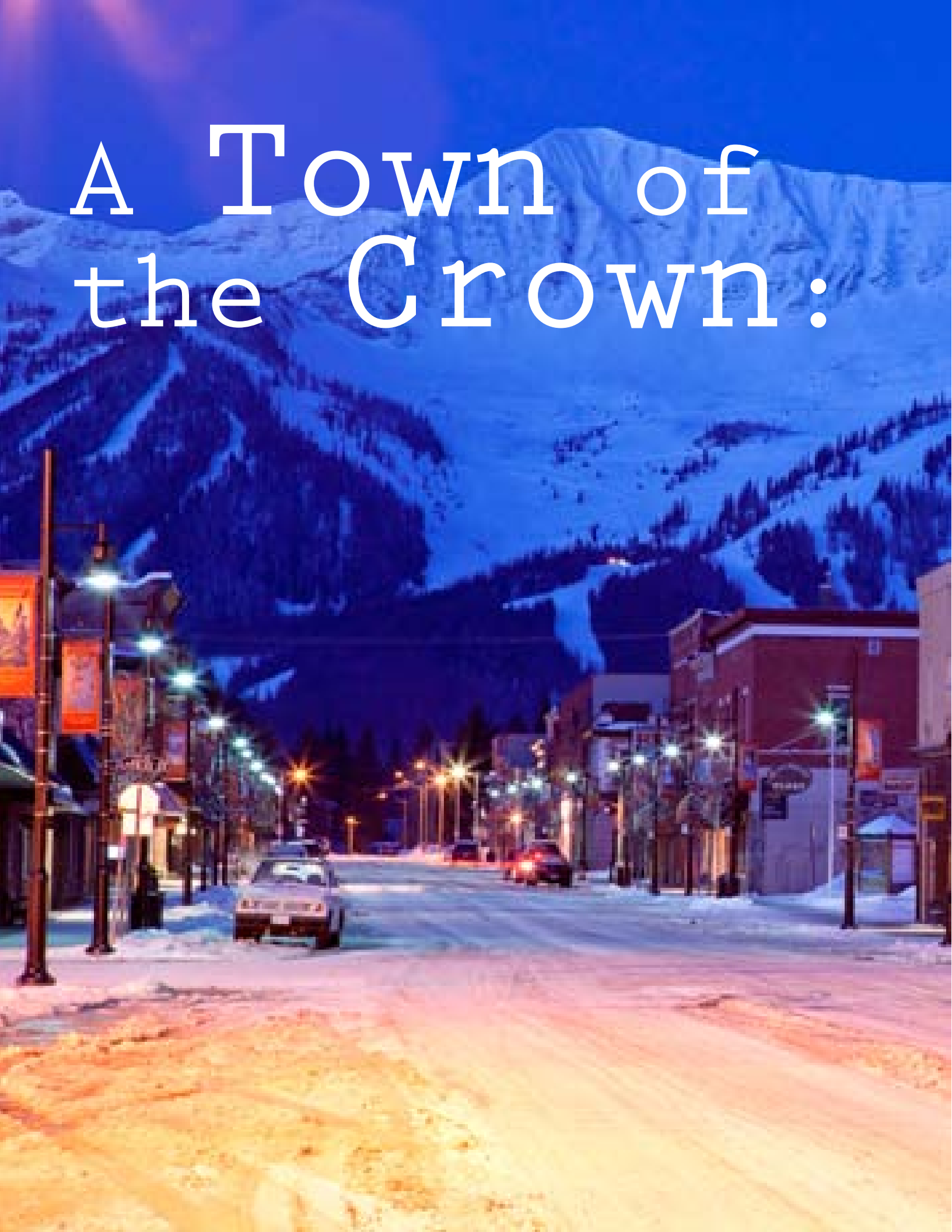


A Town of the Crown:





Fernie, BC

A Book Review and Recommendation

Photo by Tourism Fernie

With this “Book Recommendation” we are beginning a new series in the *UM Crown of the Continent E-Magazine* that we’re calling “Towns in the Crown.” Sometimes, as in this case, it is our intention to focus on a book about a specific town that we can happily recommend to our readers as with the piece below on Fernie. *A Celebration of 100 Years*, published by the Fernie and District Historical Society in 2003. In other cases, we will write or commission profiles of some of the other important and fascinating “towns of the Crown,” both large and small. We hope that our readers will get to know things they didn’t already know about these towns and, perhaps, be inspired to visit them. So here’s a piece on our featured “Crown Town #1: Fernie, British Columbia.”

Why are we starting with Fernie, you may ask? Anyone who has been to Fernie knows that it is an exciting, picturesque Rocky Mountain town with a colorful history and a vibrant present. In many ways it could be described as a “typical” Crown of the Continent town, but in other ways, it is clearly unique. Additionally, those of us who reside on the south side of the Canadian-U.S. border are, with numerous exceptions, embarrassingly uninformed about places, issues, institutions, and opportunities on the north side of that border, even though a town like Fernie lies only two hours driving time from Kalispell, Montana. Enough reasons?

Fernie. A Celebration is a treasure trove of narrative historical pieces, historical photos, contemporary photos, interesting anecdotes, brief profiles of people and institutions, reflections on significant events and major trends. And that all adds up to a highly informative portrait of this attractive and very interesting Crown town. Although the general structure of the book is laid out essentially in chronological fashion, with each of the seven chapters (excepting chapter seven) focusing on a ten to twenty year chunk of time, stretching from 1904 to 2004. The seventh chapter, “Local Speak: A Year in the Life,” is built around a collection of one-line comments from Fernie residents about “how they got there” and “why they live there.” Like all the other chapters it, too, is richly illustrated with exceptional photographs that show the town and its surrounding areas in all their diversity and stunning attractiveness. This is, after all, part of the Crown of the Continent.

Like other Crown towns on both sides of the border in which we live or which we know well, Fernie’s history is

full of drama: rough characters, mining explosions, fires, floods, depression and economic “booms and busts,” the comings and goings of major corporations and railroads, the discovery and development of tourism, the influx of outsiders looking for a natural and healthy place to live, a strong sense of place and civic pride. Readers will learn about two major legends that have accompanied Fernie’s history, are well known by its residents, and have intrigued visitors over time: the *Legend of the Ghost Rider and the Legend of the Griz*. You’ll have to read the book or check out these legends and other information about Fernie on the town’s website at www.fernies.com. I won’t give them away here. But they are important for annual events and for place names that remind residents and visitors alike of the importance of stories, and of legends.

Chapter One, “1904-1913: Trial by Fire,” informatively illustrated by historic photos and contemporary ones, covers Fernie’s beginnings as a coal mining camp (Crow’s Nest Pass Coal Company Limited) and some of its early challenges, such as a major explosion at a Coal Creek mine in 1902 that killed 128 miners and the devastating fires that ravaged the town in 1904 and again in 1908. But it also provides insights into and information about the rugged and ethnically diverse residents who led colorful lives during this period, suffered but then rebuilt the town after each disaster, turned aspirations and hopes into reality, raised families, educated their young, published newspapers, played in their marvelous natural setting and on athletic fields and ice arenas (soccer, baseball, ice hockey) and welcomed the railroad (Canadian Pacific Railroad), traveling circuses, and (mostly) new comers.

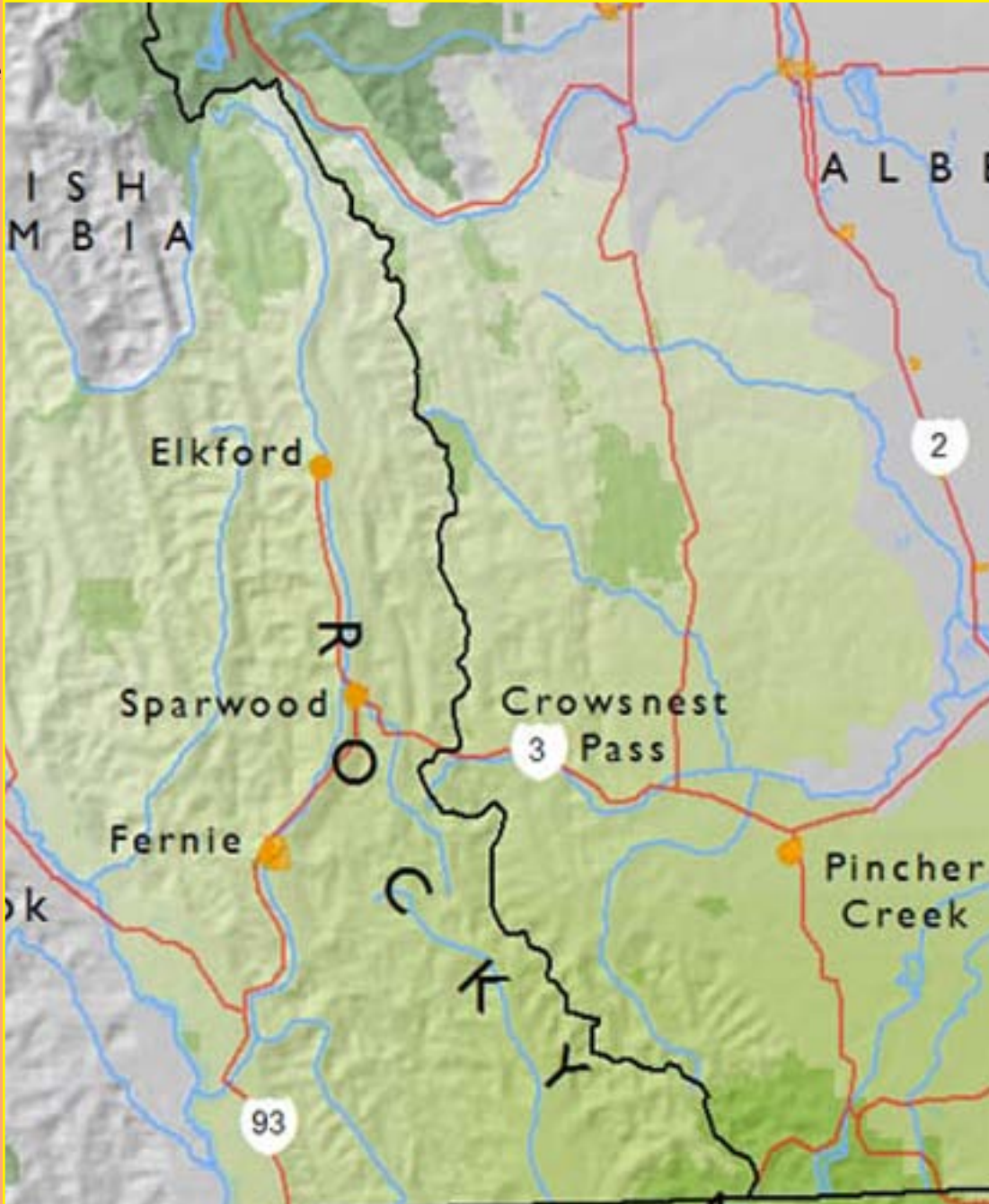
The second chapter, “1914-1938: War and Depression,” relates stories of various kinds of challenges as Fernie shed its almost exclusively “rough mining town” image and developed into a more permanent kind of town. For Ferneites and others who called Canada home, World War I began earlier than for U.S. citizens: since the war started for Britain already in 1914 (in contrast to 1917 for the U.S.), it also began in that year for Canadians. And some 92 men and boys from Fernie died in that war, a huge sacrifice for such a small town. This chapter provides information and insights, again through photos, anecdotes, and narrative, about and into the realities of prohibition, influenza outbreaks, the arrival of cars, mining strikes, the logging industry, the challenges of the 1929 crash and subsequent depression, rampant unemployment, and, once again, another big war. Like

WW I, World War II came earlier to Canadians than to citizens of the U.S., September 1939 as opposed to December 1941.

Chapter Three, “1939-1958: Winning the War but Losing Steam,” deals with the effects of that long war (1939-1945) for Canadians in and around Fernie, the slow but steady emergence from the depression, the growth of the town, the challenges of rough winters, and the modernizing of many aspects of life in these northern Rockies. This chapter is especially informative in presenting what one might call the fabric of “social history” in this feisty and creative small town, including, after the end

Chapter Four, “1959-1967: White at the End of the Tunnel,” informs the readers about the rather desperate economic situation that set in at the end of the 1950s with the closure of the Coal Creek mines, followed in 1964 by the withdrawal of the Canadian Pacific Railroad from Fernie. Even though the coal industry made a sort of comeback in the following years, it was clear to the town’s leaders that its economy had to diversify. And in this chapter we learn much about how

the “white” in its title, snow, that is, came to the rescue as Fernie became a skiing and winter recreation center. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Fernie even submitted a bid to host the Winter Olympics in 1968. It lost out to its bigger and better known neighbor Banff as Canada’s entry, which lost to Grenoble, France, for the games themselves. Nonetheless, as this chapter illustrates, Fernie became an up-and-coming outdoor recreation center and thereby added at least one stabilizing element to its theretofore rocky economic base.



Kaiser Aluminum plant which, even though it provided, in conjunction with the revival of the Crows Nest Pass Coal Company, economic growth and jobs, brought new social and infrastructure challenges with it. As we learn, the “boom and bust” cycle of mineral extraction industries in the region rattled Fernie as well during this period. Yet, the attractiveness of the region and Fernie itself for new residents continued during this period, and the town added substantially to its cultural, educational, recreational, and civic life.

The book’s fifth chapter, “1968-1994: Kaiser Boom,” deals primarily with the arrival of the

The final “regular” chapter of this book, “1995-2003: A New Wave—Locals by Choice,” focuses on the continuation of that demographic development as the lifestyle

and expansion of recreation opportunities for all seasons attracted more and more people. World-class skiing, hiking and climbing, biking and rafting, fishing and hunting, complemented by a vibrant cultural and social life, all played their roles in Fernie's more recent development and growth.

The seventh chapter, as suggested at the beginning of this review, is replete with contemporary photos of life in and around Fernie, and these are commented on, at least indirectly, by one-line statements from locals. Among my favorites are: "I am in Fernie because I was born here." "I was born in Fernie and love how I feel when I'm here." "I came to Fernie because I was told to." "I came to Fernie for snow and work and to learn how to cook Canadian." "I came to Fernie with a boy—wrong boy, right town." "I came to

Fernie because they wouldn't give me a job in Lethbridge." Whatever the reason these people came, stayed, or admittedly, in some cases, left—readers of this

wonderful book will find, as I did, a great deal to learn about this special town, its history, its people, and what it has to offer, especially, but not only, outdoors. They will also sense differences between a Canadian town in the Crown of the Continent and similar towns on the U.S. side of the Crown, and discover a plethora of great reasons for going there and seeing what it's all about for oneself. Happy travels to Fernie and the rest of Canada's amazing portion of "our" collective Crown of the Continent. I'm certainly planning my next trip there!

Jerry Fetz

The book may be purchased by e-mailing history@ferniemuseum.com. Cost is \$31CAN.

Facts about Fernie:

It is located in Southeast British Columbia, just West of the British Columbia/Alberta border. It, too, like Missoula, has a "river that runs through it," in its case the marvelous Elk River that runs north to south through town. At Fernie Coal Creek (guess why it's named that?) flows into the Elk River as well from the East. Canadian Highway 3, also called Crowsnest Highway, runs north-south through Fernie as well. Mt. Hosmer and Castle Mountain are two of the major peaks in view of the town, but Fernie is virtually surrounded by mountains. Fernie is home to a campus of the College of the Rockies (main campus in Cranbrook), its hockey club team is the Ghostriders, it hosts an annual Fernie Mountain Film Festival, and it is a destination for outdoor activities of all kinds. Fernie is accessible by car from Calgary in about 4 hours, from Cranbrook in 1, and from Kalispell in 2. And its history is both rich and colorful, as you read above.

Our "recommended book" this issue, *Fernie. A Celebration of 100 Years*, lists as its main author Jennifer Hamilton. Short, but important pieces were also contributed by members of the Historical Society staff, John Kinnear and Mike Pennock, with the final chapter compiled by Steve Short who also supplied the cover photo and the many contemporary photos of Fernie and the surrounding region. His photos constitute a major and wonderful feature of this book. The book, as the title suggests, was produced to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the incorporation of Fernie (1904) and to provide readers with a fascinating and well-illustrated historical chronology of those 100 years.

