

THE BEST OF OUR PAST MOMENTS

When the years have rolled by and all visible things have gone and only memories survive, it is time to reminisce, and, in essence, that is the invitation the Michel-Natal Reunion Committee extends.

Gone from the scene are the once populous communities of Michel, Natal and Middletown which so many, for so many years, called home.

Say a slighting thing about those towns and the person who made the ill-advised remark is instantly in trouble. The only remark you can make along that line and live in safety is that none of them were beautiful because they weren't, but they were home for people of many ethnic backgrounds who overcame tremendous obstacles to dig their roots into the valley of the Elk and Michel, and from near illiteracy in many cases sweated and penny-pinched to send their sons and daughters to university.

But where do you start when you travel down memory lane?

Do you start at one of the few remaining landmarks, the scarcely recognizable Trites-Wood store? Or do you start around a table in the Michel Hotel, or on the railway station platform at Natal? Landmarks are few. Natal is now covered by the hydraulic mine complex, the new Kaiser Resources office building and warehouse. Middletown is covered by mine waste, and weeds grown in old Michel. A fire hydrant here, a clump of rhubarb there, and a cable across Michel Creek--beside your old fishing hole, and that permanent fixture, the hotel, hang on while all else, a decade ago, fell to the wrecker's hammer.

Oh, yes, there is one thing more. The bell from St. Paul's Anglican Church rings out every Sunday from the belfry of St. Barbara's Church in Sparwood.

*Copy of article written by
Bruce Ramsay for the
Michel / Natal reunion
of 1980*

There is another place to start--the phone book. To some, names in a phone book are just that--names--but at a reunion, the very sight of a familiar name can set off an eruption of fantastic memories, of school, of the lodges and clubs, of church groups, sports, dances, and, of course, the magnificent parades with their colorful floats.

There were tragedies of course, but memories of these, although they must never be forgotten, fade into the background--unless it is a tragedy like the Irishman who threw the haggis into the river during a Burns Night celebration and afterwards boasted that because of his deed the fish in Michel Creek were bigger and better than before.

Let us hope that during the Reunion there will be a full moon in a cloudless sky. That is when the phantoms appear, the ghostly outline of the Kootenay Hotel, the Alexander, the Venezia, the theatre, Bobby Sinclair's tailor shop, Jack Beach's garage, the Co-op store, Hampton's candy store, Chow's cafe, the Chinese cafes in Natal, Sofko's Drug and Book store, Joe Gauls' clothing and hardware, Weber's hardware, Fontana's meats, Ben Noratty's tailor shop, Volpatti's dry goods, Bertoiia's store, Vlasek and Sterka's butcher shop, and the B.C. Bakery, the boarding house cum hospital. The list is endless.

In the coal black of print, let us look back briefly at the rise and fall of these communities, filling in the gaps with personal memories that may have been locked away in the mind for years.

Michel first appeared on the map in 1898 when the first coal shipments were made over the newly-built CPR line which stretched from Medicine Hat to Kootenay Landing. It took its name from a creek named in honor of a Kootenay Indian chief, whose son, Isadore was such a mischievous character that the North West Mounted Police under Sam Steele had to come in and put things in order at a place now called Fort Steele.

Mine portals lined both sides of the valley, and by comparison with the sophisticated methods used today, the operation was very crude.

All the coal mined was taken to the tibble where it was screened, and the impurities were hand-picked by men and boys at "picking tables" in the tibble. Coke was drawn from the ovens by manpower and loaded into coal cars by manpower. Horses were used underground, and woe betide the driver who mistreated an animal.

To house the workers, the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company built about 60 duplex houses, complete with outdoor plumbing, and for a time, operated a store which later became the Trites-Woods store. Strikes were numerous, but in June, 1902, Michel escaped a disaster by the skin of its teeth. The Rossland Miner for June 10 said a fire, driven by high winds "completely cleaned out the townsite on the north side of the CPR tracks." A total of 23 homes were burned. "The large and expensive tibble, which was used for the first time today, had a very close call, its destruction only being prevented by the most determined work of the men. Lack of fire protection and a very high wind made it most difficult to handle the fire with any success. The fire, fortunately, did not get over to the south side of the track. If it had the whole town would have been destroyed."

Altogether there were three mines in operation at Michel, and two more were being made ready to go into production.

More rows of double houses were built in 1903, but again, fire struck. The original Michel Hotel, valued at \$8,000, the small police station and a boarding house, were burned early in November, and facilities of the hotel were moved to a vacant store. Plans were made to build a 30-room hotel in its place, with Thomas Crahan as manager.

In 1904 a second railway, the Great Northern, arrived in Michel and a station was built opposite the Natal CPR station, and by 1906 Michel could boast a population of 1,200,

in favor. The Elk Valley (Harmers) was 28-3, Crow's Nest, 16-0 and Corbin, 36-13.)

Again, in 1926, fire hit Natal. On August 5 it started near a box car of hay, and swept through the Great Northern Hotel, a Chinese restaurant, a grocery store, the post office and the telephone exchange. Damage was set at \$40,000.

For several years past, the economic state of the coal company fluctuate between bad and very bad. The copper smelters at Grand Forks, and Greenwood, which had been major customers of the Crow's Nest Pass mines, had closed forever, and in May, 1926, the Great Northern announced its service would be terminated.

But next year, it was announced that Hartley Wilson was to design "one of the finest" schools in B.C. at Michel and this was formally opened on October 12 by the Hon. Joshua Hinchcliffe, minister of education, and was named Michel-Natal Central School.

A new Michel Hotel was opened by the coal company in November 1929, to replace one that burned shortly before.

In 1934, W.P. Wallace, owner of the Free Press in Fernie, started the Michel-Natal Observer, which, alas, only lasted from January 24 to October 3.

These were tough times. Little work was available, and a man was lucky if he got a day a week work in. A relief camp was set up at Alexander Creek. In 1936 there were road jobs, with crews converting the old Great Northern Railway right-of-way from Olsen to Michel into a highway.

In November, 1936 an old boarding house was being remodelled to become the hospital, which was in use until 1978 (?) when it was replaced by the Sparwood General Hospital.

On the night of Friday; October 29, 1937, the night watchman at the tipple noticed a small fire in the boiler room. Before his eyes, it quickly spread along a hot air passageway to the tipple itself, and in one hour the whole structure was a blazing inferno.

452
17 1/2

Some 500 men were thrown out of work that night. Hartley Wilson, president of the coal company, motored in from Fernie making the run in 22 minutes, and, before the flames had settled down, had orders telegraphed for materials for a temporary tipple.

"A.B.C. government bridge crew," said the Free Press on November 12 "has been brought in with the result the temporary wooden tipple is already under way." By the end of the month it was in business and by October 21, 1938 "one of the finest tipples in Canada, if not in North America" was in operation at Michel. It is "magnificent piece of machinery," said the Free Press "and is turning out a wonderful product."

The Second World War came and went, and more names were added to the list of those who gave the supreme sacrifice.

Then in 1968 came word that the hand of doom was to descend on Michel, Natal and Middletown, and that all residents would have to leave, some to be relocated in Sparwood.

Kaiser Resources Ltd. purchased coal lands from the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company, which changed its name to Crow's Nest Industries Ltd. and a new era began.