

Introduction

I have never seen anything finer than the fruit of the Kootenay District. You have a fruit country unsurpassed by anything in the Dominion - Professor Mills of Guelph Agricultural College, from early promotional literature.

Fruit ranching in the West Kootenays? Unlikely though it may seem, many early settlers arrived here in the early 1900s planning on doing just that!

These newly arrived residents could generally be divided into two groups. The first were individual settlers, who were often lured by the promise of a mild climate and easy growing conditions. Many had little to no experience, and had spent much of their savings on buying land. Distinct from these (often English) settlers were the Doukhobors, who came from Russia via Saskatchewan and lived communally in numerous settlements in the West Kootenays.

This exhibit offers a glimpse into some of their stories, and the industry that helped shape the local landscape for over four decades.

Pleasant Work with Profitable Returns

In the early 1900s, the Orchard industry in BC was in its infancy. Even so, higher land prices in the Okanagan encouraged both land speculators and prospective fruit ranchers to consider other areas. Brochures and other printed material from that time often painted a scene of easy country living in a land of beauty and abundance. The images and printed material on this wall are all from this type of promotional material.

Getting Started

Not surprisingly, many people who came to farm fruit found the reality quite different from what the brochures had promised. Many people bought land sight unseen, and had little to no experience in farming. Those that had enough money could pay for things like having houses built, land cleared and crops planted. The majority, however, had to learn and adapt quickly to a reality that usually required far more manual labour and money than they were led to believe.

After shelter, clearing the land of was usually the next task (if it hadn't already been done). At the same time, gardens and crops were planted as space allowed. Because it took several years for fruit trees to become established, crops such as strawberries or raspberries helped bring money in sooner.

Beyond Local

The level of production quickly saturated the local market, and local producers began shipping fruit to other markets. The prairies tended to be the main destination, but many shipments also went to England, and to a lesser extent to other countries.

Transportation was one of the main challenges, faced not only by early growers here but also across B.C. How much of a challenge it presented was generally related to how easily the Canadian Pacific's national rail line could be accessed from their location. In the Kootenays, sternwheelers were a critical link for many farmers, even after roads became more common.

Relative Prosperity

Although it wasn't the easy road to prosperity they may have been hoping for, for many fruit farming was a viable and even thriving livelihood for many years. Generally, production for the area peaked in the late 1920s, but significant amounts continued to be shipped well into the 1930s. There were many varieties of fruit grown, including strawberries, cherries, plums and pears, but apples were the main crop by a considerable margin.

The Doukhobors

Distinct from other settlers who came to the area, the Doukhobors were a Russian religious sect who came to southeastern BC starting in 1908. Their spiritual leader was Peter V. Verigan, who purchased land for them near present day Grand Forks, as well as in the Castlegar/Slocan Valley area. The majority lived and worked communally, and any profits (or losses) were shared equally. In addition to fruit ranching and a jam factory, they also operated brick factories, sawmills and flour mills.

As with individual settlers, the decline of the local fruit industry in the 1930s was a tremendous economic blow to their community. Numerous other internal and external factors, such as the death of Peter V. Verigan in 1924 and the Great Depression also contributed to their difficulties. With mounting debts, the provincial government foreclosed on their land in 1939, ending their years of communal life.

The End of an Era

By the mid 1940s few local farms were producing fruit commercially. Marketing challenges, weather and disease were all contributing factors. In the 1930s for example, the Little Cherry Disease decimated cherry production. Earlier, reduced mining activity led to the reduction of sternwheeler service to many areas, a critical link for many farmers.

Critically however, as the 20th century progressed, fruit ranching became an industry. Small and diverse family-run farms such as those found here were as much a way of life as a livelihood. In the Okanagan however, larger areas of land were increasingly being cultivated by companies instead of individuals. Mechanization, as well as other advantages of scale allowed them to produce fruit at a price that smaller farmers found it difficult (if not impossible) to compete with. Improvements in irrigation also added to the natural advantage of a warmer climate in the Okanagan, further tipping the balance in their favour.

Today, much of the original land has been divided up for residential use, although some of the old trees still produce fruit. Along with the living memories of some of our older residents, they are among the last reminders of this very interesting piece of our region's history.

Thanks and Additional Reading

If you're interested in learning more, I would highly recommend the book "Lost Orchards: Vanishing Fruit Farms of the West Kootenay" by local author Joan Lang. It was not only the inspiration and indispensable resource for this exhibit, but she was also kind enough to allow us to use the title! Thanks as well to Stan Sherstobitoff for sharing his collection with us once more, and the Doukhobor Discovery Centre in Castlegar for sharing the amazing panoramic photo of the Brilliant Jam Factory.

Rod Taylor, Curator

Fruit Fairs

Nelson had an annual fall fair for many years, with impressive displays from local producers. The exhibition hall was located on Vernon Street, roughly where the Civic Centre currently stands. West Kootenay fruit also won awards in exhibitions and fairs in cities such as Vancouver, San Francisco and London.

The McDonald Jam Factory

The McDonald Jam Factory started by accident in 1911 when Nelson grocer J.A. McDonald had surplus ripened strawberries. He turned them into jam, and found demand strong enough that he built a small factory on the waterfront, and then a stone structure on Vernon Street. The business also bottled soft drinks and imported fruit such as bananas. At its peak it employed over 100 people!

The K.C. Jam Factory

In 1911 the Doukhobors bought the Kootenay Preserving Company. Soon after, they sold the Nelson plant and moved their operation to a new plant which they constructed at Brilliant (near present day Castlegar). In addition to being larger, the plant had the advantage of being closer to their fruit orchards at Ootischenia. Marketed under the brand Kootenay Columbia, or K.C., the factory produced about 30,000 pounds of jam each day and employed about 60 workers at its peak. Sadly, in 1943 the plant was destroyed by fire. Although arson was suspected, no charges were ever brought forward.

Blowed up real good

Cutting down trees to clear the land was one thing, but the resulting stumps tended to be harder to remove. A well placed stick of dynamite or two made the job considerably easier. Unfortunately (anecdotally at least), its common use also caused a troubling increase in the rate of dynamite-related injury and death among farm workers.

Turn this boat around

After retiring from the Canadian Army, Lord Matthew Aylmer bought land, sight unseen, in Queens Bay. In 1909, he travelled from Ottawa to Procter with his wife, the Lady Amy Gertrude and their five children. The next day, he set out by rowboat with his three sons to view their future home site. Upon seeing the ragged, blackened bench lands, the young men tried to persuade their father to turn the boat around and leave immediately. Lord Aylmer would not be discouraged however, and after landing they struggled up the uncleared slope to their future building site.

Despite these beginnings, they built a house (or had it built) and planted crops. Lord and Lady Aylmer were fortunate enough to have enough money from his pension to allow them a pleasant lifestyle, including several trips to Ottawa each year. Although the children also must have benefitted from their parent's relative wealth while at home, once on their own they were faced with the difficult, if common reality of making do without family money.

He wrote the (other) book

Cambridge educated John Thomas (J.T.) Bealby (1858-1944) published *Fruit Ranching in British Columbia* in 1909, two years after his arrival here from England. The book is a mix of his personal experiences and practical advice, and is actually quite a good read. Although he tended to err a bit on the side of optimism, it would have been a far better and more detailed source of information for prospective fruit ranchers than anything else available at the time.

His farm was located on the south shore of Kootenay Lake just east of Nelson, and Bealby Point and Bealby Road are both named after him.

Extended label (w/ Renata photo, Apple boxes being shipped from Renata. October 1946.):

Among the Last

By 1945, the majority of growers in the West Kootenays had given up growing fruit for commercial sales. The exceptions were the communities of Renata and Robson. In 1954, there were still about 30 members of the Renata cooperative, and that year 800 boxes of apples were shipped out by barge.

Because of increased labour costs, only cherries were shipped the following year, and sales afterwards were made directly to buyers who came to the orchards. The High Arrow, or Hugh Keenlyside Dam was completed in 1968, which subsequently flooded the original town site of Renata, along with the majority of its orchards.