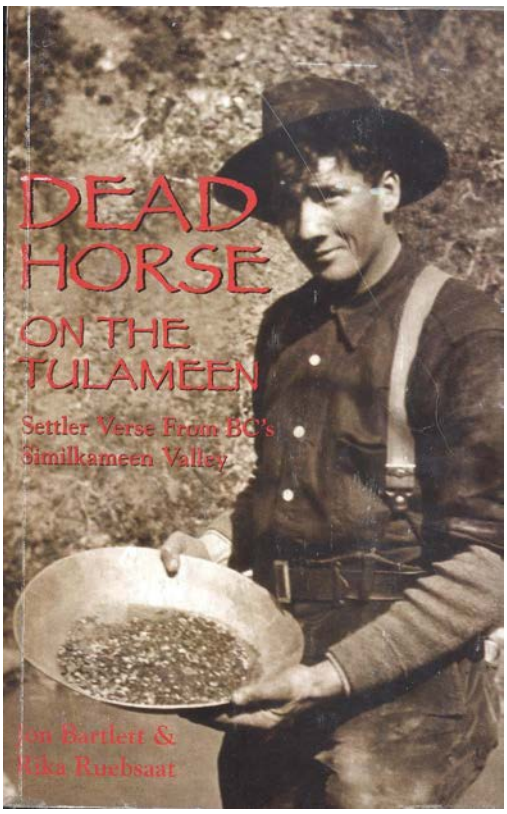
Dead Horse on the Tulameen: A Review



Dead Horse on the Tulameen: Settler Verse from B.C.'s Similkameen Valley, by Jon Bartlett & Rika Ruebsaat

Princeton, B.C., formerly known as Vermilion Forks, has a history that is colourful yet similar to thousands of other mining, logging, fur trade, or agricultural settlements pioneered in the late 19th century across the continent of North America. These arose on a wave of early 20th century enthusiasm and growth, only to be sorely tried by wars and depressions and buffeted by decade after decade of the relentless technological and economic changes that infiltrated every aspect of life in even the remotest hamlet, raising some boats and sinking others. Princeton was one of the survivors; its neighbours Hedley, Coalmont, and Copper Mountain, less so.

This book can be thought of as a social history of Princeton in verse. The verses come from local newspapers from the years 1900 to 1950. As *Dead Horse* points out, poetry was so much more a part of popular culture in those days, and the early Similkameen Valley settlers evidently expressed themselves freely in this way on both serious and silly topics. Other verses were written by the newspaper editors, and a considerable number were reprinted from other newspapers across North America. These are included as examples of themes that preoccupied people both locally and globally at that time.

As might be expected, the result is a potpourri of doggerel, clever parodies, some rather ponderous literary efforts, a solid majority of humorous ditties often referencing local characters, and ranging from the cheerful to the sardonic, and a few truly lovely gems (my personal favourite is "Spring in Similkameen" on page 245, attributed to Dave Taylor, editor of the *Similkameen Star*). The book is divided into thematic chapters, which start with a few pages of text introducing the topic and putting the verses into historical context, followed by several pages of verses. The verses are listed with their source newspaper and date, but no author. One must peruse the text or the chapter notes in the appendix to find a discussion of the origin of each piece; some may have been printed unattributed. Historic photographs from Princeton's archives illustrate each theme.

Together the text, verses, and photographs engender a flavour of the times both on a local and international scale—"boosterism" of fledgeling enterprises in pioneer towns, the rise of organized sports, roads and railways not being built where and when they were wanted, war, the Spanish flu, workers' struggles, prohibition, economic turmoil, new ideas. Many of the early pieces feature a "peppy" attitude—the jolly optimism that comes off as corny today but got folks through the Great Depression and two world wars. This can be contrasted with the postwar cynicism of "Thanksgiving Him, 1947". Some of the purest fun is in the chapter on the coming of the automobile. As with modern technologies sweeping through our culture today, the poem "Ask the Man who Owns One" makes clear that although one may bemoan their disadvantages, intrusion, and costs, it is difficult to be left out. And anyone considering asking their partner for driving lessons should first show them the poem "Teaching Them to Drive" and ask which of its two examples their lesson would be like.

But what of the titular Dead Horse? Bartlett and Ruebsaat leave that story for last. There is a mystery there, a piece of Princeton lore that has resurfaced at odd intervals, perhaps like a carcass bobbing along a river, from its earliest days to an obscure vestige left in modern memory. It is a beautiful illustration of the interleaving of printed and oral traditions, and the transmuting effect of time on both.

Fiona Gregory, Edmonton, Alberta