

From Boom to Bust in 20 Years: Sandon's History as an Incorporated City

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From the beginning, Sandon was a community that could hardly catch up with itself; organization and government were virtual afterthoughts, imposed on an existing city that had sprung up in the unlikely location of Carpenter Creek valley. In the original pell-mell rush to stake claims and build housing, no serious thought was given to the organization of streets, fire safety, sewage and waste disposal, or numerous other civic concerns. In fact, the original inhabitants simply built homes and stores wherever it suited them, and no effort was even made to stake a townsite.

It was not until the arrival of the brash, 28-year-old

J.M. Harris in 1892 that serious steps were taken to lay legal claim to a townsite. Harris, recognizing the earlier settlers' oversight, simply staked his claim on the valley floor, then told the earlier arrivals to pay up or get off his land. Harris was not popular as a result, but the squatters were forced to comply, as Harris had the law on his side. As the undisputed power broker in the Sandon's boomtown economy, Harris enjoyed immense wealth, prestige and influence, as well as many of the choice building lots and largest businesses. Harris took to his role with gusto, dispensing largesse as he saw fit, including donating land on Sunnyside Hill for the new Methodist church. Despite the many examples of his public involvement, however, Harris never involved himself with local politics.

Even though no formal civic structure existed, however, Sandon's citizens were taking steps to address the many needs in their community. By 1896 a rudimentary fire department was taking shape, a schoolhouse had been built high on Sunnyside Hill, and on March 5, 1897, Harris' Sandon Waterworks and Light Company began producing hydro power for the community. Nonetheless, issues such as sanitation were still a concern, and it soon became

obvious that a civic government was required to address these matters. Indeed, many Sandon residents, such as Paystreak editor R.T. Lowery, agitated strongly for incorporation as a means of accessing tax money that had previously gone straight to Victoria, never to be seen again.

On January 1, 1898 the City of Sandon was incorporated, with postmaster and prominent businessman E.R. Atherton elected as the city's first mayor. Among the first major projects undertaken by the new council were the construction of boardwalks along every street, and a means of containing Carpenter and Sandon Creeks, both of which meandered through the heart of the city. The council decided to flume the creeks, enabling them to be controlled and allowing the former creek channels to be used for building lots. The flume also provided an effective means of flushing away waste and sewage from the downtown core and the first Miners Union hospital, which opened for business in March of 1899. Although primitive by today's standards, the use of the flume for sewage disposal ended the threat of epidemics, although the city council could not suspect the havoc that the flume would eventually wreak in their city.

Two more immediate disasters were waiting in the wings, however. In June of 1899 a simmering labour dispute culminated in a lockout of the unionized miners by the mine-owners. This lock-out was to last nine long months, and by the time it ended a general malaise had seized Sandon. Much of the population had been lured away by the Klondike gold fields, and the silver market remained unstable; many of the mines could not recover from the nine-month shut-down, and closed down. Then, early in the morning on May 3, 1900, a fire started beside Spencer's Opera House, and by the time the sun had cleared Reco Mountain the next morning, the entire downtown core was gutted.

Rebuilding work began immediately, but on a much more modest and organized scale. City council, under the new mayor, H.H. Pitts, decided to transfer the city's main street from narrow Reco Avenue to the wider planked-over flume. A new, larger schoolhouse was constructed on Sunnyside Hill, too, reflecting the changing nature of the city; although the population was smaller than during the "boom" years, there were more families and children than before, when the bulk of the citizens had been young, single transient miners.

Perhaps one of the most visible changes was the construction of a large three-storey City Hall. Built at a cost of \$3,195, the City Hall featured beautiful trim and woodwork inside, and held city offices, council chambers, a courtroom, jail and fire hall. Despite the council's very visible expression of faith in the city's future, however, the hard times would only continue. For the next decade, metal prices continued to decline, the population of the city continued to shrink,

and many businesses closed for good. By 1910, a major forest fire had burned out most of the line on the K&S Railway and forced it into bankruptcy, as well as destroying many of the area's mining camps and mills. Rocked by these misfortunes, people continued to trickle away from Sandon, and by 1913, crippled by recession and disaster, the City of Sandon was forced into receivership.

With the outbreak of World War I, metal prices made a dramatic recovery, and prosperity returned to the city, along with an increasing population. Despite improved production from the area mines, however, the municipal government was unable to recover from the series of body blows dealt to it before the war, and in 1920 the City of Sandon was formally disincorporated. At this time, authority over municipal affairs reverted to the province, and from 1920 until 1925 the ornate City Hall was used by the provincial police constable for an office and a residence.

Meanwhile, parents in Sandon were becoming increasingly upset over the deteriorating condition of the schoolhouse on Sunnyside Hill, and were petitioning the provincial government to allow them to convert the old City Hall into a new schoolhouse. Thus, in 1925 the provincial policeman was relocated to the residence next door, the old City Hall was stripped of its finery, and it began a more prosaic period as the third Sandon schoolhouse. Abandoned in 1954, the old City Hall was almost completely demolished for its lumber over the next 30 years, before it was bought by a local family, who began an ongoing restoration project.