

Swift and Silent, The "Whispering Death" Avalanches and Snow Slides

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Soon after the first settlers arrived in Carpenter Creek valley, the hillsides rang to the sound of axes and saws as the miners began cutting timber for use in the mines or to build shacks. As the tide of hundreds turned to thousands, the virgin forest was devastated at an incredible rate.

At one point, three sawmills and a sash and door factory were kept busy, churning out lumber needs for the booming population. As Sandon mushroomed into a city, the trees shrank back, leaving vast exposed areas, and directly exposing the community to the threat of avalanches.

Above Sandon, high on the mountainsides where most of the mines were located, the risk was often greater. Numerous cookhouses, blacksmith shops and other mine buildings were swept into oblivion every winter, with the loss of many lives over the years.

Although avalanches may be triggered by loud sounds, often a slide will be caused when a layer of unstable frost crystals gives way beneath fresh snow that has fallen on top of it. These are particularly unpredictable and destructive avalanches that can sweep away thousands of tons of snow, rock and forest. Often as silent as they were deadly, these avalanches were known to the early miners and prospectors as "the whispering death", and were greatly feared for their ability to strike without warning.

While many of these avalanches struck high on the mountainsides, as the trees were cut back around the city, slides began to sweep through the few remaining trees, right into the heart of Sandon itself. Some of the most dangerous areas of the city were the upper gulch area, and

along the Cody road. One winter, the slide threat was so great that the Miners Union hospital was relocated to a safer location, and a whole city block had to be evacuated, effectively cutting Sandon into two sections.

Avalanches also caused the relocation of one of Sandon's remaining original buildings, which currently houses the Tin Cup Cafe. Originally the residence of the Neil Tattrie family, it was built on the opposite side of Carpenter Creek. However, it was so close to the steep mountainside that small avalanches were soon smashing into it, wrenching and twisting the structure in the process. Around 1900, in an attempt to save the building, two trees were felled over the creek, and the entire building was pulled across to its current location on the other side. For many years the lasting damage done to this building was evident in twisted walls and floors, until 1997 when a massive restoration project was begun.

In recent years avalanches in Sandon itself have become rare, as the trees around the community have gradually grown back up. However, high above, such as on the south slope of Reco Mountain, where once camps for 13 mines clung to the steep slopes in a two-mile (3.2-kilometre) belt at the 6,500-foot (1,981-metre) elevation, the slides continue to run, unchecked and unchallenged.

The Stewart Slide, 1937

A long period of clear, cold weather during January and February of 1937, during which an unusually thick layer of hoarfrost had built up on the surface of the snow. Suddenly, a fierce winter storm piled three feet of fresh snow on top of the unstable coating of frost crystals, setting the stage for a devastating avalanche.

Late one afternoon following school, Evelyn Stewart and her father George were walking to the home of Evelyn's grandparents, Con and Minnie Stewart, who lived on Cody Road in Sandon's upper gulch. Suddenly, all along Sunnyside Hill, a wall of snow came smashing down through the trees, directly toward the homes in the upper gulch. With no warning, George and Evelyn were engulfed in a cloud of flying powder snow, blinding Evelyn's father. Within seconds, two successive waves of snow had smashed into Con's house and forced George, who had been separated from his daughter, backward down the slope.

When the swirling snow cleared, the situation was grim. Con Stewart's house was buried under 25-feet (7.62 metres) of snow, and Evelyn was nowhere to be found- miraculously, three adults who had been in the house at the time had all escaped unharmed. Immediately a rescue crew set to work with shovels, axes and picks in a desperate race against time. As a tunnel was cut through the snow, the snow became more dense and packed, slowing the rescuers progress. Repeatedly they would have to stop as a fresh crew of workers would move in with axes and saws to clear away trees that had been carried along in the slide.

As men tired and slowed, more men would step in to take their place, and the feverish pace continued. Late in the afternoon, a relief party arrived from Silverton and New Denver, after walking the last nine miles (14.5 kilometres) through snow too deep for their vehicles. Johnny Harris, owner of the Sandon Waterworks and Light Co., set up flood lights and the digging continued on past midnight. Finally, shortly after daybreak, the bodies of the little girl and her dog, Rex, were discovered in the front room of Con's house. Apparently, they had just made it inside the front door as the adults were hurrying out the back, seconds before a wall of snow hit the house.

Even in a territory as used to slides as the Slocan, the tragedy was felt acutely in Sandon and neighbouring communities. Evelyn was buried shortly afterward, with mourners attending from New Denver, Silverton and Kaslo. In all the years since Evelyn Stewart's tragic death, there has never been another avalanche in the same area of Sandon's upper gulch.