

Uranium City, The Last Boom Town

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Uranium City, The Last Boom Town

By Ben McIntyre

Driftwood Publishers

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Mill Bay, British Columbia

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In earlier days of mining, the extraction of ores was a slow process. The communities in which this was a principal occupation existed for centuries, even sometimes for millennia, with a steady demand — mostly local or national — being steadily met. The architecture and movements of such towns as Goslar and Freiberg, in Germany, or Kongsberg in Norway bear witness to this lasting prosperity.

Not so in the last 200 years. As markets become international, there has been both the need for, and the developing technology to enable, very rapid exploitation of resources. Moreover, mining has become subject to the vicissitudes of the international market. Even if ore continues to be available, plunging prices might make it no longer economic to exploit them. One mining town after another has begun, burgeoned and bust within a few decades or less, to survive as a "ghost town," sparsely inhabited or not at all, or to collapse rapidly into ruin.

Whether Uranium City, Saskatchewan, will indeed prove the last ghost town, even in Canada, is questionable. However, if "last" is understood in the sense of "latest," this book is truly titled.

The town did not survive long. The first buildings went up in 1952 and the last mine closed on 30 June 1982: a life of just 30 years. Bernie McIntyre — swiftly rechristened "Ben" by the locals — lived there during 27 of those years, so he was well equipped to write its history. This is not a detailed recounting of the development of the uranium mines in the Beaverlodge district of northern Saskatchewan; rather, as the author states (p. 64), his aim is:

... to tell more about the individuals
who worked at these mines, in the

bush or in the building of the town
during these interesting years.

In this he succeeds admirably, for he was involved at different times in just about all of Uranium City's activities: first as a schoolteacher, then as a (not-too-successful) prospector, and thereafter as a taxi bookkeeper and dispatcher, airways clerk, shop and restaurant keeper, newspaper reporter and proprietor, and radio commentator on the geographically circumscribed north Saskatchewan airwaves. Moreover, since what happened at the mines affected the whole community, their story is also told in fair detail and sometimes (as in the strike at Eldorado in 1971 and the Bayda Enquiry of 1977) with a degree of passion.

The problems with this book arise from the fact that, being self published, it was not edited and not carefully proof-read. Textual errors are abundant, including: capitalization that seems almost random (e.g., "wife agnes and Son Vincent," p. 197; "user, The British government," p. 211; and the place name "fold lake," p. 217); the misuse of apostrophes (e.g., p. 91, 107, 214); a failure to italicize ship's names (p. 145) or book and journal titles (p. 172, 234); mixed tenses (p. 112); misused words (e.g., "their" for "there," p. 175, 247; "bother" for "brother," p. 92; "effected" for "affected," p. 240); names spelled inconsistently (e.g., "Seckinger" and "Secken-ger," p. 258-259) or misspelled (e.g., "recieved," p. 208; "Rielly," p. 62). The United States mining entrepreneur mentioned on page 135 was Joseph Hirschhorn, not "Hirshorn"; the romantic movie was "Rose Marie," not "Rosemarie" (p. 185), and the University of Saskatchewan has no chief pathologist (p. 218), although University Hospital does. All these faults disturb the reader and all could, with care, have been eliminated.

However — and fortunately — the intimate style and the easy flow of this narrative of a Saskatchewan town that is now, if not quite dead, at least moribund serve to compensate for these faults. The photographs, although rather grey, enhance the text. All in all, this book gives a good picture of what it was like to live, not just in Uranium City, but in any northern mining town from birth to eclipse.