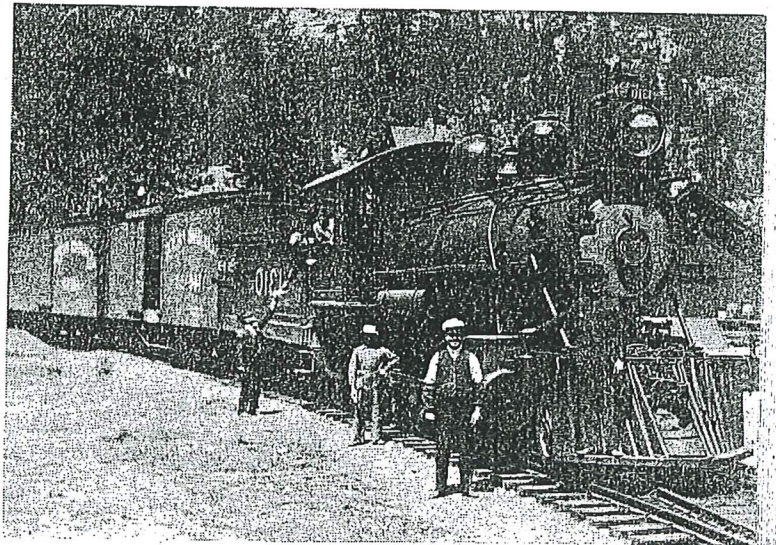
## 22 SLOCAN CITY

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**M**AIN Street doesn't look like it did three quarters of a century ago. It was something then; lined with hotels and stores and bustling with people. In those days you couldn't have raised a bet against Slocan City.

Some places have all the advantages and Slocan City was one. It had everything going for it; geographical location, temperate climate, ample water supply, good level land for expansion, railway service, mineral resources, vast timber stands, and to top it off the town was situated in a breathtaking natural setting. But somehow, somewhere along the line, it never quite made it. It was one of those towns which verged on the edge of becoming someplace, but fate always intervened.

There was a time though, when it was considered sure-fire. In 1891 when silver was discovered in the forbidding mountains on the eastern side of the Slocan Valley, the deposits soon proved to be so extensive that the whole region came to be known throughout the entire west as "The Silvery Slocan." The output of ore was so massive that it quickly attracted the attention of numerous companies eager to exploit the mineral resources. One of these companies was the gigantic Canadian Pacific Railway. Another was its rival, the Great Northern Railway. Both were vying with each other for the lion's share of the ore. Rapidly analyzing the situation, the CPR came to the conclusion that there were five major ore producing areas in the Slocan. Two were in the Sandon-Whitewater district, where the company was already challenging the Great Northern, which was driving a line from Kaslo on Kootenay Lake. The other three ore producing regions, however, were conveniently located near Slocan lake at Silverton, Ten Mile Creek and Springer Creek, east of Slocan City. Being hotly engaged with the



*The CPR's Number 1310 and crew at Slocan City in 1919.*

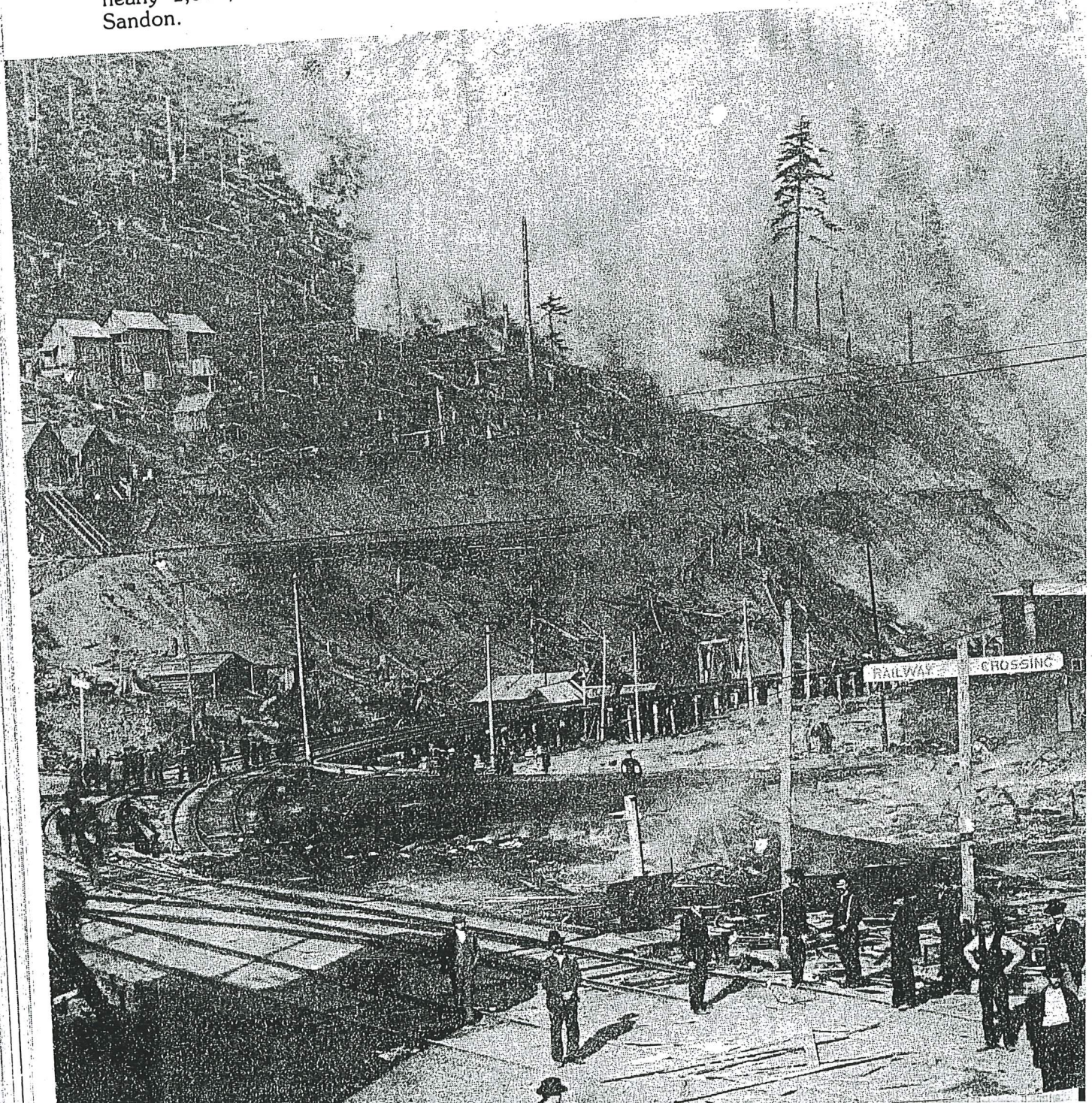
Great Northern, the CPR was convinced that it could pretty well lock up the ore shipping business if it built two lines into the Slocan rather than one. To this purpose it planned a north line from Nakusp into Sandon and a south line from the Kootenay River to the town of Slocan (it was not yet a city). The two lines could not be linked because of the precipitous nature of the country which lay in between. The CPR planned to circumvent this difficulty by placing a sternwheeler on Slocan Lake to run between Slocan and New Denver. This clever pincers movement was designed to cut off the Great Northern's subsidiary, the Kaslo and Slocan Railway, from the bulk of the ore and, hopefully, to cut into their passenger traffic as well.

The proposed south line was a great boon to Slocan. Its boosters now declared that Slocan, and not Kaslo, would be the jumping-off point to the silver country, and that all the traffic funneling through Kaslo would henceforth be routed through Slocan.

Seldom, however, does a plan go through without a hitch. In Slocan's case a series of misfortunes seemed to dog the town from the beginning. In 1893 the price of silver suddenly plummeted, this setback was followed by a long and severe depression. The effects were immediately noticed in Slocan as mines closed and unemployment mounted alarmingly. The effects were offset somewhat by the work on the CPR line which continued driving towards Slocan. In late May, 1897, the town received an impetus when the impressive CPR sternwheeler *Slocan* slipped off the ways at Rosebery on upper Slocan Lake. A few weeks later she was plying the waters between New Denver, Silverton, Slocan and other stopping places along the eastern shore. On December 6th, amid such fanfare, the first train completed the

round trip to Nelson. All through the year the town experienced a boom of unprecedented proportions. The silver mines were opening up again and pack trains were leaving Slocan daily, loaded down with supplies and machinery for the properties on the upper reaches of Springer and Lemon creeks. On Main Street, hotels, stores and other businesses were being erected at a record-breaking pace. Everyone wanted to be in on the boom. Each arriving train brought in newcomers who added to an already swollen population. At the end of Main Street, half a dozen boats loaded or unloaded daily at the crowded slip. Slocan, with a population of nearly 1,500, was challenging both Kaslo and Sandon.

1898 was entered with high expectations, but the news of the Klondike Gold Rush was spreading like wildfire all through the Kootenays, and the miners of the Slocan, like miners everywhere, were not all immune to the lure of the far north. As a result much of its population headed for the distant Yukon and Slocan's growth ground to a stop again. Little changed during 1899, but early in 1900 a disastrous fire levelled most of Sandon. The holocaust was so consuming that its entire business section was reduced to smoldering ashes in a matter of hours. It was a catastrophe of the first magnitude for the mountain city. It had, however, the opposite effect on Slocan, because while Sandon was rebuilding, Slocan appropriated much





of its rival's business. Although Sandon eventually rebuilt, it was never again to reach the prominence that it had enjoyed prior to the great fire.

Only Kaslo remained as a formidable rival, but as the year wore on it became obvious that Slocan was becoming a place to be reckoned with. There were soon eleven fully licensed hotels in the town: The traveller could choose from the Arlington, Two Friends, International, Woodcock's, Hicks House, Lakeview, Victoria, Slocan, Wilson House, Royal and the three storey Blue Front Hotel. In nearby Brandon, an adjacent townsite, there were three more hostleries to pick from. Slocan's businessmen soon came to the realization that Slocan was larger than Sandon, and the latter

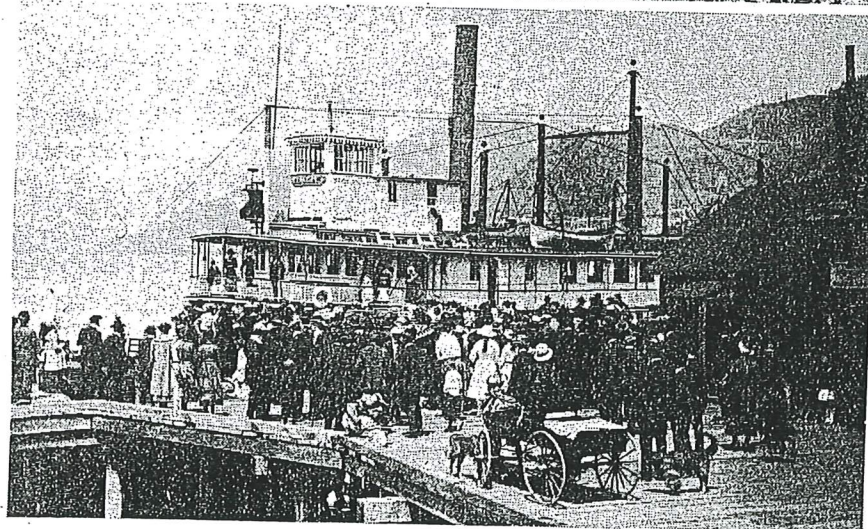
had been a city since 1898. It was time that Slocan became known as Slocan City. A petition was circulated in town and, as soon as the necessary 1,500 signatures were found, the petition was duly sent off to Victoria. In 1901, by government decree, the town formally became Slocan City.

Along Broadway and Main in those years, men of all callings could be seen; freighters in their rough garb, sleek looking stock promoters, real estate salesmen, gimlet-eyed barkeeps, the unmistakable railroaders and bearded old prospectors. Virtually every occupation, savory or otherwise, was represented. And like every mining town in the west in those days, Slocan City had its share of characters. Some, like "Red" Gordon,

*(Opposite page) The ashes of Sandon's main street after the fire of 1900. This disaster was partially responsible for Sandon's gradual demise as she never again attained her former stature. It was mainly because of this blow to her major rival that Slocan City, for a time, prospered.*

*(Below) The Slocan Rifle Club in 1908. Some of the finest marksmen in the Slocan Valley belonged to this group. Among those pictured are Norman Morrison, Howard Parker, Duncan McVannell, Blair Carter, George Garrett, Harry Lea, Bill Hicks and D. St. Denis.*

*(Bottom) Meeting the sternwheeler. The usual crowd gathers down at the wharf to greet the arriving Slocan. Circa 1914.*



"Windy" McDonald and "Weary Willie" Howarth, were generally harmless individuals, who, because of obvious physical or mental characteristics, had had their descriptive nicknames bestowed on them. Others, however, were genuinely individualistic. So, George Stoll, a miner who invariably wore clothes of yellow and brown, came to be called "The Yellow Kid," a name which stayed with him for the remainder of his life. Others, like "Cayuse" Brown, were remembered for their peculiarities. Brown had some prospects up in Crazy Jane Basin, and a few around Lemon Creek, and several times a year he came into Slocan City to replenish his supplies. After obtaining his provisions he was in the habit of dropping by the nearest saloon to top off the day with some liquid refreshments. This was not unusual, but when Brown drank non-stop for up to five hours at a sitting without even bothering to take his 150 pound pack off his back, even the locals felt that he was "just a little different."

There were some tough ones too, like old "Roughlock" McLaughlin, the hardbitten Cariboo hand who had earned his sobriquet as a stage driver on the famous Cariboo Road. "Ollie" Covington was another, a pro gambler who customarily toured "the circuit" of mining towns on payday. It was not unusual for Covington to return to Slocan City loaded down with several thousand dollars more than he had started out with. Occasionally he came back with some bruises too, legacies from differences of opinion with hardrock miners who were notoriously poor losers. Although Slocan City was a gambling town, some of the sporting types were less than scientific when it came to weighing the odds. Jim Bowes, a character who once owned a hotel in nearby Silvertown, when approached about the possibilities of betting on this event or that race, always replied. "Don't know anything about it. Don't give a damn, but I'll bet you \$100 either way and you take your choice." Amazingly Bowes evidently won the majority of his wagers.

The city attracted all kinds; from individuals like "Judge" Harris to teams like "Big" Smith and Walter "Renwick." Harris, an alcoholic who was reputedly a former justice of the Nova Scotia Supreme Court, was seldom seen sober in the years he resided in Slocan City. But he could, and did, draw up leases free of charge for illiterate miners, so ironclad that even highly paid company lawyers were unable to break them. Smith and Walter "Renwick" were professional barnstorming athletes who had arrived at an "understanding" on their tour of the mining camps. They purportedly took turns winning; depending upon which one of them had received the largest bribe to throw the race. Some years later the tour came apart somewhat abruptly when "Big" Smith was shot

and killed by a small-town sheriff in Nevada's Sierra Mountains. "Renwick" lost little time returning to Canada where he resumed his original surname of Knox and returned to Ontario. He later participated in the Olympic Games as a member of Canada's track and field contingent. He died in the early 1950s, a wealthy and respected member of his community where few, if any, were aware of his earlier exploits in the west.

Slocan City, like all of the other towns in the Slocan, depended on the price of silver for its prosperity. In 1901, a total of 637 miners were at work on various properties in the Slocan, most of them situated on the famous Slocan Slope. Another 150 to 200 prospectors had been grubstaked, and most of them were doing their assessment work. Coupled with additional employment in the service businesses it was a prosperous year. Over it, however, loomed the ever present possibility of lower raw silver prices or worse yet, a collapse of the market.

1901 was the high-water mark for Slocan City. Things didn't seem to change much after that. The backrooms of the hotels were still used for high stakes card games; the bets weren't quite as high and a few of the players had moved on but the games were almost as big as they had been. Labour Day was still the holiday of the year; the prizes weren't quite as tempting or the events as numerous; the Slocan Drill continued to joust with the papers from Sandon and New Denver, as it always had, but the old rivalry seemed to lack the fire of former years. Everything, it seemed, was a little less elegant. The high optimism and confidence of the first years had gone.

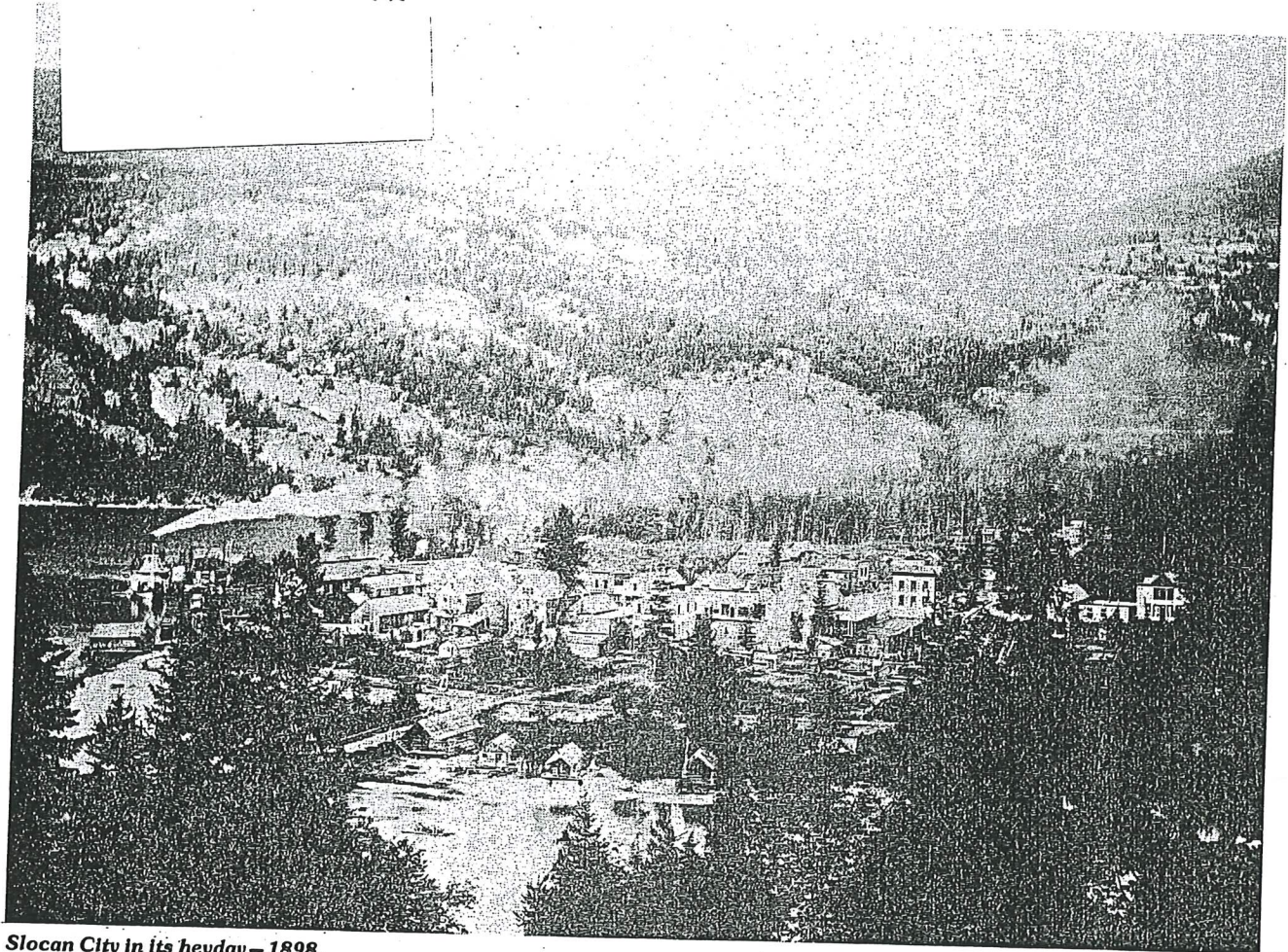
Minor setbacks seemed to be taking place almost continually. In 1904, the huge Ontario-Slocan Lumber Company closed down their operations. This was followed by a dip in the price of silver. Then it was found that the veins of the silver mines generally didn't extend to depth. There were exceptions, but they were few in number. As the mines were the mainstay of the Slocan, every town in the valley suffered but none more than Slocan City.

By 1906 the huge Arlington Mine, up Springer Creek, closed down when it lost the lead. When other mines began to shut down soon after, the number of miners employed began to decline. By the end of the year only 327 miners were at work in the entire district, a drop of nearly 50% from only a five years earlier. This had a calamitous effect on Slocan City. In a remarkably short time the various businesses began to mirror the depression and, one by one, the hotels and stores on Main and Broadway began to close their doors. The departing trains, for the first time, carried passengers who were leaving the area and had no intention of returning. The finances of the city were

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*Slocan City in its heyday - 1898.*

soon in such straits that towards the end of the year provincial authorities were forced to place Slocan City in receivership. It was the blackest period in the city's history, and a blow from which it never recovered. The mines were never again to hit the production peaks they had attained in the 1890s and, as the years slipped by, even the city's most ardent supporters found themselves hard pressed to be optimistic—everything seemed to be downhill. From time to time new ore bodies were found on old properties or there would be a brief flurry of excitement as a new mine came into production, but it never lasted.

The city struggled into the twenties, most of its businesses were closed down by then, even the *Slocan Drill*. This was an ominous sign, because when the local newspaper locked up shop, it almost always signalled the demise of the town. The depression of the thirties didn't seem to have much of an impact because the city had been in a depressed state for nearly thirty years. The official census of 1931 noted that there were only 202 residents in the city. A decade later this figure had slumped to 177.

There was a brief revival when the Japanese

were expelled from the lower mainland in 1942, and hundreds were lodged in the city for the duration of the war. It was, however, only a temporary respite for, by the mid-fifties, the city was once again barely solvent. Finally, in 1958, it applied for village status and was granted its request by the province. So, the smallest city in Canada lost its unique distinction and reverted to a village, resuming once again the name Slocan. It was a humiliating end for a once proud city.

The scenery is still magnificent today, but nearly everything else has changed. The Ottawa, Arlington, IXL, Bondholder, Black Prince, Exchange and dozens of other mines which once poured out a stream of silver are quiet now. They stand decaying and deserted on the slopes above Springer Creek. There are no crowds to greet the stately *Slocan* as there once were when she used to pull in from her down-lake run from New Denver and Silverton, Main Street, which once rang with the sounds of teamsters, boomers, and mining men, is barely recognizable. The Slocan City of eighty years ago, when the phrase "Silvery Slocan" was on everyone's lips, was far different than it is today.