



THE BOOM IN BRIDGE RIVER

HOW THIS ISOLATED VALLEY NORTH OF PEMBERTON
RECENTLY DOUBLED IN POPULATION



BY ROBERT WISLA

located 79 kilometres north of Pemberton, through a two-and-a-half-hour drive over the seasonal Hurley River Forest Service Road, lies the sleepy Bridge River Valley.

Also known as Electoral Area A of the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District (SLRD), it is a unique area unlike any other in the Sea to Sky—or all of British Columbia, for that matter.

A region full of beautiful, sweeping landscapes, the towering snow-peaked coastal mountains stretch more than a hundred

kilometres from Lillooet in the east, nearly to Pemberton in the west.

The Bridge River Valley is home to small localities that each bear their own slightly different history and character. From modern, million-dollar lakefront recreational properties to an entire abandoned gold-mining townsite that sold for the price of a single-family house in Whistler.

Historically, the region had a handful of gold rush settlements whose names can still be found on the map, like Brexton, Ogden, Pioneer, Minto and Bradian. For the most part, these settlements have been left for good, with only scattered remnants telling the stories of the towns that once were.

By comparison, today the valley is sparsely populated. The remaining settlements are composed of small communities spread across the region. These communities are Gun Lake, Tyaughton Lake, Gun Creek, Marshall Lake, Bralorne and the unofficial capital of the area, Gold Bridge.

Altogether, these communities used to have about 150 full-time residents split between them. Almost nothing compared to when the region was in its heyday, when thousands called the valley home.

Thanks to increased remote work opportunities, more affordable housing, and increased tourism, along with significant infrastructure projects in the works, including a potential gold mine expansion and BC Hydro rebuilding the major dams in the region, the population of this remote valley has surged over the last five years.

When the 2021 census came out, it had some astonishing statistics, especially as they related to the Sea to Sky. Nearly every part of the SLRD experienced rapid growth in the last five years, but none more so than the Bridge River Valley.

Whistler grew by a staggering 19 per cent, Pemberton grew by 32.4 per cent, and Electoral Area A, which makes up the Bridge River Valley, increased by a whopping 63.1 per cent, doubling the number of full-time residents in the region, to 310.

This increase in full-time residents, plus an ever-increasing number of tourists, recreational property owners, and people who come to work temporarily in the valley, is bringing the valley back to life in a way not seen in decades.

“We’ve got a whole bunch of new younger people,” says SLRD Electoral Area A Director Sal DeMare. “Everybody likes recreation. Everybody likes the backcountry, snowmobiling and backcountry skiing and mountain biking and dirt biking and quading, and the list goes on and on.

“We’ve got a whole new demographic here, where if you go back to when the mine was operating, we didn’t have that when we had a much bigger population. Things have changed.”

A large percentage of those new buyers are from the Sea to Sky, DeMare notes.

“It’s amazing how many people from Pemberton, Whistler and Squamish are buying property up here. A lot of them are younger families, but they’re not full-time. There are a few full-time, but not that many.”

So what is driving this growth?

There is a feeling that the pandemic has pushed more people out of the city. Due to the cheaper housing in parts of the Bridge River Valley, along with new technology like Starlink that allows for high-speed internet even in the most remote locations, more people are looking for these kinds of rustic, isolated havens across the province.

Franco Castiglia works as a realtor in Abbotsford. He owns property in Bralorne and has noticed more people moving from the Lower Mainland to more rural areas due to the rising cost of living.

“I’ve noticed even as a realtor, even in the Fraser Valley, that a lot of people are moving further out. Like, even in the Okanagan, many people are moving to Okanagan or 100 Mile House,” he says.

Castiglia’s family bought a place in Bralorne in 1994 and has been coming to the region ever since. His parents purchased the home in Bralorne as a recreational property for him and his brothers to enjoy as kids.

“They bought it for us, four boys. A place to go,” says Castiglia. “The house was built in 1936 or 1938, around there. It needs some work like most of these homes here, but it’s a great place to relax.”

MINE YOUR BUSINESS

Increased remote work and affordability are just one piece of the population puzzle.

The idea of reopening the Bralorne Gold Mine has come up numerous times over the years as gold prices have risen. When the mine shut down in 1970, the average price per ounce of gold was \$35 (\$258 in today’s prices).

Now that the price of gold has quintupled to \$1,850 per ounce, reopening the Bralorne Gold Mine as a more extensive underground operation has become a much more attractive idea.

The Bralorne Gold Mine was reactivated on a smaller scale of about 280 tonnes per day in 1982 by Avino Silver and Gold Mines, focusing on the mine’s richest known veins.

This reactivation was substantially smaller than in its heyday, but helped keep the communities in the area employing about 60 people through the 1980s, and then scaled back to approximately 20 employees in the early 2000s.

In 2019, the exportation-focused mining company Talisker Resources acquired the mine for about \$9 million.

Since the acquisition, the company has spent a considerable amount of money drilling core samples and exploring the property to get an idea of the prospect of expanding the mining operation into a larger-scale project.

During the exploration and core drilling, the company employed about 90 people in the region and put approximately \$40 million into the local economy. This has contributed to some of the employees setting up shop in the area permanently.

“Our primary focus as a company is on Bralorne and its future, and that’s where we spent the majority of our time and money and energy there over the last three years. The main focus of our efforts has been on taking a sort of a fresh approach to the deposit itself,” says Mike McPhie, Talisker Resources VP of sustainability and external affairs.

“We are taking a fairly systematic approach to understanding the entire deposit and seeing if there’s potential for it to come into being a new gold mine—a modern, safe, sustainable operation in this century, so that’s really what we’re focused on right now, and it’s gone really well for some time now.”

The company’s goal is to publish a report this summer that will define what reasonable estimates might be on the ground. If the report comes back with positive results, the idea of building a larger underground mine could come to fruition.

What exactly an underground mining expansion would look like would have to be decided at a future date. The mine currently has a tailings pond and milling capacity for 100 to 280 tonnes a day, which works out to about one hauling truck worth of material a day.

Talisker Resources hopes to expand the capacity of the mine to about 1,500 tonnes a day. That would require the infrastructure at the site to be substantially expanded, or alternative models of processing would have to be looked at for processing and milling for the mine.

In the early days, ore was milled, and gold bars were produced onsite, with crushed rock coming up from underground before going through a series of processing steps to refine the bars.

With the more modern operation the company is envisioning, McPhie says the mined rock could be shipped to

Kamloops at New Gold’s New Afton Mill or other potential facilities.

“We’re not sure yet what the best option is. On the one hand, it makes a lot of sense to take advantage of an existing mineral processing facility that’s in the region, but on the flipside, it’s expensive to move rocks, so you have to do the economics of it and understand what’s going to work,” notes McPhie.

“So those are some of the questions we’re going to try to answer here. The mining would be an underground mining technique. There’s a bunch of different options there for consideration, but really, the question comes once you bring it to the surface: what happens then?”

After the resource report is released, the company may move forward with a formal expansion plan. That plan would have to go through the Environmental Impact Assessment process, where details of the mine expansion such as the milling, environmental, and export plans would be reviewed.

Mine expansions such as this can take several years to become fully permitted. In the meantime, there is another large-scale project that will soon be starting construction.

WATER WORKS

Within the next five years, BC Hydro is starting work on its Bridge River System Upgrades, one of the most significant hydroelectric projects in the province.

Between the 1940s and ‘50s, three major dams were built in the Bridge River region, flooding the entire valley. The water of the Bridge River was redirected through tunnels in Mission Mountain to the community of Shalalth at Seton Lake Reservoir below.

The Bridge River Hydroelectric Power project already provides about eight per cent of British Columbia’s power supply and is one of the leading employers in the region. Over the next 10 years, these dams will be upgraded and rebuilt in a billion-dollar project.

This is expected to bring hundreds of workers over the project’s lifespan, with many of them likely setting up homes in the region.

For DeMare, the mine expansion and the BC Hydro project, on top of the existing growth in tourism businesses, represents both an opportunity and challenge for the valley.

“Let’s put it this way: I made my career in the resource industry. I worked nine years in an open-pit mine and the rest of my time in the forest industry. So there are benefits to it and some disadvantages to it. So the benefits, of course, are that the people will get jobs,” says DeMare.

“One of the issues that we have in the valley is that we don’t have very many students in the school, we don’t have a lot of families that live full time here. We have lots of new people that are buying recreational properties. They got kids because there seems to be a younger group moving in that has young families, but they’re not moving here. They’re part-time people. So one of the advantages is the school if people move here.

“If that school closes, we’re done for. If the mine opens up, there is a possibility that we could get families here, where we can keep that school open because it can bring families here. I’m in favour of the mine opening up.”

GOLD IN THEM HILLS

The Bridge River Valley has a complicated history.

In many ways, the region follows a similar story to the dozens of other gold mining ghost towns of British Columbia’s early days. With a rapid rise full of riches, a ledger full of quirky characters and ultimately an eventual decline to near-total abandonment.

The Bridge River is the traditional territory of the Tsilhqot'in and St'at'imc peoples. The region served as a crossroads between the two peoples.

In the pre-colonization days, the region was never heavily inhabited. Its rugged topography made travelling in and out tricky, much like today, even with our modern transportation.

Europeans came to the region during the same period as the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush, around 1858. As miners rushed into the Fraser Canyon, searching for riches, their journey would take them up to where the Bridge River met the Fraser near Lillooet, where gold was plentiful.

The first European to discover gold in the Bridge River Valley was a future member of the legislature for Lillooet, Andrew T. Jamieson. Jamieson led a government-sponsored exploration party in 1865 through the region. After struggling through the thick forest of the coastal mountains, they would eventually come upon a gold-bearing stream.

The stream was teeming with gold, and was named after Evan Cadwallader, who had suggested searching for gold in the area.

After word of Jamieson's party striking gold in the area got across the colony, more people joined the hunt. Even so, widespread gold mining wouldn't take off in the region for many more years, as gold claims were still quite profitable in the more easily accessible Fraser Canyon and other areas of British Columbia.

This would change after a man named Harry Atwood made a claim on Cadwallader Creek in 1897 that would become one of the most famous claims in the province's history: the Pioneer Claim.

The miners had to bring in all their equipment by horseback, which was no easy task for either the miners or the horses. Access has always been difficult for getting into the Bridge River region. The easiest way was through Seton and Anderson Lake or Pemberton up to McGillivray Pass, connecting Anderson Lake with Bralorne.

Access to the region would not get easier until the Great Pacific Eastern Railways were pushed through Squamish, Whistler, Pemberton and Lil'wat, N'quatqua and Tsalalh territory.

Interestingly enough, the current Hurley River Forest Service Road that connects Pemberton with the Bridge River Valley goes through the railroad pass, as that was the original planned railway route connecting the Cariboo to the coast.

People would eventually flock to the region on the train until Mission Mountain at Tsalalh (Shalalh), where the journey would take them over several perilous switchbacks over the mountain and into the valley.

From there, it was a journey along the flat Bridge River Valley to Gold Bridge and Bralorne at the end of the valley. Once the massive BC Hydro dams were built and the reservoirs created, this route would be replaced by

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Carpenter Lake Road/ Road 40, which remains the primary connection to the region all year.

A series of claims would be made on the Cadwallader and surrounding region in the Bridge River Valley, and dozens of little settlements would pop up alongside them as people came from around the world to partake in the gold fever.

By 1928, the fever had died down, and the search for gold in the area had turned into a more organized, corporate affair. Many of the original mining claims were bought out, and the resources needed to be increased as the gold mining turned into deeper underground mining.

In 1928, Pioneer Gold Mine was incorporated as an underground mining operation. Shortly after, the Pioneer townsite was founded, schools were built, and as more people came, so did more houses, dance halls, and banks. You name it. The modern history of the region was born.

Between 1930 and 1960, more mines opened up, and new townsites like Bradian were built. Eventually, Bralorne, Bradian and Pioneer became essentially one large town with thousands of people and all the amenities you can think of.

"During its heyday in the 1930s to the 1950s, there were between 3,500 and 5,000 people working here, and every year, they had to keep building more houses," says Bralorne Pioneer Museum curator Janis Irvine.

"Every employee contributed into the pot and the actual companies, both Pioneer and Lorne mine, contributed the same amount until 1960 when everything became Bralorne-Pioneer mines. That's why there were schools, skating rinks, theatres, baseball diamonds, everything that you can think of in a modern-day town in Vancouver was here."

Bralorne, Gold Bridge and the rest of the Bridge River region were booming during those days. Dances and banquets were held in the big hall. There was a high school, a Bank of Montreal, and even a full-fledged hospital.

Things were going well for the region. While it was and still is quite isolated due to challenging topography and poor road connections, the towns in the area thrived for decades.

Then everything changed when gold prices started going down. As prices sank, so did the fortunes of the communities in the region. The various mines that worked independently would end up getting consolidated into the larger Bralorne Gold Mine, but this did little to offset the harsh economic reality of sinking gold prices.

The mine would begin to lay off workers in waves, and by 1971, when the mine officially closed, more than 80 per cent of the housing was vacated in Bralorne, with most of the valuables taken out.

The Bralorne Gold Mine was the largest employer in the valley, employing up to half the region, so when it shut down, it was a blow that devastated the communities of the Bridge River.

Ten years before Blackcomb Mountain would officially open its doors to the world, while Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was honeymooning at his in-law's cabin in Alta Lake in 1971, the largest population centre in the SLRD was coming to a painful end.

After a hundred years of gold mining, the Bridge River Valley's largest and last mine, the Bralorne Gold Mine, closed its doors for good. Hundreds of workers who had raised their families in the valley, attended high school, got married, and built lives for themselves were left to figure out their future.

Many of the houses were abandoned for the elements and ghosts to inhabit. Some people would attempt to stick it out, but it wasn't easy. Without a significant employer in the region and with most of the town moving away, the services such as the high school, hospital and eventually the bus service would all stop, and the towns slowly fell apart.

The headline from *The Province* newspaper screamed, "BRALORNE: TOWN DIES." The article described how the plan at the time was to burn the company town to the ground and let the forest reclaim it.

"The old houses and mine buildings will be set afire when the rains come. This is the present plan of management. When salvagers have picked out the iron from the ashes, the weeds and forest will start to grow back over the stony ground," wrote reporter Art Mackenzie in the 1971 article.

Most of the houses in the Bralorne area were built in the 1930s and, nearing 40 years old when the mine closed, renovations were desperately needed. The miners' houses were built quickly and cheaply, primarily out of wood and some without stone foundations. Some viewed it as more cost-effective to wipe the slate clean.

Fortunately, this idea of remediation didn't go ahead. Although many of the buildings in the area would end up being torn down, the main townsite of Bralorne was saved by a group of brothers from Vancouver.

Frank, John and Gerry Whiting bought the town from the mine (excluding the mine itself) and formed Marmot Enterprises.

Over the following years, Marmot Enterprises would upgrade the town's sewer, water and streetlights and then subdivide the property into individual lots sold to people from across the province.

Houses were sold for between \$14,000 and \$26,000 (between \$96,645 and \$179,483 in 2022 prices), pretty affordable even for back then. The original dream was a remote

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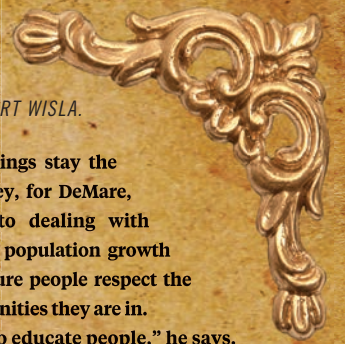
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retirement community; however, since the hospital shut down and doctors moved away, it became clear that recreational users would become the predominant owners of the town.

This has remained case across the region, for the most part. Non-resident property owners make up the majority of homeowners in the area, with many visiting their “cabins” on holidays or long weekends. Some people moved to the region full time to get away from it all—a tranquil place with striking mountains, no cell service and next to no prying eyes.

Today, Bralorne features a mixture of renovated properties with new siding and modern roofs interspersed among abandoned buildings that haven’t received attention in decades. The cracked, peeling paint and sagging ceilings characterizing some buildings contrast with the modern-looking properties that sometimes sit literally across the street.

As the population has risen in the Bridge River Valley, so have efforts to rejuvenate some of the older buildings to bring them back into working order.

The Bralorne Church, in some ways, is a good representation of the community as a whole. At one point in time, it was the centre of a bustling town. The church would be packed with people who would regularly come together to get married, christened and have potlucks.

Named the Boulton Memorial Church after secretary-treasurer of Bralorne Mines W.W. Boulton, it was built by the company in 1936 along with most of the town.

Much like the community as a whole, as the gold mines grew unprofitable, the pews that once held the prayers of a whole town began to empty; the once-bustling church began to weather the elements. The white paint began to chip and crust away as the roof itself began to open to the heavens above.

Rather than let the church fall to ruin, the remaining people in the region rallied together in 1999 and brought it back to life. The building was painted and eventually became

an SLRD community park in 2013, which remains to this day.

A similar story is happening to the old Bralorne Pioneer Mine headquarters, a larger stone building that stands out among the wooden structures of the settlement. In its hundred-year history, it served as the town hall, the mine headquarters, a private residence and even a laundromat.

Thanks to recently received grants it will be turned into the new home of the museum for the community, along with accommodation for a future caretaker onsite. In a funny roundabout way, the museum that began in the building a hundred years ago is now returning to where it all began.

GROWTH SPURT

The Bridge River Valley will remain for future generations a place of immense history and beauty, which one feature alone cannot truly do justice.

To deal with the rapid growth, the SLRD has launched a review of its Official Community Plan for the area, and will be seeking the community’s input into what the future of the region should look like.

Although many in the region have trepidation when it

comes to growth, hoping things stay the way they are as a quiet valley, for DeMare, sustainability is the key to dealing with change in both tourism and population growth in the region, and making sure people respect the environment and the communities they are in.

“It’s a continual effort to educate people,” he says. “People that come into the valley, you must respect not only the communities you’re travelling through but also our environment and our wildlife.” ■



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