

'Colonel' Robert Thornton Lowery 1859 - 1921

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A diminutive man, R.T. Lowery stood only about five feet tall, but other than his height, there was nothing 'small' about the man. What Lowery lacked in height, he more than compensated for with his attitude. Brash, opinionated and combative, Lowery was a crusading pioneer journalist who argued with wit and skill on behalf of those who could not defend themselves, such as illiterate hard-rock miners and women forced by lack of skills or education to become prostitutes.

Born in 1859 at Halton County, Ontario, he gained his first newspaper experience in Petrolia before being lured to the wild frontiers and silver fields of British Columbia. His first newspaper in the Kootenays was the Kaslo Claim, which lasted a mere 16 weeks before the 'silver panic' of 1893 caused the bottom to drop out of the silver market, and business in the young town dried up to a mere trickle. "The financial panic frosted the roses in the Slocan and made Kaslo look like a torn poster in a wet ditch. I barely escaped with my life", Lowery commented wryly.

Undaunted, however, Lowery soon packed up his small printing press and assorted equipment and moved on to Nakusp, where he began printing The Ledge. In all, Lowery owned and operated some 10 or 12 Kootenay newspapers in different towns over the years. Commenting on the tendency of Lowery's and other small area newspapers to 'wander', the editor of the Bonner's Ferry Herald wrote, "It is hard to keep track of the Slocan newspapers - they appear to be on wheels." Indeed, this characterization more often than not appeared to be true.

By 1894, Lowery had moved The Ledge to New Denver, but soon the booming growth in Sandon had convinced him to sell that paper and relocate to the heart of the silver fields. On September 26, 1896, Lowery, along with J.J. Langstaff, former editor of the Trout Lake Topic, printed the first edition of what was to become Lowery's most famous newspaper of all, the

Sandon Paystreak. Its first issue was filled with news of Sandon's rapid growth: "The sound of the carpenter's hammer is everywhere heard in Sandon, and building operations are being vigorously prosecuted on every side. Some very tasty dwelling houses are being erected, and the liveliest and busiest town in the Slocan country is every day assuming a more urban-like appearance than is usually met with a mining centre. Some 20 buildings, dwellings and otherwise, are now under construction, and more are contemplated."

In appearance, Lowery was said by some to resemble 'a country parson', while others described him as rather more dapper than that. He was reputed to always dress with the greatest of taste, wore a small neatly-trimmed goatee, smoked two-bit cigars, and peered determinedly through steel-rimmed glasses. And although he was known far and wide as 'Colonel' Lowery, he admitted himself that it was a title he assumed, rather than one he had earned for military service. Despite this minor affectation, Lowery never lost sight of his dedication to the 'common' men and women who were his most ardent readers and supporters.

Arguing on behalf of safer working conditions for the miners, Lowery wrote:

"The miner is the backbone of every mining camp. It is upon the money that he earns that we, who live in the towns hard by, get our daily bread and other luxuries. It is for him principally that the saloons are fitted up in gorgeous style. It is for him that the storekeeper is waiting so that he may pay his bills. It is through his hard work that many men of capital are enabled to ride in carriages and dine with dukes in Europe. He gets \$3.50 a day in the Slocan, and for this amount he pounds a drill and lacerates rocks in the darkness of the tunnel or shaft. He occasionally is assisted up the Golden Stairs by a premature blast, and sometimes gets introduced to St. Peter by the aid of a snowslide. Being of so much value to the community, his life should be freed from danger as much as possible. One way to do this is to have all buildings at the mines built in such a manner as to obviate the danger from slides, and render it unnecessary for men to flee for their lives, as has been done during the past week.

Miners may be plentiful, and some capitalists may think that their lives cut but a small figure, but we think different. We want every one of them to have a chance to die in bed, and we urge upon all owners the necessity of seeing that their employees are protected from the danger of slides in every way possible. Take our advice, boys, or when the slides come again, some of you may have to push clouds instead of holding the end of a drill."

Lowery definitely had a talent for writing with flair and style, and delighted in using this talent to skewer hypocrites and high-handed organizations such as the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Indeed, his condemnations of the CPR were so frequent and caustic that the rail line refused to carry his newspapers, and in place of a ticket issued him a lifetime 'tie pass' (the right to tromp down the tracks, counting the ties).

Lowery's style earned him many enemies among the rich and powerful, but he remained unrepentant and pugnacious as ever, and could give as good as he got with even a short paragraph:

You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. It is also a fact that you cannot make a good, honest and pleasant citizen out of a petty, spiteful, nosey, vindictive, gluttonous individual. Such fellows by accident are sometimes elevated to high positions, when they should be sawing wood in a penitentiary or looking out from the windows of a lunatic asylum.

Here is another example:

We would rather be a frog and live upon the green scum of a swamp than supinely sit and not use our pen in the defence of liberty and justice. The good have nothing to conceal and have only admiration from a trenchant editor. It is only the sneaking, cowardly, dishonorable, back-biting and black-mailing curs that writhe in mental agony when the editorial harpoon tears away their masks, exposing their detestable acts to the gaze of an outraged and indignant world.

However, despite Lowery's many admirable qualities, he had several serious character flaws as well. Like so many newspapermen of his time, he was a two-fisted drinker who tended to indulge in semi-regular bouts with the bottle. His alcoholism would remain with him for most of his life, and resulted in periodic sessions in hospital for the feisty little editor. Indeed, on more than one occasion, The New Denver Ledger reported that: "Col. Lowery was discharged from hospital this week, the 'same old thing'".

Undoubtedly, however, the most distressing aspect of Lowery's character was his naked racism toward Chinese workers. True, this attitude was not uncommon in British Columbia during this time period, and Lowery was merely reflecting a commonly-held view that because Chinese labourers were often willing to work for lower wages than other workers, they brought down everyone else's standard of living. Nevertheless, his unrelenting bigotry toward the Chinese, while understandable in the context of his times, leaves today's reader with a feeling of distaste.

As the years passed, Lowery was once again on the move with his printing press. In 1906 he packed up his equipment and his pet bulldog, Keno, and moved on to Greenwood, where he ran another paper for 14 years. His health was deteriorating, however, and he suffered from dropsy, likely as a result of his years of alcohol abuse. By 1920, with his best years behind him, he sold his last newspaper and retired to Grand Forks where he died on May 20, 1921 at age 62. His funeral in Nelson, BC was a crowded affair, and many of his old friends and subscribers turned out to pay their respects to the irascible old editor.

A lifelong bachelor, Lowery left no children or family behind, just some of the most well-written and entertaining sketches of early mining camp life ever put to paper. Today, some historians have compared his writing favourably with that of Bret Harte, Mark Twain and renegade newspaper publisher Bob 'Give-em-hell' Edwards of the Calgary Eye-Opener. Without a doubt, he was one of the most fearless and uncompromising newspaper men of his time, and he has left us an invaluable glimpse into the lives of the miners, gamblers, prostitutes, business people, and ordinary citizens who populated the Silvery Slocan.