

To touch the living past

by Art Joyce

History is alive. To touch a 100-year-old edition of *The Miner* or *The Tribune*—Nelson's two pioneer newspapers—is to touch the living past. To read their stories is to put your finger on the pulse of a once breathing individual. The more individual the personality, the more that person becomes flesh and blood before your eyes. And, like living people, history is often complex, enigmatic, even self-contradictory.

Generations of school children have been raised to believe Canadian history is dull as dishwater. The reason our culture is saturated with American images of the Civil War and the Wild West is not because equally exciting chapters do not exist in our own history. The Americans have simply packaged their stories in a slick, shiny package that reaches the widest possible audience.

To members of the '@ Generation', all this may seem irrelevant in an age of information-at-a-click and zip drives measured in gigabytes. We spend our 20s striving to prove how much different we are than our parents, staking out an identity for ourselves. Our individuality secure, we then have the freedom to notice how *alike* we are to our parents and grandparents, how much our personality is a composite of generations. Yet in order to know who we are, where we are going, we must become intimately familiar with both our personal and collective pasts.

To contend that those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it, is to be confronted with Hegel's equally true contention that "people and governments have never learned anything from history." Yet we cannot escape history, because in fact it is imprinted in our genes, in what Carl Jung called the 'collective unconscious'—a repository of myths and archetypes as old as humanity—universal in nature yet as unique as each culture.

The sermon done, this preacher now gracefully leaves the pulpit, but not before letting the people who have gone before him rise up to tell us their stories. Breathe, unquiet sleepers....

Wednesday, February 3, 1897. Late evening. William Cowgill, popularly known as 'Porcupine Billy,' perhaps for his bristling set of whiskers, enters the Central Saloon in Nelson's downtown. The room is wreathed in cigar smoke and rent by raucous laughter. A cheap piano grinds out music-hall melodies,

pumping up the atmosphere of reckless gambling and heavy drinking. Cowgill steps up to the brass rail and lays his coins on the bar for a quart of whiskey. "For a lady friend," he winks to the bartender. Constable John 'Paddy' Miles, on his way to the door, watches Cowgill with a suspicious glare.

His final end is equally inglorious, though no less flamboyant.

Porcupine Billy shrugs it off and shuffles back to the Stanley House, where he is employed as a porter. The proprietress of the house, Mrs. McDonald, answers his knock at her door and accepts the flask graciously. With little else to do this late

es the fluted glass to ward off the blow. Cowgill is overpowered, and the lampshade crashes onto the floor in pieces. By the time downstairs tenant James McKernon reaches the bathroom, Cowgill's face has been beaten bloody. McKernon's intervention stops the brawl. Miles claps a beefy arm around Cowgill's shoulder,

helping him up.

"Here, that's enough. Let me buy you a drink downstairs, Billy. No hard feelings, eh?"

Mrs. McDonald's son works the bar and pours the two combatants a double

is 'addicted' to liquor, and besides, can get all she needs at the bar in the Stanley House where she lives. After watching Cowgill buy the whiskey, he had followed him to the hotel and searched McDonald's room, finding the flask hidden under her mattress. Miles says he intends to marry her but blames her son for sowing antagonism between them. Her response is less than encouraging. "I'd rather marry a rattlesnake!"

After hearing the testimony from the defense, Judge Forin addresses the court.

"I am surprised to know that a man who has been an officer for 18 years would so far forget the dignity of his position to indulge in a fight. I might expect it from a man like Cowgill, but not from an old officer like the defendant. A constable is an officer of the peace and should be the last man to transgress the laws which he is paid to see maintained. I am adjourning the case for eight days while I consult with the provincial authorities before rendering my decision."

Unlike the more 'upstanding' citizens of his day, John 'Paddy' Miles leaves little formal record of himself outside the scandal sheets and court dockets of the latter 1890s. Despite being a city police constable, he puts himself behind bars far more often than any lawbreakers. Throughout Nelson's incorporation year, he is jailed repeatedly for public drunkenness and brawling. Obviously an out-of-control alcoholic, his more tender side becomes twisted under the



Paddy Miles, at Tamblin's Bar, 1899.

PHOTO COURTESY NELSON MUSEUM

in the evening, he removes several glass lampshades and takes them to a bathroom for washing. Suddenly Miles throws open the door.

"Aha! I am aware you have purchased whiskey for bootlegging purposes, and here," Miles charges, pulling a flask from

shot each. His face registers alarm for Cowgill's battered condition and contempt for Miles. They part like old friends but Miles is surprised later that day by a summons on the charge of assault and battery.

Thursday, February 4, 1897. Justice

The pallor of Miles' forehead darkens in rage as he swings at Cowgill, who raises the fluted glass to ward off the blow.

his jacket, "is the proof!"

"You're a liar!" Cowgill's answer is weak, but rallies to a defensive tone. "And anyhow, it's none of your damn business if I did!"

"Billy, I saw you buy the flask at the saloon, and saw you take it to Mrs. McDonald's room. What do you say to that?"

"That you can keep it, since you're so fond of the stuff yourself, Paddy."

The pallor of Miles' forehead darkens in rage as he swings at Cowgill, who rais-

waits for no man in frontier Nelson. Court is convened the afternoon the summons is issued, and with little else in town for entertainment, the room is packed with people. County court judge John Andrew Forin presides. After Cowgill and McKernon testify for the prosecution, Paddy Miles is called to the witness stand. Under cross-examination, it is revealed that Miles had a romantic interest in the lady in question. He claims to be looking out for her health, since she

influence.

His final end is equally inglorious, though no less flamboyant. In May of 1908, he is on the river west of Nelson, rowing from Miles Crossing with Jack Sharples and John Richmond. Casual observers from the shore become alarmed when they see him rowing too close to the swift water. He loses control and the boat is drawn steadily toward Bonnington Falls. Sharples jumps, upsetting the small craft. Miles manages to haul himself onto the upturned boat, with Sharples struggling in the water a few feet away. The current sweeps the three men closer and closer to the brink of the falls, where the boat pauses, then plunges over. The smashed wreckage of the boat is all that remains in the pool at the foot of the falls. The bodies are never found. ♦

SOURCES: *The Miner*, February 6, 1897—*A Lawless Constable—The Venerable Paddy Miles as a Gay Lothario and a Disturber of the Peace*; *Nelson Daily News* May 28, 1924.