Alberta’s Red Democrats:
The Challenge and Legacy of Blairmore Communism, 1921-1936

by
Kyle Randolph Franz

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Abstract

On Valentine’s Day, 1933 the citizens of Blairmore, Alberta elected a Communist town council and school board. “Alberta’s Red Democrats: the Challenges and Legacy of Blairmore Communism, 1921-1936” seeks not only to understand the Red administration that governed here during the mid-thirties, but also the community that elected it. It will be shown that the election of Mayor Bill Knight and his colleagues was neither a knee-jerk reaction to the protracted poverty of the Great Depression nor an alignment with the Communist Party of Canada as an act of desperation. The Red movement at Blairmore was deeply rooted in past experience, and as it came to fruition challenged what it meant to be a Communist in Canada.
Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to Ian McKay, without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. Throughout this process Ian has been not only been my mentor, but my colleague and friend as well. His insights, suggestions and revisions have helped me to become a better writer and historian. His kindness has helped me to become a better person.

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I owe my biggest thank-you to my family. Mom and Dad, please know that you have always provided me with a loving home, a sympathetic ear and a strong sense of self. Meghan, I am grateful for the connection we share. You are my closest friend and yes, I realize that although I may be able to call myself a doctor, to you I will always be an out-of-province active trailer. Tisha: although we are not related, you are – and always will be – family. And finally Chris; it isn’t often people share a bond as strong as ours, and I am grateful to have you in my life. I dedicate this dissertation to my family.
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Chapter One: Introduction

In February of 1933, the citizens of Blairmore, Alberta, shocked the country by electing a Communist mayor, town council and school board. Although the Reds undertook an ambitious legislative and social agenda, notoriously declaring a public holiday to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian Revolution and trying to implement a system of public health care during their tenure in office, many remember the Communist administration as a novelty – an interesting story for a cocktail party or perhaps the answer to a question in a future edition of Trivial Pursuit. This dissertation will move Blairmore away from the historical footnote it currently occupies by bringing together documentary evidence and newly collected oral testimony in order to better understand local lived experiences while at the same time challenging some influential regional and national narratives in Canadian and left history.

Before we proceed to the questions and arguments this research will pose, let us briefly recount the actions of the council itself. Mayor Bill Knight and his colleagues served three consecutive terms in office between 1933 and 1936, undertaking to fulfill an agenda that pragmatically addressed the needs of a community deeply affected by the Great Depression and years of labour unrest while concurrently promoting radical social and political change. Within weeks of being elected, the council lowered property taxes for workers and cut expenses related to the basic provision of water and electricity. Library fees were abolished for all but the wealthiest citizens, and the ice arena was purchased by the town to ensure that all residents could make use of it. The council made available vacant land for residents to plant vegetable gardens, and rather than selling town-owned property that had accumulated due to tax default under previous administrations, it opted instead to renovate existing buildings in order to house the local unemployed. Those on relief received an increase in pay from twenty cents per hour to fifty
cents per hour for work completed, then the highest rate of pay for relief work in the country. A system of garbage collection was introduced to improve sanitation. The council even went so far as to decree that charges of prostitution would not be pursued within municipal boundaries, requiring local prostitutes to carry with them a medical certificate attesting to their clean bill of health. It was during their attempt to create a system of municipally funded public healthcare that the Reds lost power in 1936.

Despite these achievements, the Red administration of Blairmore has not been remembered for its social programs. Instead, these years are often associated with newspaper articles trumpeting the council’s more controversial ideas and programs. For example, the town’s main street – Victoria Avenue – was renamed Tim Buck Boulevard to honour the then-imprisoned leader of the Communist Party of Canada. In a very public rededication ceremony, the famous (and to some infamous) Reverend A.E. Smith of the Workers’ Unity League cut a bright red ribbon, broke a bottle of ginger ale and pronounced Tim Buck Boulevard open to traffic.¹ The revitalized, widened road boasted high voltage streetlights and a new automatic sprinkler system installed at the then-enormous sum of $80 per block.² Flowers were planted along the route, and the council finished the job by ordering two large, electrical “Tim Buck Boulevard” signs to be installed at the beginning and the end of the Boulevard.³ As Maclean’s Magazine reported:

Whereas Victoria Avenue boasted only five ordinary streetlights, the boulevard is a blaze of glory at night, being illuminated by a row of about eighty arc-lights of high candle power. A new project is underway at present to erect at either end of the boulevard a

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² Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 August 1934. Also see Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 17 July 1934. Council proceedings are available at the office of the Municipality of the Crowsnest Pass.
³ Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 July 1935.
large neon sign bearing the name “Tim Buck,” and announcing to all and sundry that here is no mean city but one which proudly boasts the Communist leader as patron saint.\(^4\)

As one can see in the photograph below, the traveler of the day would be in no doubt about the distinct identity of Tim Buck Boulevard.

![Tim Buck Boulevard](image)

Photo Source: Crowsnest Pass Museum and Archives Gushul Collection.

In a similar spirit, holidays like Armistice Day were abolished and all civic employees and school children were given a day off to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

The council also became increasingly engaged with larger social and political issues. For example, it became standard practice to raise public awareness (and, where necessary, funds) to support protests, events and strikes occurring elsewhere in the province or country. The On-to-Ottawa Trek warranted not only a large public meeting but also telegrams of protest to the Federal Government and the taking of a collection to help get Trekkers to Ottawa. Likewise, the council ensured that Blairmorites were aware of, and engaging with, issues of international

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\(^4\) Miles, “Is This A Soviet?”
importance. When the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was raised for the Spanish Civil War there were information and recruitment drives sponsored by the town. Similarly, when Ethiopia was invaded by Italy in 1935, the council not only held a public meeting to discuss the matter, but sent the following telegram to Ethiopian Emperor Haile Salasse:

Mayor and Council convey best wishes for success over Mussolini, the oppressor of the Italian people and war-monger. We pray for your victory which will help to free the Italian people and the world. Blairmore salutes you! Signed Mayor William Knight.\(^5\)

They also sent copies of the telegram to the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, the *New York Times*, and *Pravda*. Media reaction was swift. Once again, perhaps the editors of *Macleans* were the most succinct. “To put it mildly,” they editorialized, the actions of Blairmore’s town council and school board represented “an affront to the sensibilities of all thinking Canadians!”\(^6\)

Blairmore thus became notorious for its town council and its school board, yet few outsiders paused to wonder about the background and context of its Depression-era radicalism. Why did this one Alberta community elevate radicals to such a prominent position?

This question will be answered by undertaking a localized analysis of Blairmore, examining the intersections of ethnicity, class, gender and ever-changing identities – the fabric of local society – in order to understand what made residents support social and political change. Once an understanding of the local experience is established, we will be in a unique position vis-à-vis Blairmore to engage with broader regional and national narratives. Finally, this project will contemplate how lived experience in this Rocky Mountain town could challenge the way that

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\(^5\) Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 4 November 1935.

\(^6\) Miles, “Is This A Soviet?”
scholars of the Left understand the relationship between the Communist Party of Canada and its supporters during the Third Period.

**Historiography**

Very little has been written about Blairmore’s unusual experiences during the 1930s, and even less has been published concerning its Communist administration. Until recently, the majority of local narratives could be summed up either as apologetic defences in that they argued that the community was impoverished to the point that desperate measures were taken by desperate people, or as efforts in ethnic damage control that set out to dispel stereotypes relating to certain groups as being inherently radical. There is a great deal more to say than either approach allows.

Annie Larbalestier is an excellent example of the former. In the commemorative booklet published to celebrate Blairmore’s 50th anniversary, Larbalestier prefaces her discussion of the Depression by informing readers that Reds “were just [plain] hungry and bored with unemployment, lack of earnings and general hardship,” adding that “anything was better than what they had or their living conditions.” The article itself does not discuss the actions of the Red council specifically, but laments the contemporary (1961) lack of involvement in the municipal process. Larbalestier attributes the end of radicalism here to individuals who organized baseball, basketball and hockey tournaments to facilitate what she refers to as the “general improvement of relations” among the citizens of Blairmore. She also points out that

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8 Ibid., 66.
9 Larbalestier credits the Catholic Bishop for helping to “calm the situation,” while interviews with Beatrice Peressini indicate that as both a Catholic and the daughter of a known Communist she felt the church was not neutral, but anti-communist. Clearly, unifying factors were not the same for Peressini and Larbalestier. See Beatrice Peressini interview, in author’s possession.
“perhaps it was the outbreak of war in 1939 that finally cleared [radicalism] away…”10 This research will demonstrate that this simplistic evaluation of the situation is more representative of the politics of the Cold War – the context in which her article was written – than the actual day-to-day lived experience at Blairmore.

An apologetic portrayal has also been presented by James Cousins, who grew up close to Blairmore and was one of the founding members of the Department of History at the University of Lethbridge. According to Cousins, the citizens of Blairmore were not communist per se, but the vernacular used during the 1930s was definitely Communist-inspired. He points out that public occasions required “mass meetings” or “demonstrations of solidarity,” while “Soviet-style” parades were held.11 Reds often organized twenty-four hour sympathy strikes at Blairmore, but Cousins believes that “these strikes were more annoying than dangerous as so few shifts were worked in any case that each strike merely postponed the day’s work.”12 In making these arguments, Cousins is not only downplaying local support for radical action, but also removing the meaning that Red words and phrases had in Blairmore during the 1930s, and in so doing he removes the individuality and social agency of those who employed them.

Those concerned with the association of certain nationalities with Communism have taken a revisionist perspective when penning local histories of Blairmore and the Pass. Though acknowledging what she calls “limited” Polish activity in the Communist Party of Canada, Claire Chuchla argues that many ethnic Poles in the Pass “found Communism to be spiritually, economically and socially repulsive.”13 And in a narrative that this dissertation will directly

10 Larbalestier, 65.
11 Ibid., 73.
12 Ibid.
challenge, Krystina Lukasiewicz posits that because Polish émigrés arrived in the Crowsnest Pass before the Great War they represented an element of stability rather than a catalyst for revolution. Lukasiewicz solidifies her argument by pointing out that of the sixty-two individuals not re-hired after the strike of 1932, only two were Polish.\textsuperscript{14} Clearly for the Polish community in the Crowsnest Pass – with whom both authors are linked – the association of ethnic groups from Eastern Europe with Communism is still a sensitive subject.

Recently local historian John Kinnear has linked the establishment of a workers’ government at Blairmore with the conditions resulting in the 1932 strike. In 1932 miners across the Pass went on strike, with Blairmore staying out for over eight months. For Kinnear, this was a landmark event for miners at Blairmore. He points out that for those fortunate enough to have jobs prior to the strike, the mines were only working at 50% capacity. Those on relief in 1932 could expect a “pathetic $4.24 per month for a diet of flour, rice, porridge, beans, sugar, lard and prunes.”\textsuperscript{15} The unemployed were expected to supplement this diet by hunting and fishing in the surrounding forest.\textsuperscript{16} Kinnear argues it was a combination of destitution and corporate discrimination (in the form of ethnic favouritism at the West Canadian Collieries) that resulted in the 1932 strike and the subsequent election of a Red council.

While Kinnear echoes Cousins regarding the actions of the council, he raises an interesting point about the way the administration is remembered. In 1990 an effort was made to revive Tim Buck Boulevard as a tourist initiative. Kinnear states the proposal was “met with indignation from the old guard in the Pass who would rather forget than commemorate that

\textsuperscript{14} Krystina Lukasiewicz, “Polish Community in the Crowsnest Pass,” \textit{Alberta History} 30, no. 4 (1988), 6-7. The West Canadian Collieries was accused of not re-hiring known Reds, despite a provision in their contract that barred the company from discrimination based on whether or not an individual had been on the picket lines.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
important part of Pass history.”¹⁷ The desire to “forget” the Knight administration is not limited to textual documents. During my first interview with Beatrice Peressini (whose father Romano Peressini served as a town councillor for several terms), I was presented with a photo of Blairmore town council which was said to have been taken in 1933 just after the municipal election. It was not until later in my research that I came across a very similar photo in the Crowsnest Pass Museum and Archives’ Gushul Collection and realized the print given to me by Mrs. Peressini had been digitally altered. As one can see below, the original picture depicted council seated behind a pro-Communist poster, while in the copy I was given the poster was replaced with a placard that reads: “Town Council 1933.” In a later interview, it was revealed to me that Mrs. Peressini paid to have the photo altered in an effort to keep her father’s involvement with Red Blairmore out of the public record. The “before and after” sequence of pictures below represents how far some residents were willing to go in order to disguise their past:

¹⁷ Ibid.
In their article “Politicians of the Pass,” Tom Langford and Wayne Norton do not mention the Red administration at Blairmore at all; this absence could be representative of the lack of printed information about the council at the time of publication, or perhaps an extension of the silence noted by Kinnear. ¹⁸

My own work has largely challenged this discourse, suggesting that Blairmorites were not only fully aware of the decisions they were making – they were not merely the uninformed, hungry or desperate victims of the Depression – but also that their actions demonstrated a complex awareness of their local, national and international context. Building on the theme of local agency, I posit that the administration, while Communist, came to and retained power through the utilization of its own brand of Red-infused populism. Finally, I contest the view that Blairmorites’ involvement in radical movements was inextricably linked to their ethnicity. Rather, this dissertation contends that because of protracted economic recession and deprivation throughout the Pass during the 1920s – a decade when the majority of Canadians witnessed ever-improving standards of living – the use of ethnic self-identifiers waned and that of class

identifiers waxed. The one exception to this finding – the rise of “Canadian” as an ethnicity – proves the rule: ethnic divisions were being supplemented by class identities.

Blairmore is not often the primary subject of historical discourse. When it does appear in the historical record, the discourse is often in the context of comparisons that support a larger political narrative.¹⁹ In Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919 A. Ross McCormack argues that the Crowsnest Pass was part of a larger regional labour history, which included hard rock mining in the interior of British Columbia and coal mines on Vancouver Island.²⁰ McCormack uses Crowsnest examples to support his arguments about a formative period of labour politics, freely making comparisons between the experiences of “miners” in the Kootenays, Vancouver Island, and the Crowsnest Pass.²¹ He further compares their experiences to those of industrial workers and other resource sector employees (such as loggers), arguing that their commonalities represent a common intellectual and political bonds among labour communities. Allen Seager and David Roth similarly compare the experiences of “miners” in the Crowsnest Pass with “miners” in British Columbia. Their article “British Columbia and the Mining West,” for example, evaluates the labour unrest of 1919-1925, arguing that the turmoil of this period was the result of government’s failure to integrate returning soldiers into a peacetime economy.²²

¹⁹ For some scholars the concept of Western Exceptionalism – that is to say that workers in Western Canada were more radical than workers in Central or Eastern Canada – accentuates the “specifically Western focus” of their studies. In my opinion, however, academic studies such as David Frank, J.B. McLachlan: A Biography (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1999) and Michel Beaulieu, Labour at the Lakehead: Ethnicity, Socialism, and Politics, 1900-1935 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011) have provided a serious and substantial challenge to the Exceptionalism argument. Western Exceptionalism plays a key role in David J. Bercuson, Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990).
²¹ Ibid., 52.
²² Seager and Roth, 231-268.
This type of broad comparison is also present in non-academic works, such as Bruce Ramsey’s *The Noble Cause: The Story of the United Mine Workers of America in Western Canada*. In this book, Ramsey uses specific events at Blairmore and the Crowsnest Pass to support his larger argument that the United Mine Workers of America (U.M.W.A.) was an effective voice for the miners of western Canada. Devoting space in his monograph to the 1932 Crowsnest Pass strike, in which the Blairmore miners took part, Ramsey closely associates the U.M.W.A. with the Workers' Unity League (W.U.L.), the representative of Blairmore miners at the time.\(^\text{23}\) Though the U.M.W.A. was not directly involved with the 1932 strike, it is clear that because the M.W.U.C. folded itself into the U.M.W.A. later in the decade, this strike and the consequent Red administration were part of the union’s history.

There is, arguably, a tendency within regional and national narratives to use experiences at Blairmore to validate larger economic or political narratives without incorporating a comprehensive understanding of those who lived there or the local peculiarities which infused their decision-making processes. While one must recognize the importance of broad class- or industry- based experiences, this research will carefully frame any comparisons it undertakes within a broader social as well as economic and political context. While the above works show larger patterns of labour unrest or union representation, they make few allowances for the individual experiences of the constituent settlements.\(^\text{24}\) Such comparisons may, if not tempered and complicated by local evidence, take for granted that workers in different locations were

\(^{23}\) Miners at the West Canadian Collieries Blairmore operations were members of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, an affiliate of the Red Workers’ Unity League. See Bruce Ramsey, *The Noble Cause: The Story of the United Mine Workers of America in Western Canada* (Calgary: District 18, United Mine Workers of America, 1990).

affected in the same way(s) by larger events and in doing so ignore the important role played by the workers’ local agency.

While the works of McCormack, Seager and Roth use the general experience of the Crowsnest Pass in support of a larger labour narrative, specific events have also been appropriated to support larger political arguments. John Manley, for example, cites the creation of Communist children’s play groups at Blairmore during the strike of 1932 as evidence that the Third Period objectives of the Communist Party of Canada were becoming successful with party members. For Manley the spirit of the Third Period was summed up by Communist organizer Harvey Murphy at Blairmore’s Cosmopolitan Hotel: “This business of dividing people because of their colour or their religion or what lodge they belong to is so much rot! Here there are only two colours, red and yellow!” Manley is quite justified in using this Blairmore evidence in his wider conceptualization of Communist unionism but, as outlined earlier, in this example it is used without consideration of the local experiences from which it is drawn.

This dissertation will also challenge the dominant perception within secondary literature as to what a Red movement should have looked like: a group of so-called “foreigners.” Ian Radforth perhaps describes this popular perception most concisely in his observation that a large proportion of those involved with leftist movements “were immigrants, many of them ‘foreigners’

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26 Ibid., 230.
27 As Ian McKay has observed, “to be a true Canadian was to be white, English-speaking, and Protestant — with some allowance made for French Canadian Catholics, provided they were deferential to the Empire.” Thus, by extension, to act “White” was to act in accordance with principles of British fair play and decorum. Race was thus often “the complicated articulation of class, with employers preferring to hire British or native-born individuals and discriminating against ‘non-white’ persons.” Practically speaking, this resulted in concentrations of “non-white” labour in the lowest paying and least desirable jobs. Being a “foreigner” was thus equated to being “non-white,” and individuals who were categorized as such found themselves at the bottom of the Canadian social and economic totem pole. See Ian McKay, Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 345–416.
from continental Europe.” Scholar Ivan Avakumovic observes that in Canada Communists were expected to speak English with a bad accent, use words and phrases that could not be understood by the average person on the street, read newspapers that were incomprehensible to the majority of people around them, and live in places that “go-ahead” Canadians were only too happy to leave. Individuals who were British-born and were active within the Communist Party also become associated with the “foreign-born element.” In reference to Leslie Morris, for example, it has been observed that “whether from propinquity or not, most Red Britishers [sic] chose ethnic women.”

While the C.P.C. necessarily existed within a Canadian framework and in relation to Canadian experiences, it also needs to be placed within an understanding of the international Communist movement. Generally speaking, between 1922 and 1928 the Communist International (or Comintern) instructed its affiliated parties to make use of existing labour and leftist groups by infiltrating them and encouraging their members to gain class consciousness, thus making them supportive of a world revolution of the Soviet variety. The implementation of the “Third Period” in 1928 – to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four – marked a departure from this policy. This new Comintern line postulated that the temporary stabilization experienced in the capitalist world after the Great War was about to end, and consequently capitalism was descending into crisis. In this context, the only way to remedy such a crisis in

29 Cited, Ibid.
30 Lita-Rose Betcherman, The Little Band: the Clashes between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishment in Canada, 1928–1832 (Ottawa: Deneau, n.d.), 98. The assumed link between individuals of British descent and radical action was strengthened by the Winnipeg General Strike, when the federal government through an order-in-council changed the law to allow for the deportation of persons who were of British birth, but were involved with radical social and political action. This was seen as both a major escalation in state repression as well as an indicator that even those ethnic groups who were contemporarily perceived as loyal to the state could be contaminated through social and political contact with “foreigners” or “foreign ideas.”
capitalism was through Communist revolution. It thus dictated that those who believed there was a ‘reformist’ (i.e., social democratic) solution to the problem could no longer be potential allies. In practical terms, the implementation of this line spelled the end of cooperation with other left-leaning groups, with Communists instructed to set up their own independent unions and organizations.

The Third Period is often placed within the context of Stalin’s rule. Current historiography questions the amount of direct control Joseph Stalin exercised over the Comintern and its affiliated parities: to what degree did he personally dictate Comintern policy? As early as the interwar years, academics from what has become known as the traditionalist school of thought on the Third Period have posited that Stalin gained absolute control over the Communist International, and through it all the affiliated Communist parties. German historian Franz Borkenau argued that the changes brought about by the Third Period were nothing more than a guise allowing Stalin to consolidate control over the actions of international Communists, approving of candidates for positions within foreign parties and keeping Moscow-approved leaders on a short leash. 31 While admittedly Borkenau wrote contemporarily and without the benefit of retrospect, his arguments were largely echoed by Theodore Draper three decades later. Perhaps one of the names most associated with the traditional school of thought, Draper analyzed the relationship of the Communist Party of the United States of America (C.P.U.S.A.) and the Communist International. He argued that the C.P.U.S.A. was not a national party with any local, regional or national agency, but was rather a group forced to adhere to the directives of the Communist International, even when they were dogmatically problematic or disadvantageous for the Party itself. For Draper there was no major decision that was left to the American leadership.

alone. When evaluating actions taken by the Executive Committee of the C.P.U.S.A. it is necessary “to leave the area of the American movement altogether.”

Although both Borkenau and Draper wrote during a period when access to Soviet archival material was strictly regulated and seldom possible for western academics, the traditionalist perspective has survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the partial opening of the archives has breathed new life into this point of view. Fridrikh Firsov builds on Borkenau’s arguments, indicating from his archival research that “Stalin’s burning hostility to social democracy shines through… [precluding] any possibility of establishing contact between Communist and social democratic parties for the purpose of creating a united workers’ front against the fascist offensive.” While Firsov stops short of endorsing Borkenau’s perception of Stalin as virtually omnipotent within the Comintern, he makes it clear that Stalin was very much like “an absentee director who occasionally turns up unexpectedly and demands that props be removed or the odd actor [be] replaced, and then disappears, leaving the others to cope with the mess.”

Within the context of relations between the Communist International (CI) and the national parties, Jeremy Agnew and Kevin McDermott posited similar arguments in 1996. While allotting some room for local and regional agency – which is more than either Brokenau or Draper were willing to concede – Agnew and McDermott continue to argue that one does not need to regard Stalin during the Third Period as an omnipotent tyrant to understand and appreciate his influence over the Comintern and International Communism. More to the point,

34 Cited in Ibid., 37.
35 Cited in McDermott and Agnew, 93-94.
according to McDermott and Agnew the Third Period was “characterized by a stultifying tactical and ideological conformity…” within the parties, resulting in new total domination of the world Communist movement from Moscow.36

The argument that actions taken by the C.P.U.S.A., its organizations and members could not be understood apart from the influence of Joseph Stalin has recently been reinforced by historian Bryan Palmer. According to Palmer, no study of the CUPSA could be conducted during the interwar years without deliberate attention being paid to “the ways in which [the Party] was transformed by Stalinism in the 1920s.”37 Challenging recent revisionist studies – such as the work of Randi Storch on Chicago – Palmer dismisses the prospect that local activism can be understood apart from its international context: how, he questions, is it possible to “study the people of Communism and leave aside their singular commitment to a Party, its program, and its leadership?”38

While there is much debate between traditionalists and revisionists within the context of the American (and other) parties, an examination of monographs pertaining specifically to the Canadian experience reveals a narrative that is predominantly traditionalist in its outlook. The title of Ivan Avakumovic’s monograph *The Communist Party in Canada* is telling. Avakumovic posits that members of the C.P.C. did not merely see themselves as being a part of a small, fledgling national political party but “as part and parcel of a worldwide movement that had many victories to its credit”; the only reason the C.P.C. survived, he suggests, was because of this

36 Ibid., 87.
international connection. Though scholar Norman Penner clearly places the Communist Party of Canada within a Soviet context, he disagrees with Avakumovic on the cause of the C.P.C.’s increase in membership during this period. According to Penner, the growth in the number of party members was as much a backlash against the extreme policies of Conservative Prime Minister R.B. Bennett as it was a reflection of actual commitment to a Communist programme. It is precisely the international link that scholars such as William Rodney have decried. The best reason for studying the C.P.C., he argues, “…is to be found in the subordination of the Canadian Party to Moscow.” For Rodney, the Communist Party of Canada lost all agency with the implementation of the Third Period, leaving it, in his words “a mere satellite firmly in the orbit of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.” Ian Angus is equally blunt in his evaluation of the Canadian Party. The installation of Tim Buck as leader resulted, in his assessment, in “the Canadian Party [becoming] one of the most servile of the world’s Communist Parties.”

These historical studies contributed greatly to our understanding of the Communist experience. Yet they share a perspective – that during the Third Period the Communist International was firmly in control of the Communist Party of Canada – that this study questions. Even the work of Lita-Rose Betcherman, which admirably brings to life individuals

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40 Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto: Methuen, 1988), 117. Interestingly, he also attributes the election of the Communist town council at Blairmore to the same backlash. See Penner, 122.
42 Ibid., 160.
43 Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Victoria: Trafford, 2004), 299. This work was reprinted in 2004, but not updated save the preface. The original publication was in 1981.
44 The link between members of the C.P.C. and the international movement is particularly important for this research. Did members at Blairmore feel they were part of a larger movement that allowed them to bypass the authority of the C.P.C., for example? How did this international identity inculcate itself in the local movement, and rather than being a detriment to local agency, could it have in fact fostered it? Arguments dismissing the popularity of the Party need to be revisited, for some scholars are disinclined to allow any importance to the fact that choosing
such as Harvey Murphy and portrays them with some degree of agency, concludes: “men like [Tim] Buck and [Thomas] Ewan may have started out as pure humanitarians, but Moscow got hold of their souls. After 1928 the Party leaders were completely under Soviet domination. Their first loyalty was to the USSR…” Given that, apart from Michel Beaulieu’s work on the Lakehead and Benjamin Isitt’s on British Columbia, there have been no published monographs written in the past twenty years that rethink the local experiences of the Communist Party of Canada; the only book-length studies of the Party during the Third Period remain traditionalist in their inspiration.

The traditionalist approach has been challenged by revisionist historians, who argue that there was significant room for flexibility and agency within the Communist International, and by extension between the C.I. and the national parties. Noted scholars like E.H. Carr, for example, challenge the amount of control Joseph Stalin exercised within the C.I. and the international Communist movement, arguing that Stalin was preoccupied with the domestic matters of the Soviet Union, and was not tempted to get involved with the petty disputes of an institution he had always despised. In reference to the C.P.U.S.A., historian John Manley has described revisionism and revisionist historians as having “led the way on establishing a more sympathetic

Communism represented a given leftist’s active choice among a variety of left alternatives, such as, for example, the Industrial Workers of the World or the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation.


47 Whereas traditionalists place the study of Communism predominantly within its international context, revisionists often focus on individual, local, regional, ethnic or gendered aspects of the Communist experience. As late as 2003 this approach has been rejected by traditionalists, who claim that revisionist studies, while interesting within the context they are placed, do their subjects a disservice by disconnecting them from the larger Communist experience. See John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, “The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field,” *Labor History Review* 68 (April 2003).

A strong and current example of such a revisionist approach is offered by the work of Randi Storch on the Communist movement in Chicago. While Storch recognizes the Soviet origins of the Third Period, she argues that local agency ensured that the experience at Chicago was not “singular, totalitarian, or heavy handed.” Storch argues that, at least in the context of the local Communist community, influence from national and international headquarters was interpreted and filtered through a local perspective rather than being enforced in a literal sense. Challenging arguments made by Bryan Palmer that it is impossible, if not undesirable, to study the people of Communism separate from their Party and the Party leadership, Storch posits that it is exactly the agency exerted by party members that resulted in a healthy and vibrant Communist movement.

Within a Canadian context scholar Stefan Epp has recently undertaken a revisionist approach in his important studies of Communism in Winnipeg. While Epp acknowledges that party doctrine on matters of national importance – such as unemployment – was shaped at Party headquarters and conformed to the demands of Moscow, he argues that it “had to be interpreted and acted out in local circumstances.” Epp insightfully argues that while the C.P.C. was a top-

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50 Ibid.
53 Stefan Epp, “‘Placing the Revolutionary Party on the Parliamentary Map’: Communists in Winnipeg Municipal Politics during the Third Period,” M.A. Thesis: Queen’s University, 2008, 93. Also see Stefan Epp, “‘Fighting for the everyday interests of Winnipeg Workers’: Jacob Penner, Martin Fortin and the Communist Party in Winnipeg.
down Party during the Third period, it was also one in which local actors were able to make significant decisions about the best way to conduct their struggle on behalf of the working class.\textsuperscript{54} Analyzing the same period and many of the same issues as Storch, Epp reveals that Communist aldermen in Winnipeg “lived at the nexus of the national and international party line and the needs of their constituents,” demonstrating that C.P.C. members could both be invested in the Party line while effectively adapting – and in effect changing – it, to meet local needs and conditions.\textsuperscript{55} Epp’s work echoes the excellent doctoral dissertation of Michel Beaulieu, in which it is argued that to an unusual extent in North America, local Communists were able to foster a “sturdy, resilient, multi-faceted and often lively left-wing counter-culture.”\textsuperscript{56}

Recently Stephen Lyon Endicott has added to the small collection of Canadian revisionist literature with his welcome monograph \textit{Raising the Workers’ Flag: The Workers’ Unity League of Canada, 1930-1936}. With an attention to detail which brings forward many of the main players in the admittedly small inner circle of the W.U.L., Endicott portrays an organization that was flexible insofar as its main actors were able to find common ground between the dictates of Moscow and the local realities they were struggling to transform.\textsuperscript{57}

Established scholars such as John Manley have been more reserved in their stance than Epp and Endicott. Manley could be termed a reluctant revisionist. In his article “Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the ‘Third Period’: The Workers’ Unity League, 1929-1935,” Manley observed that the Communist-backed Workers’ Unity League was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] Ibid., 94.
\item[55] Ibid.
\item[56] Michel Beaulieu, “A Proletarian Prometheus: Socialism, Ethnicity and Revolution at the Lakehead, 1900-1935.” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Queen’s University, 2007), 423. Also see Michel Beaulieu, \textit{Labour at the Lakehead}.
\end{footnotes}
“unexpectedly responsive to its context and the moods and needs of its constituency.”

Provision was made, however, for the inflexibility of Comintern-C.P.C. relations during this period. A decade later Manley revisited his article, questioning whether the upsurge in support for the Canadian Communist movement from 1931-1934 “was because of, or in spite of, the Third Period?” While Manley continues to acknowledge the importance and presence of some flexibility within the W.U.L. and other Party-sponsored bodies, his revised argument is more critical of the C.P.C. in the Third Period. He argues that the C.P.C.’s achievements “only justify a modest revision of the consensus,” positing that while the Party emerged larger, stronger and more influential after the Third Period and its policies, the implementation of the Comintern’s directives destroyed “any hope of future unity with social democracy and the last vestiges of political autonomy from Moscow.” Within the Canadian context, both traditionalists and revisionists agree the Communist Party of Canada was tightly tied to the Communist International in Moscow, and that directives from the Comintern largely dictated the policy and actions of the Party. Where scholars diverge is on the question of how much, if any, autonomy and agency the Party and its members exerted. This thesis – focused as it is on the showplace of Communism at the municipal level in Canada – suggests that the local experience sustains the revisionist position, which in its present form might be said to understate the unexpectedly strong autonomy of local Reds in the Canadian setting.

Though existing literature has come some way in establishing the council’s achievements and debating its legacy, there are several fundamentally important questions that arise from the

59 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 239.
current body of knowledge that this research will address. Building on existing knowledge, and
my own previous work, I seek to understand the lived experience in the Depression-era
community of Blairmore in order to achieve a more holistic understanding of this one Western
community. What role did ethnicity play in the local experience, and how did ethnicity and
ethnic identification change during this period? Given the anti-religious tenets of Communism,
how did organized religions react to the institution of Communist authority at Blairmore, and
how did those who were both radical and religious – the Mayor was, for example, both a known
Red and a Catholic – manage their complicated ideological situation? How did politics and
religion interact at Blairmore, and did this change over time? What effect did the surge of
support for Communism and radical action have within the lodges, fraternities and ethnic
associations in town, and were members forced to choose between their membership in such
associations and their political beliefs? Did specific organizations engage with the Red element,
either in support of or opposition to their agenda? How did conceptions of gender change over
this period, and how successful were left-wing women’s organizations in transforming the pre-
existing relations of men and women? What does the election and appointment of women into
prominent positions within the Red administration and the union apparatus reveal about not only
the radicals themselves, but the community as a whole? Simply, what was it like to live in
Blairmore during this time, and how were one’s experiences, alliances and beliefs affected by the
election and re-election of the Red administration? What was it about the experience at
Blairmore that made the citizens so willing and able to pursue radical change?

The existing historiography does not address the nature of relations between Blairmore
and the provincial or federal governments. Both the governments of Prime Minister R.B. Bennett
and Premier John Edward Brownlee were adamant in their denunciations of Communism, and
had on many occasions acted swiftly and decisively against Communist agitation. During the Strike of 1932, for example, the provincial government sought out innovative and obscure ways to prosecute those violating the status quo while nationally the imprisonment of eight leading communists represented only too well the Bennett Government’s approach to known Communist agitators. Both the Prime Minister and Premier appear to have subscribed to the same philosophy when dealing with Communists: arrest them, deport them, but do not negotiate with them.62

Yet, only one year later, the provincial government stood by and took no action as known Communists were sworn into office and took control of both the town hall and school board at Blairmore. As the regulation of both municipal affairs and education fell within provincial authority, many members of the public believed that the results of the election could have been declared invalid and a provincial trustee appointed to conduct the business of the community.63 The government could also have requested arrests be made under the provisions of Section 98. And so the question naturally arises: why did the government not intervene? What was the rationale of the Premier for not taking action, despite demands that he do so? Did this election defy the philosophical understandings of government, or was the political price for any top-down disallowance simply too high?64 Why did the province move to repress individuals and groups that were radical in their behaviour in other locations in Alberta – Drumheller, for example – but

62 The memory of the Bienfait massacre (three striking miners were gunned down by the R.C.M.P. and many others were deported after the strike was over) was still in the forefront of many individuals’ thoughts in the mid-1930s. See Stephen Endicott, Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners’ Struggle of 31’ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

63 Though there is no known precedent in Alberta for the removal of an elected council in similar circumstances, it should be noted that the provincial government did publicly indicate that it was considering its options in this regard. It is also clear from newspaper articles (such as “That Blairmore Trouble,” Medicine Hat News, 28 February 1933) that members of the general public thought removal of an elected council made up of Communists was not only socially acceptable but politically desirable.

64 It might be presumed that the government was occupied with Premier Brownlee’s sex scandal, but it should be noted that this occurred in July 1933, while the election in Blairmore was held the previous February.
not at Blairmore? What was it about Blairmore that prevented, restrained or deterred the provincial government from acting?

Similar questions must be asked in relation to the developments at Blairmore and the reaction of the governments of R.B. Bennett and Mackenzie King. The Bennett administration is widely perceived as one of the most repressive in Canadian history, and was unapologetic and unrelenting in its use of the Criminal Code of Canada to detain, deport or imprison known or suspected Communists. The trial and jailing of Tim Buck and the eight Communist leaders is the most prominent example of this repression, but the hunt for known Communists and their sympathizers extended from the leadership right down to individual party members. Possession of just one “red” pamphlet could lead to a prison term or even deportation. How then did Communists who put their names forward for election in Blairmore manage to make it to election day, let alone govern thereafter? Even if they had managed to proceed without detection – highly unlikely given the presence of Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the area, as evidenced by the hundreds of surveillance documents they produced – how did members of the town council avoid being jailed when they re-named the main street through Blairmore Tim Buck Boulevard, attracting national media attention? There is also the matter of the councillors declaring a public holiday to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, their criticism of the federal relief programs, and their public advocacy of measures that could have surely been qualified as seditious under the wide-ranging provisions of the Criminal Code. There was every opportunity to prosecute the Blairmore Reds before they were elected, immediately after they were elected, and with each and every deliberately controversial project they undertook. Why did the federal government not act against these Reds, when elsewhere it was using every avenue possible to put Communists behind bars?
There is evidence that Mayor and Council made a concerted effort to avoid describing themselves as Communist, and in so doing sought to protect themselves from prosecution under the law. For example, one of the council’s first acts in office was to alter the tax and fee structures of the town, requiring industry and business to pay much higher taxes while lowering the financial burden for workers and the unemployed. When asked about whether or not these changes were in fact Communist, the Mayor replied “After a great deal of deliberation, [it has been decided by council] that Redness is a state of the stomach.”65

Yet, while the unwillingness to publicly use the word Communist was patent, it is hard to believe this tactic either deceived the state, armed with Section 98 and an active surveillance team, or discouraged anti-communists in their hunt for supposed Reds. There could certainly be no great fear on the part of the state that a strong resistance would or could be mounted by the community, as Blairmore was at its most impoverished point since before the Great War. And there was certainly no lack of demands for arrests from conservative and liberal members of the community and religious groups determined to stamp the movement out while it was still in its infancy. Why did those in power – known anti-communists – not do everything in their power to quash Blairmore’s Red experiment?

The experiences at Blairmore will also complicate our understanding of the Communist Party of Canada and the Communist International. I believe it is clear that at Blairmore individual members were able to exercise a good deal of agency. Communists here were largely self-directed in terms of the projects they undertook. Initial radical actions were not guided by the Party, and when the movement gained strength and publicity, its members were largely unwilling to take direction from the C.P.C. Despite public statements in support of the council

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65 “Blairmore Expects This Day Every Wage Earner to do His Duty,” Blairmore Enterprise, 2 March 1933.
when it was elected (and the many articles in the Communist organ *The Worker* extolling the achievements of Red Blairmore), members of the Party hierarchy admitted to themselves that they had little to no control over the situation in the town.

This observation is significant because it challenges what has until now been the predominant traditionalist narrative. It prompts larger questions: Why did the Communist Party of Canada not distance itself from the radicals at Blairmore when they refused to toe the Party line, or simply expel those members who continually flouted the authority of the Party? This was, after all, the norm elsewhere. Does this refusal to act in the case of Blairmore represent a Party that was weak in its ability to enforce its own rules? Was the C.P.C. creating a *de facto* exceptionalism in this case? Was the local movement strong enough to resist being governed from afar? Or do we find here an unsuspected subtlety and flexibility on the part of the C.P.C.?

The public hoopla surrounding the dedication of Tim Buck Boulevard aside, did Blairmorites see themselves engaged with a larger world movement far transcending the humble C.P.C. – or did they acknowledge the role of the Party even in situations in which they chose not to work within its directives? Could the radicals in control at Blairmore even justifiably refer to themselves as “Communist,” given their routine defiance of the Party? Who could call themselves a Communist during this period, and how did this affect both the activists at Blairmore and the Communist Party of Canada itself? This dissertation will demonstrate that it will be necessary to redefine the role played by the C.P.C., recognizing the agency inherent within organic Communist movements – such as that at Blairmore – while fundamentally reinterpreting the centrality of the Communist Party of Canada’s role in creating and validating Communists and Communist movements in Canada. This will not only be revisionist in regards to the
understanding of the movement at Blairmore, but it will also raise questions about general characterizations of the Communist experience, both in Canada and beyond it.

**Theory and Methodology**

Having established a historiographical context within which this research will be located, it is next necessary to engage with the theoretical and methodological frameworks that inform this dissertation. In total there are four important constructs upon which this thesis will depend. An understanding of Ian McKay’s liberal order theory will ground and inform this dissertation, providing a worldview and framework through which the remaining theoretical enquiries will take place. By accepting the argument that Blairmore and its resource-based economy were the product of the liberal order rather than an organic creation, one can better comprehend the roles played by ethnicity, class and gender both in relation to each other and to the larger experience. McKay’s important conceptual framework surrounding the idea of living otherwise also provides a cornerstone upon which this thesis will rely. Approaches to the history of the Canadian West that emphasize “populism” will be usefully revisited via the liberal order framework, since they posit a degree of regional exceptionalism that has the inadvertent effect of removing the West from the mainstream of Canadian history. Whether residents liked it or not, the West is necessarily a relational concept – west of what? – and is ultimately an inextricable part of a more general political project. Similarly, the Communist Party of Canada during the 1920s and 1930s was influenced by its members, its ideological belief in Marxism and Leninism and the needs/demands of the Communist International. It also was directly shaped by a Canada that was itself a liberal project. And finally, as oral histories play a critical role in this research, we must discuss the frameworks and ideas that are used to engage with them in the coming pages.
Liberal Order

An understanding of the liberal order framework, as conceptualized by historian Ian McKay, grounds this research. The basis of McKay’s argument is to the point: “the category ‘Canada’ should henceforth denote a historically specific project of rule, rather than either an essence we must defend or an empty homogeneous space we must possess.” In this vein, Canada-as-a-project is the result of a determined effort to implement and nurture the philosophical assumptions, political beliefs and economic systems of liberalism. Perhaps the most important of these was the extension “across time and space [of] a belief in the epistemological and ontological primacy of the category of ‘individual.’”

Building on the work of Fernande Roy, McKay posits that liberty, equality and property form the core tenets of liberalism: property is the most important of these values as it is a precondition to liberty and achieving the status of an individual, while formal equality is subordinate to both property and liberty. Critically, the liberal order is flexible, allowing it to consolidate its influence, compromise in the short term where necessary and ultimately continue to reinforce and spread liberal philosophies. When these factors are considered together, Canada becomes less of a self-evident or natural entity, and increasingly the result of the extension of liberal rule: Canada, according to McKay, “is simultaneously an extensive projection of liberal rule across a large territory and an intensive process of subjectification, whereby liberal assumptions are internalized and normalized within the dominion’s subjects.”

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68 *Ibid.*, 623. According to McKay, an individual “is the proprietor of him – or herself, and whose freedom should be limited only to voluntary obligations to others or to God, and the rules necessary to obtain the equal freedom of other individuals.” See *Ibid.*, 623-624 for a more detailed explanation.
The work of Antonio Gramsci underlies the liberal order framework, particularly his arguments surrounding hegemony and passive revolution. In regards to hegemonic control, the author observes that one social group cannot gain leadership over other groups without considering the interests of the group in question. Such a social group – sometimes, but not always, a class – exerts authority via a combination of coercion and consent which is reinforced in varying ways on a daily basis. This control is never complete or secure, according to McKay, and the group exerting power must constantly defend its interests against rival groups. In order to do this, the liberal order “must engage in far-ranging compromises, both economic and cultural, with those subaltern groups necessary for its material survival.”

This can involve strategies such as temporarily looking beyond the immediate philosophical parameters of liberalism in order to facilitate compromises that will, in the long term, reinforce the liberal order. Gramsci’s thesis of passive revolution argues that when faced with a serious problem or threat, the liberal state will initiate dramatic and far-reaching change in order to include some of those who had been previously excluded “with the quid pro quo that they divest themselves of the most radical aspects of their oppositional programs.” Many of the social programs demanded by the Communist Party of Canada would, by the 1950s, become associated with the liberal welfare state, thus taking the sting out of elements of the Party’s program and contributing to its decline.

The modern economy and society of the Crowsnest Pass – Blairmore included – was a creation of the liberal order. Located a large distance from any viable natural source of transportation, there was simply no pre-capitalist way to get the region’s coal to market. Until the state subsidized the building of a rail line through the valley (under the terms of the Crowsnest Agreement), it was simply not feasible to settle or invest there. Thus when investment and

71 Ibid., 628.
72 Ibid., 643.
settlement occurred, newcomers were not arriving in communities with previously established social and political norms and traditions; rather, they were settling in towns that had been planned by government and corporations. The institutions that reinforced the primacy of the liberal order - for example, such government agencies as the Royal North West Mounted Police - brought with them not only “safety” but also the norms and laws of liberal society. Organizations such as banks ensured that currency, the collection of monetary wealth, and indenture by way of long term debt were widely accepted. The social and political infrastructure laid down in the area served to reinforce the values and goals of the liberal order. Blairmore was not an organic community, but the result of the liberal project that is Canada.

**Living Otherwise and the Influence of the Communist Party of Canada during the Second Period**

The Communist Party of Canada was a formidable and important adversary of the liberal order. It was the first real coast-to-coast revolutionary party in Canada and consequently exerted an influence beyond its limited numbers. Indeed, while Canadian Communism was institutionalized by the C.P.C. and ideologically inextricable from the international Communist movement, many leftists and non-Communists found social and political agency within its many front organizations, if not in the Party itself. In many respects this second, revolutionary formation of the Canadian left was revolutionary not because of its advocacy of armed resistance but because it exemplified the widespread desire to, in McKay’s words, “live otherwise.”

The importance of this concept is fundamental to the research being proposed. Rather than questioning who the Communists were at Blairmore and examining the radical movement from that perspective, this dissertation moves beyond such a categorization to examine the community that created radical social change and how its desire to live otherwise interacted with
the state, the Communist Party of Canada, the organizations directly and indirectly associated with the Party, local, ethnic and fraternal associations, and so on.

As we fully examine the experiences at Blairmore as they relate to local realities, it is important to be aware of their subtleties. For example, often those pushing for radical changes in Blairmore were referred to by those outside the Crowsnest Valley simply as “Communists.” The term is actually more complicated than it seems. From the vantage point of the Communist Party of Canada, many of those who self-identified as Communist or were identified as Party members by the press were individuals the C.P.C. found hard to control. They did not work with the rigour or the sophistication the C.P.C. expected of its members, at either the practical or theoretical levels. Likewise, many individuals who were members of the Red-affiliated Mine Workers’ Union of Canada were not card-carrying Communists, yet because of their decisive and radical action through their union had come to be associated in the public mind with the Communist Party. Thus while the label Communist was used frequently either to the credit or discredit of an individual or group, the reality is that Blairmorites were coming together to create a society and a local system of governance that allowed them the agency and freedom to live otherwise. In short, they developed a radical democratic movement and administration that drew upon Communist ideals, practices, and images, without being in any sense mere foot soldiers of the Communist International. And herein lies not only the local but also the international significance of Blairmore’s radical 1930s.

**Western Populism**

In relation to populism this dissertation relies heavily on the works of David Laycock, Trevor Harrison and Peter Sinclair. Despite the contemporary association of populism with right-
of-centre political parties – the P.C. Party of Alberta under Ralph Klein offers a ready example – Laycock posits that populism is as applicable to the left and to the political centre as it is to the right. Indeed, Laycock argues that “populism becomes a part of virtually all political organizations and social movements proposing a substantial redistribution of class power.”

Arguably this pattern was found in Blairmore. When the Communists took power, they replaced the entrenched elite that had governed for twenty years and rapidly redistributed as many positions as possible to members of the working class, known Communists or Red sympathizers. The Police Chief, the Fire Chief and even the Town Electrician were among the first to be unceremoniously dismissed and replaced by miners or their allies.

Accepting Laycock’s argument that at the base of any populist movement is the redistribution of class power, I turn to sociologist Trevor Harrison to help explore exactly what constitutes a populist movement. Harrison argues there are three principal tenets common to all populist movements. They all

involve a personal appeal by a leader to a mass audience… Central to the leader’s appeal is the notion of “the people,” a group defined by its historic, geographic and/or cultural roots. This appeal is made urgent by the perception of a crisis threatening “the people.” Finally, the source of this threat is another group – sometimes termed “power bloc” – viewed as physically or culturally external to “the people.”

Harrison further notes that populism is a flexible ideology, with the meanings and representations of the definition above similarly being “elastic.” A populist leader requires more than simply the appearance of leadership qualities in the eyes of a targeted group of individuals. Populist movements, in Harrison’s words, tend to arise from a crisis of legitimacy.

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75 Ibid.
and parallel the breakdown of previous political alliances or hegemonies.\textsuperscript{76} While the type of populist movement that emerges (right- or left-wing) is a product of the social, political and ideological elements that consolidate themselves after the breakdown of the preceding political power structure, it will also entail a capacity to respond to and initiate political change itself.

In the Blairmore case, one can discern two such distinct crises of legitimacy before 1933. The first manifested itself in 1925 with the collapse of international unionism and the resultant creation of company-sponsored “home” locals. In this case it was only one element of the governing hegemony that was challenged – the established United Mine Workers of America – while the authority of the mine operators, the municipal, provincial and federal governments as well as the system of capitalism itself, all persisted. The situation in 1932 represented something starkly different. The legitimacy of the West Canadian Collieries (W.C.C.), governments at all levels and capitalism were all questioned. Support for the liberal order could no longer be assumed to be the default disposition of most Blairmorites. If, as Harrison suggests, hegemony can be described as “the ability of a dominant class to construct an overarching concept of reality,” one can see the reality imposed by the W.C.C. on the home local from 1925-1931 disintegrating and being replaced by a new class-based reality.\textsuperscript{77} This new or counter hegemony had a distinct flavour, reflecting the concept of a populist movement as defined by Peter Sinclair: “stress[ing] the worth of the common people and [advocating] their political supremacy,” rejecting “intermediate associates between the mass and the leaders” and “direct[ing] its protests against some group that lies outside the society.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} For a more detailed discussion of populism, see Trevor Harrison, \textit{Of Passionate Intensity: Right-Wing Populism and the Reform Party of Canada}, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 11-15.\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 11.\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 5.
How does what we know about Blairmore interact with the definition of a populist movement laid out between Laycock, Harrison and Sinclair? The future Red mayor encapsulated all that was necessary to make him a “leader” in a populist context. Having been employed by the W.C.C. while concurrently working at the local pool hall, Mayor Bill Knight was able to understand and connect with the population on multiple levels and in a variety of different circumstances. His appeal was not limited to either the patrons of the pool hall or to the miners at W.C.C. This also allowed him to have contact with a vast majority of the town’s voting population while going about his day-to-day life. This access to the masses was enhanced by the fact that he too was a working-class individual, sharing social experiences, economic concerns and employment anxieties with the general population. When Knight spoke to the voters, he billed himself not as a politician, but as an ordinary person trying to make a bad situation better.

Knight’s leadership qualities and working-class background are not enough to define the experience at Blairmore as populist. As Laycock has argued, reducing a populist movement to the appeal of its leader “ignores the mass organizational movement” necessary for populist success.79 Such a mass movement was certainly evident in Blairmore, with the union organization working for the Red candidates during the elections of 1933, 1934 and 1935.

The Red candidates were also successful in framing the election not as a choice between legislative agendas, but as a struggle that pitted workers in Blairmore against capitalist elements located “outside the local society.”80 By linking the economic hardships being experienced by residents with the government ministries and agencies in Edmonton and Ottawa (and by extension the economic systems they supported), Knight was successful in establishing these

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79 Laycock, 15.
outside elements as a power bloc that threatened “the people” and therefore needed to be opposed.\textsuperscript{81} It is not the unity of “the people,” however, that was critical in this context but “the identification of a group ‘not of the people,’ possessing illegitimate political and economic power.”\textsuperscript{82} This dissertation will demonstrate that while this power bloc was maintained and a “direct relationship with the people” cultivated, the Red council was able to pursue both their pragmatic local agenda and their more radical undertakings. The citizens could identify with the local council as it did battle with these threatening outside interests.\textsuperscript{83} When the communists presented war and fascism as the greatest threat to the population, local support began to wane because, unlike the unpopular actions of the federal and provincial government, the new enemy was more abstract and difficult to conceptualize as a direct menace to the immediate well-being of the citizens.

It was not the attempt to challenge the existing balance of power in the community that undermined the radical democracy championed by this left populist movement. Its program was supported by a broad local constituency. What was crucial to both the movement’s rise and decline were its relations with larger hegemonic structures. While some have attempted to reduce the Blairmore experiment to Communism pure and simple, it is better explained in an approach that combines an appreciation for the enduring ideological and political resources of the liberal order with the complexity of populist and democratic movements that sought to transform it.

Consequently, this dissertation will engage with a framework that looks at all the people and parties who made up a given period in the history of the left. It assumes that each period, in complex ways, makes its own practice of leftism; that leftists

\textsuperscript{81} Harrison, “The Changing Face of Prairie Populism,” 108.
\textsuperscript{82} Harrison, Of Passionate Intensity, 6.
\textsuperscript{83} Sinclair, 75.
in each period invent distinctive conceptual systems through which they grasp the world. They construct their own dialect of the general language of socialism.\textsuperscript{84}

It is from this perspective that this dissertation will engage with the situation in Blairmore and the role played by populism, both through the facilitation of the radical experience at Blairmore and vis-à-vis its interaction with the state.

**Oral History Methodology**

Before it is possible to address the oral history methodology proposed for this research, it is necessary to briefly discuss the utility of oral history itself. As I have discovered in my teaching, not everyone is as open to the use of oral history as I am. One must take note of concerns of historians who question (in David Quiring’s words) “...the reliability and value of orally transmitted historical accounts, thinking them affected by faulty memory, wishful thinking or outright dishonesty.”\textsuperscript{85} Taken at face value, the biggest problem with oral history seems to be that it represents the collection of subjective data that are unreliable as historical fact.

The resistance to the collection and use of oral histories is as much about politics as it is about the writing of history itself. Although the oral transmission of a historical record has played a central role in the preservation of knowledge in many varied and fundamentally different societies, the use of oral history within a Western academic context was not a significant reality until the close of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{86} In the immediate post-war years the introduction and use of oral sources was not particularly controversial, as testimony predominantly centred on white men whose interviews not only supported the dominant socio-

\textsuperscript{84} Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, 34-35.
political narrative but were also easily triangulated with other data in order to be “proven accurate.” By the 1960s, however, the changing uses of oral history by the new left resulted in a major schism pitting many empiricist historians against left-wing academics.

Oral history thus enjoyed a brief period in which it was not considered to be controversial, operating essentially within a Western context as a conduit for white, male, externally-verifiable memory. This general acceptance of it as a methodology was not to last. Though the methodological process by which memories were elicited, recorded, and transcribed did not change significantly until the late 1970s, the ways in which oral testimony was used by historians did. As a new generation of academics entered the academy versed in the politics of feminism, civil rights and the new left, oral histories became fused with social historians’ commitment to pursue a “history from below.” The integration and increasing prominence of oral sources within historical monographs was touted as the “liberation” of voices “previously inaudible in history.” Historians of the new left argued that the use of oral testimony within academic works allowed working-class men and women, cultural and ethnic minorities, and people of the First Nations to influence the historical record by introducing narratives and perspectives that had hitherto been untouched by historians. Paul Thompson argued that “oral history [as opposed to traditional empirical history] makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated.”

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88 Ibid.
testimony. Thompson’s vision of democracy was not universally accepted. In the Canadian context, Jack Granatstein argued in the 1980s that the proliferation of oral histories had led to the triumph of studies focused on “pork packing, Marxist labour organizations, social control in insane asylums... [and the study of] the history of housemaid’s knee in Belleville in the 1890s.” “Really,” he added, “who cares?”

In response to historians such as Quiring and Granatstein I would suggest that oral history includes – though is not limited to – a close attention to the subjective. I am left to ask, what the result would be if we as historians routinely subjected our written sources to the same standards of rigorous examination oral historians normally bring to their work? What effect would it have on most historians’ studies if instead of simply relying on “the document” as a repository of factual information, we were required to understand that document more holistically within its cultural and political context?

I would like to address concerns of subjectivity in relation to oral history head-on. As Alessandro Portelli has quite aptly observed, many historians fear “that once the floodgates of orality are opened, writing (and rationality along with it) will be swept out as if by a spontaneous uncontrollable mass of fluid.” Others observe that oral history is perhaps the first and most fundamental challenge to the historical profession in that it allows everyone to be their own historian – ivory tower sold separately. In their critiques of oral history, empiricists evoke the

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92 Ibid., 6.
94 Ibid., 73.
spectre of an uncontrolled relativism. Yet Conservatives add their concern that history risks becoming politicized. Yet in privileging the written document above all, the first camp overlooks the extent to which such written documents themselves are often the subjective reflections of a specific context. There is no magical quality of objectivity that necessarily renders a written document more accurate than an oral report. And in invoking the prospect of a damaging (and often implicitly radical) politicization, the second camp overlooks the extent to which written texts are themselves often created with some underlying, even ‘political’ purpose in mind. Though hard-copy evidence offers the illusion of historical security, in reality such documents are often just as subjective, culturally endowed, and politically motivated as any oral testimony.

The methodological framework within which oral interviews for this project have taken place and have been evaluated builds upon the work of several noted scholars, chief among them Julie Cruikshank. Collecting oral testimony in the Yukon, Cruikshank challenged the position of many historians who argued that oral histories were only useful when they could be triangulated with other academic sources to ensure accuracy. Agreeing with theorist and historian Luisa Passerini, Cruikshank argues that the reduction of oral knowledge to that which can be triangulated or substantiated by massive evidence from other sources amounts to erasure: “it would seem,” Cruikshank posits, “that in many histories erasure happens to the individual person and personal experiences in an effort to legitimate or conceptualize the situation within a larger

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96 A good example can be found in the re-writing of Mi’kmaq history, particularly as a result of the highly controversial legal proceedings surrounding R. v. Marshall. For more on this, see William Wicken, Mi’kmaq Treaties on Trial: History, Land and Donald Marshall Junior (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). A good overview of the historiographical revision of our understanding of these treaties more generally can be found in Andrew Nurse, “History, Law, and the Mi’kmaq of Atlantic Canada,” Acadiensis Vol. 33, 1 (Spring 2004): 126.

97 For an example of the kind of work that arouses such conservative worries, see Judy Rebick, Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2005).

The reduction of oral testimony to that which is statistically probable is tantamount, for Cruikshank and for this researcher, to reducing the historical record to the lowest common denominator. Cruikshank does not advocate the modification of any of the existing frameworks within which to pose oral questions, but rather the re-conceptualization of the entire practice of oral history collection. Before one can understand cultural and social structures in question, it is necessary to question fundamentally the frameworks and parameters academics use to define their research. Instead of working from the conventional practice in which an outside investigator initiates and directs the research, “this model depends on ongoing collaboration between interviewer and interviewee. Such a model begins by taking seriously what people say about their lives rather than treating their words as simply an illustration of some other process.” In short, it is necessary to let the informants, not academics, guide the creation of a framework in which oral histories can be shared and recorded.

Cruikshank argues that this fundamental realignment of the interview framework allows the informants the flexibility to work within their own internalized cultural and social norms. She recalls that when trying to direct the conversations during her initial contact, she was repeatedly told “not now” or “listen to this story first” in reaction to the questions posed. The informants then went on to tell her seemingly unrelated stories that ultimately reflected an elaborate cultural

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100 One only needs to look to the prediction of pollsters during the 2012 provincial election in Alberta to understand Cruikshank’s uneasiness with statistical probability.


narrative within which they would later locate the information that Cruikshank was seeking. Consequently, interviews conducted in relation to this dissertation have been approached within the broadest context possible, facilitating a situation in which the informant can trustfully impart the information this study needs while placing it within its social or cultural context. Pertinent examples of this process can be found in the testimony of individuals who worked within the mine. Though they knew this dissertation would be focusing on Communism and their above-ground experiences during the 1930s, some started their interviews by explaining what it was like to work in the mine itself because their time underground was important in shaping their beliefs and perspectives when they were not working. Their strategy of story-telling consequently permitted the interviewer a better understanding of their motivations and states of mind during the period in question. This approach is also advocated by historian Charles Morrissey, who promotes the use of open-ended questions, and by the Popular Memory Group. Allowing individuals to tell their own stories within their own context allows informants to become their own historians.

Within her re-conceptualization of oral history frameworks, Cruikshank conveys an important insight about the interviews themselves: people give oral testimony in the present tense. They speak in ways that are meaningful in the present. Oral testimony is not only historical in nature, but also exists in the present and therefore has consequences for those sharing the informant’s experiences. The role played by academics and interviewers in this process is particularly important: “concepts and categories have the potential to pull people

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103 Ibid., 2-3; Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories*, 46.
together – to unite them – but they can just as easily be divisive, especially when they become legitimized by ‘expert’ knowledge.’\textsuperscript{106} Cruikshank in her works lays out a careful and challenging path that she argues must be followed by academics, but what happens once the testimony is published or otherwise disseminated? What responsibilities does the academic have to the informant once the interview process is over?

While Cruikshank does not offer any concrete solutions, she does remind her audience that all too often it is not what was said during the interview that comes through in the finished publication; rather, monographs are the product of “narrative production, reproduction, distribution, public legitimization, and erasure.”\textsuperscript{107} Cruikshank thereby urges academics to check their transcripts and their recollections of the interview process to make sure that the essence of the interview is not lost in the Western process of legitimization and publication.\textsuperscript{108} This has been particularly true with the research previously completed within the Crowsnest Pass. When books or articles have been published in the past, copies were infrequently (if at all) sent to the informants who took the time to share their stories. Many who did get a copy of the work suspected that their comments had been hijacked or removed from their original context and reworked in support of a larger narrative. A different approach, one based on a relationship of trust between the interviewer and informants, would entail a less distant and objectifying stance towards the latter.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Julie Cruikshank, \textit{Life Lived Like a Story}, 95.
\textsuperscript{108} While Cruikshank intends this to be a process whereby academics re-listen to recorded testimony to ensure that the essence of the interview was captured, other scholars like Gary Burrill sent his transcripts back to the respondents who would read and respond to them: at the end of the day both author and informant came to an agreement on the final form of the interview. See Gary Burrill, \textit{Away: Maritimers in Massachusetts, Ontario and Alberta} (Montreal and Kingston: Queen’s University Press, 1992).
In order to build on the challenges surrounding the present tense of oral testimony, I have employed ideas and frameworks created by Alessandro Portelli. For Portelli, oral histories are not objective, but that does not preclude their academic use; written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive, but oral history is intrinsically different and therefore specifically useful. He argues that the key to understanding the importance of oral evidence lies not in a careful reading of the transcript of the conversation, but listening again and again to the recording of the interview itself. He posits that “the tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meanings and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing.” The informant’s organization of the narrative thus becomes the gateway to understanding the oral evidence provided, although there can be no general cross-cultural norm when it comes to understanding oral texts. It is therefore critical to reach an informed understanding of the social and cultural structures the informant is living within. Like Cruikshank, Portelli stresses the need for the researcher to “accept the informant and give priority to what he or she wishes to tell, rather than what the researcher wants to hear, saving any unanswered questions for another interview.” Under this process, interviewing becomes a long experience that entails, of necessity, the building of trust between the parties involved.

The realization that memory and oral testimony are structured within the present caused the Popular Memory Group to revisit the arguments of Trevor Lumis relating to memory vs. recall. Arguing that testimony is affected by social and cultural experiences, Lumis argues that historians must recognize the difference between “memory” and “recall” in order to gain further insight into oral testimony: memories are polished stories that are frequently re-told and are within the boundaries of what is socially and politically acceptable to the informant, whereas recall is the spontaneous recollection of dormant memories that are

110 Ibid., 47-48.
111 Ibid., 54.
112 Arguing that testimony is affected by social and cultural experiences, Lumis argues that historians must recognize the difference between “memory” and “recall” in order to gain further insight into oral testimony: memories are polished stories that are frequently re-told and are within the boundaries of what is socially and politically acceptable to the informant, whereas recall is the spontaneous recollection of dormant memories that are
the conclusion that oral history emerges from private and public memories, both of which are created in the present, and neither of which can be unscrambled from the contemporary socio-political experiences of the informant.\textsuperscript{113} The Popular Memory Group argues that individuals possess both public and private memories, the public memories being the stories or revelations that are socially acceptable, and the private memories consisting of experiences that are either intentionally or subconsciously repressed.\textsuperscript{114} The group argues that historians, sociologists, or anthropologists – or for that matter any academic seeking knowledge through the oral interview process – will often be initially offered an informant’s public memory, a story that informants may feel is expected from them, but certainly one that will reflect the dominant memory as they perceive it to exist. It is important, therefore, to establish a trust relationship with the informant and re-visit their experiences over many interviews and over a long period of time.

The Popular Memory Group also notes that when an interviewer spends a long time with an interviewee, he or she often adds details or perspectives to original two-dimensional narratives not present in their initial interview.\textsuperscript{115} Likewise, because both public and private memories interact with the informant’s present reality, they are also of necessity interacting with the political; all oral history is therefore political.\textsuperscript{116} By way of an example from this research, I return to the testimony of Beatrice Peressini. During our first interview, she was reluctant to provide anything beyond what was already publicly available: her father was a town councillor, times were hard, in the end everything worked out and life went on. As our series of interviews

\textsuperscript{113} Popular Memory Group, 208.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 209.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 208-214.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 209.
continued and she gained not only trust in me as a person but also an understanding of my depth of knowledge on the issue, she provided increasing levels of detail (for example not only did she admit that her father was a Communist during that period in time, but that she was the little girl in a photograph handing a bouquet of flowers to C.P.C. leader Tim Buck during his visit to the town). By our final interview Mrs. Peressini and I had reached a level of comfort and mutual respect whereby she was able to share information pertaining to religion and other sensitive issues. Critically, the Popular Memory Group relates this to the arguments of Gramsci, positing that “History – in particular popular memory – is a stake in the constant struggle for hegemony. The relation between history and politics, like the relation between past and present, is, therefore, an internal one: it is about the politics of history, and the historical dimensions of politics.”

When academics undertake oral history projects they are often – despite preparation – unready for much of the content they will receive. According to Naomi Rosh White, many historians are ill-equipped to comprehend the testimony with which they are about to engage: “the intelligibility of [the informant’s] testimony depends on the listener as much as it does on the speaker.” White is concerned that in too many cases oral historians are not properly prepared for the interview process, and thereby become “unhearing listeners.” As argued by Cruikshank and others, the historian needs to possess a firm grasp of both the shared cultural symbols and understandings between interviewer and interviewee while being concurrently aware that the ways in which they respond can have important implications on the interviewee. In this context, retelling a story is a process of reliving the experience that resulted in the memory in question. When academics or interviewers reply with statements like

117 For a larger discussion, see Ibid., 211-218.
“really,” or “my goodness” to oral testimony, the informant may come to feel trivialized and either stop the interview or return to giving the same polished, politically acceptable story that he or she has told many times before. By not doing the necessary groundwork in order to understand the culture and the circumstances experienced by the informant, the interviewer risks alienating the person in question. While this may result in a narrative collected by the academic that does not stray far from the dominant recollection of the event in question, it is critical that the interviewer be aware of the possible psychological effects such an experience could have on an informant.

When informants have had marginalizing or demeaning experiences or are not secure in sharing their entire story with the interviewer, White argues that they go through a process she refers to as “permissible disclosure.” White believes that many people will not talk about experiences that will disturb the listener, or themselves, in the process of telling the story. They will often question “is there enough trust between you and I,” or “will I hurt you or make you uncomfortable with what I have to say?” While the latter is less of an issue in regards to this research, the issue of trust is of paramount importance for the oral history methodology of this project.

Taking the perspectives of these scholars into consideration, I developed a localized framework within which interviews took place. In the broadest sense, I ensured that I came prepared with as much knowledge of, and appreciation for, the dynamics of Blairmore and the Crowsnest Pass as I possibly could. These came not only from scholarly research, but from spending a large amount of time in the area and ensuring that I was well-read in terms of current

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120 White, 16-18.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
local news. The goal was to establish a personal basis in local society. From this base knowledge, a well grounded understanding and respect for the constituent ethnic and religious groups – as well as the role played by gender – can be instilled in the interviewer before any interviews take place. For example, although a given ethnic group’s experiences might appear to have unfolded in Blairmore, it is quite likely they also reflected something of the group’s pre-immigration culture. It was critical to understand the local experience before initiating the interview process, and similarly important to be willing to learn and admit lack of knowledge when confronted with unexpected situations.

Further, the idea that academics can simply enter a location, collect testimony, and depart to write their monograph or article is not only desperately outdated, but has the capacity to be damaging for both the interviewer and the informant. My framework not only perceives the relationship between academic and interviewee as one of collaboration and mutual respect, but dictates that the interviewing must take place within an informant-centred interview process. Though this necessarily takes longer – after all, it is easier to ask about the subject in question directly and record the answer than to find the answer in hours of transcripts – it not only respects the informant by allowing him or her to place the story within its own context, but also allows interviewers to gain a better understanding of the community within which they are operating.

The oral testimony engaged with in this dissertation comes from two different and distinct sources: interviews conducted on an ad hoc basis by members of the Crowsnest Pass Historical Society and those conducted in relation to this research. The former – the smaller group of oral sources – were already complete and publicly available at the Crowsnest Museum
and Archives when I began this research. The latter were collected under the auspices of the Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project.

The Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project was a local partnership between twelve different organizations with the aim of collecting and preserving the testimony of as many pioneers in the Blairmore-Frank area as possible. The project lasted just over a year, involved $50,000 in grant money from the Government of Alberta and ultimately resulted in the testimony of 135 individuals being collected, digitized and preserved at the Crowsnest Museum and Archives. This project was undertaken in accordance with the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s guidelines for research involving humans and with the permission of the General Research Ethics Board of Queen’s University.

While all Project participants were asked questions pertaining to radical action, strikes and their lived experience during the Great Depression, not everyone provided information that was germane to the writing of this dissertation. It consequently follows that while their testimony is important to the history of Blairmore, Frank and the Crowsnest Pass, only the names of interviewees directly utilized in this research are found in the bibliography. All interviews completed in relation to the Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project are identified with the Crowsnest Museum and Archives accession number 2012.019.xxxx; in accordance with SSHRC guidelines those who did not wish to have their interviews made publicly available are marked as in author’s possession.

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123 The constituent groups were the Municipality of the Crowsnest Pass, Crowsnest Pass Chamber of Commerce, Community Futures Crowsnest Pass, Crowsnest Pass Ecomuseum Trust Society, Crowsnest Museum, Crowsnest Historical Society, Coleman Community Society, Coleman Lions, Coleman Senior’s Drop-in Centre, Bellcrest Society, Bellevue Underground Mine Tour and the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre.
Thus, in addition to drawing upon the existing secondary literature, this thesis draws upon five relatively new or under-exploited primary sources: (a) oral interviews, both those already available in local archival collections and 135 new interviews undertaken in 2008; (b) the newly-accessible papers of the Communist International, available on microfilm at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, which provide an invaluable perspective on the inner workings and debates of the Communist Party of Canada; (c) the extraordinarily abundant (and hitherto unexploited) papers left behind by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, whose Blairmore file survives in relatively unexpurgated form at the Crowsnest Museum and Archives; (d) the papers of the Blairmore Council itself; and (e) the corporate papers of the leading company, West Canadian Collieries, housed at the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary. Bringing these five distinct types of sources together in one study has been a challenging and rewarding experience, and it is my hope that on the basis of this study, many more scholars will be persuaded to explore the extraordinary documentary richness of these archival collections.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Utilizing the methods and engaging with the ideas outlined on the preceding pages, I believe that we are now in a position to interact with the experiences and perspectives of Blairmorites, and through them question larger national and international narratives pertaining to the history of Canada as well as the history of the Left. Chapter Two will engage with the idea of Blairmore itself, recognizing that the Blairmore we know today would not exist without capital and the state, as they came to articulate their relationship in a particular geographical location. Specifically, this chapter will look at the raison d’être of the settlement – coal – and the role played by the state in opening and settling the region. Once the physical and geological aspects of the town have been established, the chapter will then move on to address settlement patterns
in Blairmore and the governmental, social and corporate influences affecting them. This chapter will demonstrate that Blairmore was created by the project of liberal order and influenced by the specific forms of coalfield capitalism that flourished at the time of the Great War.

Building on this understanding of Blairmore as a constructed – rather than organic – entity, Chapter Three will move on to challenge the argument dominant in existing historiography that Communism found favour here as an automatic reaction to the Great Depression and not as the result of a longer and more involved politico-economic process. Considering the period between 1914-1928, this chapter will demonstrate that for many Blairmorites, the roots of their discontent could be found in the lived realities of the Great War. Discussing three distinct experience-defined groups – those who served, those who remained in Blairmore and those who were not given a choice in the matter – this chapter will also establish that not only did government do much to delegitimize itself vis-à-vis the war effort, but also inadvertently created a positive lived experience in relation to nationalized industry. This chapter will move on to examine how the economic and political realities of the 1920s served to further compromise the legitimacy of capitalism and the state, ultimately demonstrating that for many people in this mining town the process of radicalization was a long and intensely personal one, rather than the product of some rapid, visceral response to unexpected financial downturn.

On the basis of this demonstration that the roots of radical activism were more deeply rooted than previously thought, Chapter Four will examine the implementation of the Third Period up to the now-infamous strike of 1932 and Chapter Five the strike itself. It has been argued previously that, because the successful strike had been led by the Red-affiliated Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, it was “easier” for many voters to support Communist candidates. This chapter will complicate this argument by demonstrating that the community itself was
fundamentally altered by experiences immediately prior to, during, and after the strike. Ethnic identities, religion and gender roles will be examined. My account will challenge the dominant narrative whereby women were relegated to certain tasks during times of strike action and individuals could be manipulated according to their religious beliefs or ethnicity. A shared community experience left the citizens of Blairmore well-prepared to elect the nation’s first Communist town council and school board in 1933.

Chapter Six will examine the aftermath of the strike and the election of Mayor Knight and his administration as well as the local agenda pursued by the Red Council. It will be shown that although the council may be best remembered for headline-grabbing events like the dedication of Tim Buck Boulevard, the Red administration also undertook a less spectacular but more significant reordering of democratic rule – and through it Blairmore society – to reflect a town in which government was not only of the people, but existed to make their lives better.

The Seventh and final chapter examines the outward political agenda of Blairmore’s now much-celebrated (and also much-condemned) Mayor, council and school board. It demonstrates not only that Canada’s “little Moscow” had connections with the wider Communist movement, but that it actively sought to interact with – and influence – the world around it. It first examines the actions of the council itself, showing that it not only undertook an ambitious local agenda but also unhesitatingly engaged with larger regional, national and international issues it felt relevant to the local condition. Drawing upon recently-released Communist International papers, we will then move on to examine the actions at Blairmore through the eyes of the Communist Party of Canada. This chapter will show that while the Red administration and the C.P.C. were in public agreement about most everything, behind the scenes there were dynamic disagreements and power struggles between the Mayor and local radicals on the one hand and the C.P.C. and card-
carrying Party members on the other. The question of legality will also be addressed, with newly-available R.C.M.P. documents outlining why, despite active prosecution elsewhere in the country, the Red element was not only permitted to act openly, but also to retain control over the local levers of power at Blairmore for three consecutive terms in office.

Conclusion

When I was asked to speak at Blairmore’s centennial celebrations in September of 2011, I inquired what the terms of reference for my talk would be. The reply from an organizing committee member was not surprising: “everyone gets a laugh hearing that Blairmore used to be Communist. Tell us about some of the crazy stuff they did.” Of course the idea of a Communist government in an Alberta community strikes contemporary Albertans and Canadians as an oddity, and this dissertation will bring out at least some of the Blairmore Reds’ “crazy stuff.” It will also describe what was innovative, courageous and even noble about an experiment in radical democracy that, in the depths of the Depression, provided one model of living otherwise.

124 This is not to suggest that the Reds in the town administration and in the M.W.U.C. did not see themselves as Communists, but rather to imply that while supporting the Party in a general way they were often not under Party control, at least not in the sense that other members are thought to have been.
Chapter Two: Place, Capital and Establishing Community in the Rocky Mountain West.

I encourage anyone who visits Blairmore to head downtown and sit near the gazebo. While you’re there, take a good look around. What perceptions do the physical characteristics of the community convey to you? For those who have not had the opportunity to visit, let me tell you what I see. In front of you is Main Street. Still the commercial hub of the region, storefronts are constructed of brick and, though weathered, have seemingly stood the test of time. Behind you is the ski hill, to your left lies the golf course, and in many of the areas in-between are what realtors are now referring to as “miners’ cottages” in an attempt to gentrify the unostentatious yet well-built homes of the families who for so many decades earned their living at the mine and associated industries. The sense I am always left with is one of stability and longevity, a perception of Blairmore as a town that naturally and historically fits exactly into its present location, as though it had always been here.
Yet as an historian, I know this cannot be true. As little as one hundred and twenty years ago the area was virtually unsettled (and, according to some, undesirable for this purpose). The soil was unturned, the resources were unexploited and the name “Blairmore” had not yet left the lips of the town’s founding fathers.¹ The things that I have come to most closely associate with the community simply did not exist. In the broadest sense this chapter will answer what I have come to realize is a deceptively straightforward question: What is Blairmore? Or perhaps more to the point, why is Blairmore? In order to construct an understanding of why this community came to exist, this chapter will engage with the geographical and geological implications inherent within these questions. Once these factors are addressed, we will be in a stronger position to understand the institutions and lived experiences which defined life here during the formative (pre-1914) years of Blairmore’s existence.

The Politics of Geography

If you were asked to associate one word with Blairmore, what would it be? More often than not, the answer to this question is “coal.” And it is not hard to understand why. The mining industry dominated the local economy here for decades, having an undeniable effect on generations of Blairmorites. That said, it is important to remember that the geographic area which is known today as Blairmore has a history that pre-dates white contact and settlement, and that in many ways the town’s pre-contact experience sets it apart from other places in the Canadian West. According to Dr. B. Reeves of the University of Calgary, the land that would

¹ What we understand today as Blairmore was first known as “Tenth Siding,” as it was located on the tenth siding of the Canadian Pacific’s line between Lethbridge, Alberta and Nelson, British Columbia. As the town started to grow, boosters re-named it “The Springs” in reference to the nearby hot springs. By the census of 1901 the area had become known as Blairmore, though the reason for this name is not certain. Local historian James Cousins argues that “It was given its present name in honour of two contractors, Blair and either More, or a name ending in –more.” Others suggest that it was named for the Hon. Mr. Blair, Federal Minister of Mines. For further discussion see W. James Cousins, A History of the Crowsnest Pass (Calgary: Historical Trails Society of Alberta, 1981), 43.
become Blairmore initially shared a similar historical narrative to such places as present-day Calgary or Fort MacLeod. The first use of the Crowsnest Pass can be traced back 11,000 years to the Clovis culture, which was replaced in turn by the cultures that anthropologists have named Old Cordilleran, Agate Basin and Pelican Lake. Most recently, the Crowsnest Pass has been considered a contested territory, oscillating between Kootenai and Blackfoot control.\(^2\) Given this continuous pattern of use, one might be forgiven for questioning how Blairmore is any different from the rest of what historical geographer Theodore Binnema has termed the West’s “common and contested ground.”\(^3\)

Yet, despite the almost constant use of the Crowsnest Pass from Clovis times forward, there is one notable exception to this pattern, particularly for the Kootenai and Blackfoot cultures: the land surrounding present-day Turtle Mountain was considered by them to be unlucky. Just as good spirits were thought to live in the Cypress Hills, the First Peoples believed that an evil spirit inhabited Turtle Mountain. According to oral histories, a person should never turn their back to Turtle Mountain, nor traverse the lands on which it casts its shadow. They came to believe the mountain was moving to the East, referring to it as “the mountain that moves.”\(^4\) According to indigenous tradition, those who camped under its peaks often reported hearing strange noises throughout the night, and upon waking up they often found that their surroundings had changed. When traveling on an east-west route through the Pass, it was customary to take the safer – but much longer – path to the north to avoid any of the malicious intentions that the mountain was thought to possess. Located on the western slopes of Turtle

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\(^2\) An accessible discussion of this history can be found in Crowsnest Pass Historical Society, \textit{Crowsnest and Its People} (Lethbridge: Crowsnest Pass Historical Society, 1979), 15-20.


Mountain, Blairmore is one of the few places in the Canadian West that First Nations peoples were known to actively avoid.\(^5\)

Considered unlucky by First Nations communities, Turtle Mountain (and more generally the Crowsnest Pass) were understood in an entirely different framework by the Government of Canada. When initially considering routes for the Canadian Pacific Railway, the government had seriously considered the Crowsnest Pass, the shortest link between east and west.\(^6\) Yet politicians and capital interests alike worried about putting the only all-Canadian transcontinental rail line so close to the border with the United States. In the event of hostilities there were fears that should American forces capture (or worse, destroy) a portion of the transcontinental railway, Canada would not be able to defend itself.\(^7\)

Yet it was exactly this proximity to the American border that would only a few years later result in the government’s decision to entice the C.P.R. to build a railway through the region with a series of lucrative land grants and cash incentives. As prospectors and pioneers slowly

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\(^5\) The disuse or avoidance of the areas surrounding Turtle Mountain in no way suggest that First Nations cultures did not heavily use the land in the Crowsnest Pass. Fernie, for example, was “cursed” by a local tribe in the 1890s. Local legend states that the town’s founder, William Fernie, came across a tribe of First Nations people and noticed that the Chief’s daughter was wearing a necklace made of coal. The Chief agreed to show Mr. Fernie the location of the coal in exchange for his marrying his daughter. True to his word, the Chieftain shared the location of the bituminous deposits with Fernie, but when the time came for the pair to marry Fernie refused. Enraged, the Chief of the tribe put a curse on the town, stating that all who lived here would know fire, floods and famine. As a reminder of this curse, he asked the gods to put the image of a ghost rider on Mount Hosmer, which faced into the valley. Though not taken seriously initially his curse came to be seen as prophetic as years passed by. Major fires occurred in 1904 and 1908, the latter almost entirely destroying the city. In 1916 disaster struck again when the Elk River overflowed its banks and flooded much of the town. The near-famine conditions of the Depression convinced many that the curse was not only true, but that it would never end. The townspeople of Fernie took the unusual precaution of asking the Kootenai First Nations to lift the curse, and on the 15 August 1964 Chief Red Eagle and Mayor James White concluded a truce which was entered into between the tribe and the town by the smoking of a symbolic peace pipe. For a more detailed account, see Wayne Norton, *The Forgotten Side of the Border: British Columbia’s Elk Valley and the Crowsnest Pass* (Kamloops: Plateau Press, 1998).

\(^6\) The other two proposals would locate the rail line to the north, either through Rogers Pass or the Yellowhead Pass.\(^7\) For a complete discussion of these factors, see John A. Eagle, *The Canadian Pacific Railway and the Development of Western Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989). It is important to remember that during this period the border between Canada and the United States was not as complete or firm a construct as it is today. It had only been a few decades since the War of 1812 had concluded, and the ideas surrounding Manifest Destiny were influential. For more on this topic, see Kris Fresonke, *West of Emerson: The Designs of Manifest Destiny* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
started to populate the region, it became increasingly evident that they were doing so using the most accessible and comprehensive transportation system then available: rivers.\textsuperscript{8} The rivers here flow north to south, and provided easy access for Americans to British Columbia. A trickle of south-to-north migration turned into a full blown rush after the discovery of silver near Nelson, British Columbia in 1887. It was then that the Government of Canada decided it had to act in order to assert its sovereignty over the area.\textsuperscript{9} The matter soon became even more urgent with the discovery of coal, zinc and lead.

As mining and investment capital flowed into the region, the need to transport mining (and other) heavy equipment into the area became acute. Initially managed through steamboats and barges on the rivers, north-south travel could also be effected via such railways as the Great Northern.\textsuperscript{10} Capitalists in places like Coeur d’Alene cast their eyes on the area, which they saw as the northernmost extension of the Inland Empire.\textsuperscript{11} The federal government in Ottawa was worried, and consequently it was under this monetary, infrastructural and cultural bombardment from the Pacific Northwest that the Canadian Government initiated construction of the Crowsnest Pass Railway.

While the development and construction of the railroad itself is beyond the purview of this dissertation, its significance for Blairmore was that it revealed the lengths to which the Government of Canada was willing to go in order to see an all-Canadian railway put through the area. Having fast-tracked “An Act to Authorize a Subsidy for a Railway Line through the Crow’s Nest Pass” through both houses of parliament, an agreement was inked between the Government

\textsuperscript{8} R. G. Harvey, \textit{Routes to Remember: Carving the Western Path} (Calgary: Heritage House Publishing Company, 2006), 58.
\textsuperscript{9} The deposit at Nelson would later be developed into the Silver King Mine.
\textsuperscript{10} For the purposes of this dissertation, the most important of these lines was built by the Great Northern Railway under the leadership of Canadian J.J. Hill. Eventually it would connect Fernie and Michel/Natal with the Great Northern’s transcontinental American network via Spokane, Washington.
\textsuperscript{11} For a full discussion, see William Sloan, “The Crowsnest Pass During the Depression: A Socioeconomic History of Southeastern British Columbia, 1918-1939” (M.A. Thesis, University of Victoria, 1968), 7.
and the Canadian Pacific Railway providing for the construction of a railway between Lethbridge and Nelson via the Crowsnest Pass.\textsuperscript{12} Though the Crowsnest Agreement was in some ways similar to previous arrangements made between the two parties in that it provided cash and land incentives for each mile of track completed, the document also reflects a sense of urgency on the part of the government. With an increasing number of Americans and other so-called “foreigners” in the region, the federal government made it clear to the C.P.R. it wanted the company to lay down track as soon as possible. And this determination to get going, so to speak, was made consistently clear in the text of the Agreement itself. Among its contractual provisions, the following is representative of the federal government’s mindset: “…time being declared to be material and of the essence of this contract and in default of such completion as aforesaid the company shall forfeit all right, claim or demand to any and every part of the subsidy remaining unpaid…”\textsuperscript{13} The message was clear: if the Canadian Pacific wanted to be paid for the project, it needed to be completed on time.\textsuperscript{14}

Another important departure that speaks to the unique and complicated nature of the situation was suggested by the provisions in the agreement regarding labour. When constructing its first line through the Rockies, the Canadian Pacific relied on the labour of non-citizens to get the job done. But, already worried about the number of non-citizens present in this area, the federal government made it clear that there would be strict limitations on who could – and could not – work on the project. The following lines of the Act are worth citing at length:

The company shall not let or sub-let the said work or any portion thereof to any foreigner, or any corporation composed wholly or in part of foreigners, or employ or cause to be employed on the said works any person who is not at the date hereof a British subject or a

\textsuperscript{12} The full text of the agreement is available at \url{www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/05/0529/052920/05292083_e.html}.
\textsuperscript{13} Crowsnest Pass Agreement, 3.
\textsuperscript{14} Given the urgency of the situation in relation to American settlers in the area, it is perhaps not surprising that the federal government was concerned the railway would incur the massive time delays and cost overruns that had plagued the construction of the Canadian Pacific transcontinental line only a few years earlier.
bona fide resident of Canada, or who is not certified by an agent of the Immigration Department of Canada as having come to Canada as an immigrant, intending to bona fide settle in the country, unless either the Minister of Railways is satisfied that there is not available sufficient Canadian labour to enable the company to complete the works within the time limit as aforesaid, or there be some other reason which shall be deemed by the Governor in Council sufficient in the public interest in which case or cases, and insofar as the Minister may deem it necessary, and for any particular portion or portions of the work, and for any specified period or periods, and as to the particular number of persons, he may from time to time consent in writing consent to the employment of such persons as are hereby otherwise permitted.\textsuperscript{15}

Not only does this mark an important departure from the way labour relating to railroads had previously been conceptualized in Canada, but it is also an important social comment on ethnicity and place of origin. Though the agreement excludes individuals (read: Americans) who might be Caucasian but not British Subjects from working on the Crowsnest Pass route, it does not bar non-white subjects from employment. As Ian McKay has aptly articulated, the constructs surrounding who could and could not be considered to be white were politically charged, and the idea that non-white labour from other parts of the Empire was preferable to Caucasian labourers from south of the line stands witness to the federal government’s determination to keep the area firmly under “British” control.\textsuperscript{16} The agreement also provided for a discount on cartage rates for a whole array of food and material supplies – fruit, vegetables, furniture and livestock are some of the examples – destined for points along the new route in order that the region be quickly settled and populated.\textsuperscript{17}

As the railway pushed its way west through the Crowsnest Valley, people and capital began to flow into the area. Prospectors hoping to find gold and silver found large quantities of coal instead, and “the Pass” as it became known was soon touted as having the largest proven

\textsuperscript{15} Crowsnest Pass Agreement, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{16} For a more detailed discussion, see Ian McKay, \textit{Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920} (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008): 345-416.
\textsuperscript{17} These reductions in tariffs were collectively known as the “Crow Rate.” For a complete list of the items and their accompanying rates of discount, see Crowsnest Pass Agreement, 4-5.
coal deposits in the country. But before we can discuss the geological nature of these deposits, it is first necessary to discuss the Crowsnest Pass itself. What constitutes the Pass? And more specifically, how does Blairmore fit into this geographical region?

Since the establishment of the Municipality of the Crowsnest Pass in 1978, cartographers have represented the region as a distinct area stretching from the Passburg Flats in the east to the Alberta-British Columbia border in the west, with provincial highway number three serving as a rough north-south dividing line. When driving through the area today one might be excused for believing that the area exists as one continuous zone of settlement, with small distances between the towns and villages and very little of the downtown business cores visible from the highway. The Crowsnest Pass has not always been this neatly defined.

The citizens of Blairmore currently share a strong regional identity with other residents of the Crowsnest Pass, yet the definition of what constitutes “the Pass” is not as concrete as existing road signs or map demarcations might lead one to believe. Authors and academics alike have very different perceptions of its constituent communities. In a 1984 article for Canadian Geographic, Elliot and Nicole Bernshaw informed readers that “sociologically” the Crowsnest Pass linked, through common or shared experiences, towns as far apart as Fort Macleod, Alberta in the east and Fernie, British Columbia in the West. Geographer David Lake takes a different view of the Crowsnest Pass as a “functional area” which starts at Elko, British Columbia where the valley narrows and terminates at Burmis, Alberta, where the valley widens. A third

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18 Passburg Flats is known contemporarily as Leitch Collieries, named for the mining operation that briefly existed there between 1907 and 1915. For more on Leitch Collieries, specifically on preservation efforts being made by the Government of Alberta, see David Koshman, “Stabilizing Ruins: Coal Mining Ruins at Leitch Collieries,” ATP Bulletin Vol. 20 no. 4 (1988): 55-61.
definition is the one offered by historian William Sloan, who argues that a “social corridor” existed between the communities of the Crowsnest Pass and Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, facilitated later by the Great Northern Railway. According to Sloan, some felt the Crowsnest Pass represented the northernmost extension of the Inland Empire. The Pass is often further divided along the provincial boundary to reflect the experiences of those living in either Alberta or British Columbia respectively.

Given the varying perceptions of what constitutes the Crowsnest Pass, it is necessary to define it vis-à-vis this research. The examples offered above are based on sociological, geographical, social and political variables, each using different sets of empirical data to come to an acceptable definition. During the approximately 135 interviews utilized for this project, informants were asked how they defined the Pass during the Depression. The dominant response was ‘the towns and villages stretching from Hillcrest, Alberta in the east through Bellevue, Frank, Blairmore, Coleman, Crowsnest, Michel, Corbin, Natal and Hosmer, ending at Fernie, B.C.’ Interviewees remembered frequent travel between the communities for social visits. Beatrice Peressini, for example, recalls traveling from Blairmore to Michel and then on to Fernie with her family to visit other members of the Italian Society on weekends. It is clear that social, fraternal and ethnic ties connected the residents of these Crowsnest communities, who got

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21 Sloan, 7.
22 Ibid. The Inland Empire is centred on Spokane, Washington, and includes much of the Columbia River Basin, extending into northern Idaho, northeast Oregon, and north-western Montana. This region is sometimes also referred to as the Inland Northwest.
23 A good example can be found in the following collection of essays: Tom Langford, The Forgotten Side of the Border, British Columbia's Crowsnest Pass (Kamloops: Plateau Press, 1998).
24 For example see Beatrice Peressini interview, in author’s possession.
together to celebrate events such as Labour Day and May Day.\textsuperscript{25} This dissertation will therefore conceptualize the Pass as stretching from Hillcrest, Alberta to Fernie, B.C. inclusively.

While interests and relationships linked the communities that made up the Crowsnest Pass of the 1930s, it would be incorrect to assume that there was anything like today’s level of integration, communication or cooperation. Blairmore, Coleman and Fernie became the dominant urban and economic centres, and as such competed with each other for investment (and therefore prosperity and employment) throughout the period.\textsuperscript{26} Of the three, Blairmore and Coleman were particularly notorious rivals. Their mutual competition represented itself at sporting events and even on the dating scene throughout the 1920s and 1930s. As Helen Kropinak remembered, “hockey games were like war!”\textsuperscript{27} Beatrice Peressini added that as an assertion of maturity, girls from Blairmore would deliberately seek out a boyfriend from Coleman and vice versa; in her case, Mrs. Peressini married into a Coleman family, relocating her husband to Blairmore.\textsuperscript{28} Kinship links between the rivals were therefore constantly in play.

Comparisons between Blairmore, Coleman, and Fernie were also frequently found in the local press, with each town having a weekly newspaper to extol its strengths and cast doubt on the efficiency of government, industry and people of the neighboring towns.\textsuperscript{29} The result was a common experience that was broadly shared among all of the constituent communities by virtue of location and dependence on coal mining as a dominant industry, yet defined locally by


\textsuperscript{27} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0060, “Helen Kropinak Interview.”

\textsuperscript{28} Beatrice Peressini interview, in author’s possession.

\textsuperscript{29} While such remarks and comparisons tended to be qualitative, they became more personal and political after the election of a Red council at Blairmore in 1933 with comments such as: “What’s the difference between [Blairmore] Mayor William Knight and the future? The future sometimes looks bright!” See “Local and General Items,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 11 May 1933.
economic, corporate, ethnic, and political considerations. All three settlements had unique political experiences during this period: Blairmore elected a Communist town council while Coleman elected a right-leaning administration and Fernie was placed under the trusteeship of the Government of British Columbia after going bankrupt.30

**Geology and the Nature of Coal in the Crowsnest Pass**

As rails were laid through the Crowsnest Pass – and at some points even before – exploration for (and exploitation of) the rich seams of coal found throughout the region began in earnest. Coal extracted in the Pass, though it burned well and gave off exceptional amounts of heat, was soft and relatively perishable when compared to coal mined at Vancouver Island, Bienfait, Saskatchewan or in the mines of the eastern provinces’ largest supplier, Pennsylvania.31 Crowsnest coal had to be shipped by rail in closed boxcars or low gondolas, and had to be stored indoors to prolong its shelf life.32 The more coal from the Crowsnest Pass was handled – by the miners, pickers, tipple workers, railway employees and consumers – the more it deteriorated, and the less it was worth. “Slack” or “Slag” – the pieces that were too small to be sold – were simply discarded in large piles adjacent to the tipple.33


31 Although Pennsylvania coal was not entering the Western Canadian market it did impede western producers from selling to markets east of Winnipeg. The West Canadian Collieries of Blairmore and other producers lobbied the federal government to increase the tariffs on American coal or subsidize freight rates for coal traveling east from Alberta. The lobbying continued, though for the most part unsuccessfully, for most of the interwar years. For coverage, see “Alberta Coal is Facing a Loss in Winnipeg Market: Steam Coal Already being Supplanted by American Produce – Domestic Faces Possibility of being Forced Out,” *Lethbridge Herald*, 6 May 1924.

32 For an explanation of some of the trouble facing Crowsnest coal, refer to the 1919 Royal Commission on Coal in Alberta. An abridged version has been edited by David J. Bercuson, and a description of the problem can be found in pages ix-x in the introduction. See David J. Bercuson (ed.), *Alberta’s Coal Industry, 1919* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 1978).

33 When coal was brought to the surface it was cleaned of any other rocks or minerals, and then passed over a series of screens to separate the coal by size. Lump coal (more than 8 inches in diameter), nut coal (from 1-8 inches in diameter) and pea coal (smaller than two inches but still not powder or shards) could be sold to different markets or
The softer and more perishable nature of Crowsnest coal would affect miners at Blairmore in a direct and real way. They were paid by the weight of saleable coal they extracted and not by the amount of time they spent at the coal face. Coal that was crushed or chipped into small pieces (or which had otherwise deteriorated on the way from the depths to the tipple) was worthless to the West Canadian Collieries. As it could not be sold by the company, miners were simply not paid for it.

Soft, slacky coal was not the only geological factor with which those working underground had to contend. According to miner Arthur Wilson there were “menacing peculiarities” that caused a series of problems unique to the Crowsnest coal fields. Throughout the Pass coal seams lay at steeply pitched angles, which made the traditional room-and-pillar method of extraction particularly challenging. Geologists reported that Crowsnest coal seams “generally did not follow continuous paths, contained lethal pockets of methane gas and, because they consisted of soft bituminous coal, broke down neatly into dust during the mining process.” Mine operators at Frank, located just two kilometres from the Blairmore mine, complained that “the local coal seam pitched to the west at an angle of 70 degrees, changing to a vertical seam at an angle of 60 degrees, and going as low as 30 degrees to the east thereafter.”

To understand why coal seams in this area pitched at such unpredictable angles, we must look to the creation of the mountain ranges themselves. Scientists believe the Crowsnest Valley transformed into coke. The remaining coal was discarded as slack, and when coal broke down quickly as it did in the Crowsnest Pass, it was referred to as “slacky.” Some miners in the Crowsnest Pass used “culm” and “culmy” interchangeably with “slack” and “slacky.”

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35 Most underground mining was conducted by the room-and-pillar method, whereby rooms are cut into the coal bed, leaving a series of pillars, or columns of coal, to help support the mine roof and control the air flow. Generally, rooms are 20-30 feet wide and the pillars are up to 100 feet wide. As mining advanced, a grid like pattern of rooms and pillars is formed. When the coal bed has been exhausted, the miners then retreat, removing the pillars and allowing the coal seam to eventually collapse under its own weight. The steep angles of the coal seams in the Crowsnest Pass would eventually lead to strip mining rather than underground mining in the 1940s.

36 Cited in Babien, 39.

was created between 60-70 million years ago as tectonic plates violently collided (and in doing so pushed up this section of the Rocky Mountains). In the Crowsnest Pass, the collision of these plates occurred with such force that malleable Mesozoic deposits of sandstone, shale and coal buckled under the intense pressure. Palaeozoic rocks – mainly limestone – came to rest over the much younger coal bearing rock. The end result was that in the Crowsnest Pass coal seams had – at places – been contorted into a near vertical position. While the coal itself was plentiful in the region, it often was found at steep and unexpected angles, making it more difficult and dangerous to extract.\textsuperscript{38}

Adding to this challenge was the problem of methane gas. When asked about methane in the Greenhill Mine, retired miner Ross MacDonald was matter-of-fact about the reality for many at the West Canadian:

There’s a lot of methane. And [if] it’s in your lungs and an explosion occurs, it blows your chest open. Ya’ got ribs laying all over the place... Quick, but messy. And if there’s enough flash flame afterwards, [you’re] just sort of cooked... A lot of closed caskets here.\textsuperscript{39}

Coal seams at Blairmore were more labour-intensive and dangerous to work than those in competing markets.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{People, Places and Institutional Structures.}

Established in 1898 at the tenth siding of the Crowsnest Pass Railway, the location that would become Blairmore was at first nothing more than a C.P.R. section house and a boxcar-

\textsuperscript{38} For a detailed local analysis, see Dr. William Kerr, “Geology of the Crowsnest Pass” in \textit{Crowsnest and Its People} (Lethbridge: Crowsnest Historical Society, 1979), 1-15.
\textsuperscript{39} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.100, “Ross MacDonald interview.”
\textsuperscript{40} For a discussion relating to the extraction of coal in Southern Saskatchewan, see Stephen Endicott, \textit{Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners’ Struggle of 31} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).
turned-station placed at the side of the tracks.\footnote{The C.P.R. was known to locate stations built on the chassis of box cars at locations that had the potential for growth but were not yet stable enough to warrant a permanent station building. In the event the location did not yield enough business or growth, the station could simply be moved elsewhere. Interesting to some might be their practise of “hanging” place names on transportable stations rather than painting them on. During this period they were moved more often than they were painted.} Having only two residents – H.E. Lyon and Felix Montalbetti – Blairmore’s future was precarious at best.\footnote{Cousins, 43.} Unlike the coal fields in South Eastern British Columbia which had been almost exclusively granted to the Crowsnest Pass Coal Company – a large corporation with the financial resources to initiate large-scale operations – the coal deposits on the Alberta side of the Pass were allocated only after an individual or corporation prospected and laid claim to an area. This resulted in a rush of prospectors arriving in the Crowsnest Pass, and many dozens of claims being staked. When the initial rush was over ten communities had formed around two dozen mines within fourteen miles of one another. By 1952 only five of them remained.\footnote{There were three relatively large operations (York Creek, the International Coal and Coke Company and the McGillivray Coal and Coke Company) digging from the same seam at Coleman, Alberta. In the end this was not economically viable, and they merged after decades of competition and separate surface plants to form “Coleman Collieries.” For a discussion regarding individual experiences in the constituent towns of the Pass, see Cousins, 36-63.} Though Blairmore would emerge as one of three economic powerhouses in the Pass, its ascendancy was far from assured.

Indeed, many thought it was the town of Frank, not Blairmore, that was destined to become the economic centre of the Alberta side of the Crowsnest Pass. Heavily bankrolled by American interests out of Butte, Montana, the well-capitalized Canadian-American Coal Company (C.A.C.C.) invested heavily in both the development of a mine and townsite, and on the first of September, 1901 both were opened to great public fanfare.\footnote{The corporation received its funding from millionaire H.L. Frank of Butte, Montana.} Special trains ran to Frank from as far west as Cranbrook, B.C., and among the special guests were the Hon. G.F. Haultain, Premier of the North West Territories and his Minister of Public Works. Overshadowing nearby Blairmore’s temporary railway station, the C.P.R. established a
maintenance centre at Frank, and on the day the townsite was officially opened the C.A.C.C. backstopped a local economy boasting twenty-five company cottages, a large “modern” boarding house, a post office and a resident population of just over three hundred people.\textsuperscript{45}

Among those who had made the journey to Frank that day was T. Clarke of the N.W.M.P., responsible for the safety of Premier Haultain. Clarke later remembered that “the little town was looking its prettiest. The rows of miners’ cottages, neatly painted, each removed about fifty feet from its nearest neighbour, radiated a look of prosperity and permanency.”\textsuperscript{46} Games of lacrosse, shot put and foot races riveted the attentions of those in attendance, he added. And when it came time to eat, he recalled that the Canadian-American Coal and Coke Company had engaged a French chef for the occasion. It was reported that in addition to the Chef, over a ton of fresh fruit and ice cream had been brought in by rail from Spokane for guests to enjoy.\textsuperscript{47} And when not enjoying the food or taking part in sporting events, couples could choose to dance the afternoon and evening away. “The spacious ballroom of the new hotel attracted many, a bang-up orchestra being specially hired for the occasion. Everything was free, the visitors’ money having no value on that day of days.”\textsuperscript{48} When Frank appeared on the map in 1901, it had all the trappings of a town destined for stability and prosperity. It is easy to see why the local population was widely expected to reach two thousand by the end of 1903.\textsuperscript{49}

In comparison (and only two kilometres away), Blairmore initially exhibited many of the characteristics historian Gerald Friesen attributes to the stereotypical mining community or frontier town. In his analysis of resource-dependent local economies, Friesen suggests that centres like Blairmore were home to a narrow segment of the overall population – transient white

\textsuperscript{45} Cousins, 47.
\textsuperscript{46} Crowsnest and Its People, 47.
\textsuperscript{47} Diana Wilson, \textit{Triumph and Tragedy in the Crowsnest Pass} (Surry: Heritage House, 2008), 56.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, 47-48.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}
males – and therefore lacked the social diversity of young, old and female residents whose presence contributed to social stability. Friesen notes that because residence in towns like Blairmore was temporary, local problems seemingly “did not require or deserve permanent economic or political remedies.” Miners rarely went to church, attended social functions, interacted with non-miners or shared the company of women other than prostitutes.

The Canadian Census of 1901 similarly shows Blairmore to be representative of many of the demographic and social trends outlined by Friesen. The census indicates that 86% of Blairmore’s total population was male, and of that 74% considered themselves to be single. And though this seems like an extraordinarily unbalanced male-female ratio at first sight, it is important to remember that of the remaining 25% of men who reported themselves as married, 64% of them were living as bachelors in Blairmore. In practice, then, only 10% or 22 men could be considered married in the sense that they were actually cohabitating with their spouses. Equally important is the realization that while the census of 1901 reported 16 single women, this does not account for the possibility that female children may also have been included in this number. Towns like Blairmore “were often viewed as stopping places on a trip to another destination, and suffered the problems generated by short-term community social arrangements.” In this regard, many Blairmore boosters feared that it would become the “stopping place” before miners either continued on to Fernie, or turned around to settle at Frank.

In its first five years of existence, the unstable nature of Blairmore’s local economy was aggravated, not mitigated, by the nature of its mines. Indeed, mining operations at Blairmore

51 Ibid., 298.
52 Ibid., 297.
53 Census of Canada, 1901. See details in Appendix 1.
54 This was quite common, as many (such as Joe Kroszky Sr.) would immigrate to Canada to work, saving enough money to bring their family over one member at a time.
55 Friesen, 296.
prior to 1903 provided a telling foil to the well-funded and professionally-managed operations at Fernie and Frank. Having laid claim to the area south of the C.P.R. right of way, one Mr. Chestnut opened his mine at the turn of the century while the team of Fishburn and Proctor commenced mining operations to the north of the town in 1901. These mines, generally speaking, were poorly capitalized and crudely equipped. Rather than embodying many of the physical characteristics associated with coal mines in the Rockies – surface plants, cement-faced portals and structures to load coal and deliver it to market – these operations more closely resembled the part-time mines of Southern Saskatchewan where men worked full-time on farms or ranches, supplementing this work with mine labour only when they had to. The work was sporadic, the conditions were dangerous and the mining companies themselves did not have the required money in the bank to ensure their employees a steady paycheque. Had it not been for a sawmill built early on by Senator Peter McLaren – which in 1900 could produce between seven and eight million board feet of lumber per year and employed fifty men – some question if Blairmore would have survived.56

In order to better understand Friesen’s arguments from a potential settler’s point of view, there are below four comparative pictures of Blairmore and Frank. In the first set of photographs, we can see that by 1901 Frank had a well developed main street that offered residents access to all the economic amenities that could be expected in a boomtown environment. Residents could visit a variety of general and dry goods vendors, a grocer, a pharmacist, a doctor, more than one saloon, a respectable hotel, a boarding house, several restaurants, a blacksmith, an electric light company, a waterworks system, a post office, a bank

and a two-storey schoolhouse.57 And though the angle is not the same in both pictures, we can see that Blairmore boasted only a scattering of commercial services. Also evident in the photograph in the right is just how much land was considered to be unavailable, as squatters’ rights were claimed over it by two parties and consequently no clear title could be established by those settling on it.

57 Diana Wilson, *Triumph and Tragedy in the Crowsnest Pass* (Surrey: Heritage House, 2008), 57.

This difference becomes even more pronounced when examining the infrastructure of the mining companies operating in Frank and Blairmore during the same period in time. The bankhead at Blairmore, pictured on the right, is a roughly-constructed entry to a poorly capitalized mine. Coal was hauled out of the mine and screened by hand before being loaded – again by hand – into railway cars on a nearby C.P.R. siding. In comparison, we can see that the operations at Frank were not only well constructed, but also well capitalized. Once coal had been removed from the mine, it was brought to the tipple pictured below. Once inside the tipple the coal was washed, mechanically sorted, and readied for market. And when the coal had been sold, it was loaded directly into waiting railway cars at the tipple itself, because the company had paid to have a
railway spurline constructed between the mine workings and the C.P.R. mainline. The system at Frank was safer, more efficient and steadier. Because of the massive amount of capital behind the venture, miners and other mine employees could expect to be paid at the end of each pay period. The same could not be said for the upstart operators just around the corner in Blairmore.

![Frank 1901](image1)

![Blairmore 1901](image2)

So how did Blairmore avoid becoming a stopping place on the road to bigger and better things? What was it that allowed Blairmore to grow while other coal towns stagnated, disintegrated or were simply unable to move beyond a frontier camp culture to a more stable and complex society? Part of the answer can be found in the formation of the West Canadian Collieries in 1903, and another in the fate of Blairmore’s competitor, Frank.

Beginning its corporate life in 1901 as Gold Fields Limited of British Columbia, the West Canadian Collieries was initially run by J.J. Fluetot and C. Remy, both French émigrés. They had come to the Crowsnest Pass prospecting for gold – local legend had it that there was a large gold deposit near Blairmore – and instead had came across an exceedingly rich coal deposit north of Blairmore and Frank at Grassy Mountain. In order to exploit this coal deposit, Fleutot and

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58 Friesen, 296.
59 In the 1870s, a team of prospectors came to the Canadian west from Montana in search of gold along the Saskatchewan River systems. Two of them – known as Lemon and Blackjack – struck out on their own and explored what would be later known as the Crowsnest Pass. While in the Pass, they are reputed to have found trace amounts
Remy set about legally reorganizing their company in 1903 in order to attract the necessary investment capital to start mining operations.\textsuperscript{60} The two entrepreneurs founded French Camp (later known as Lille) at the base of Grassy Mountain. The new corporation hired surveyors to lay out a rail link between the new collieries and the Canadian Pacific mainline a few miles distant.\textsuperscript{61}

When the re-branded corporation – now known as the West Canadian Collieries Ltd. (W.C.C.) – held its initial public offering on the London Stock Exchange, it received a healthy market capitalization of £720,000. It used this money to finish the construction of its collieries at Lille as well as for the completion of the spur line which linked its new mine and surface plant to the C.P.R. at Frank. Though some believed the West Canadian had intended to focus solely on the development of its claims at Grassy Mountain, the company surprised many in the Pass by purchasing the assets of Chestnut, Fishburn and Proctor at Blairmore (as well as a small mining company at Bellevue), giving it control over a large percentage of the coalfields in the eastern Crowsnest Pass.

And this is where luck – or for some, legend – intervened. As discussed earlier in this chapter, generations of First Nations cultures believed that Turtle Mountain was unlucky, and that the spirit within the mountain was not to be trusted. After the railway was constructed, the Village of Frank was laid out on Turtle Mountain’s eastern slopes, with Blairmore close by on its}

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\textsuperscript{61} Both Seager and Cousins respectively can be consulted with profit for discussions of the formation of the W.C.C. There is also an unpublished History of the West Canadian Collieries written by W.H. Chappell, available at the Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Coleman, Alberta.
west-facing frontage. On 29 April, 1903 at 4:10 in the morning, about 90 million tonnes of limestone broke free from Turtle Mountain and came tumbling down its eastern face. Now referred to as the Frank Slide, this event was then (as it is now) considered to be Canada’s worst natural disaster.\textsuperscript{62} Damage from the slide was immediately evident, even before the sun came up that morning. The rock loosened from the mountain slid into the valley, damming the Old Man River and causing a large lake to form at the base of the mountain. Over a mile of the Canadian Pacific Railway was completely covered and much of the West Canadian’s short line connecting Lille to the outside world – including the company’s new steam engine and servicing yards – had been obliterated. Gone too were all the mining instillations opened with such fanfare just two years earlier. Perhaps the greatest loss could be counted in human lives: one in six people living in Frank were killed that night, though only 14 bodies were ever recovered.\textsuperscript{63}

The aftermath was immediately evident. The red and white cottage that had once been home to Samuel Ennis, his wife and four children was in ruins. Attracted by calls for help coming from a destroyed building, rescuers found that Sam Ennis had managed to free himself, and assisted him in removing a heavy structural beam pinning his wife Lucy into the debris.\textsuperscript{64} Slowly but surely his four children were pulled from the rubble, as was their boarder James Warrington. Though Mrs. Ennis had a broken collarbone and Warrington had a broken femur, this household could count themselves among the lucky: of all the people caught by the slide, only 23 survived.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{63} An excellent discussion of the Frank Slide can be found in Dinah Wilson, \textit{Triumph and Tragedy in the Crowsnest Pass} (Calgary: Heritage House Books, 2005).
\textsuperscript{64} Wilson, 73.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 76.
Samuel Ennis immediately moved his family to Blairmore and away from the potential
danger of another slide. And though he continued to be employed at the rebuilt Canadian-
American Coal and Coke Company operations at Frank, he preferred to walk the two kilometres
each workday to and from the tipple rather than gamble on returning his family to Frank. Ennis
and his family were captured by a photographer not long after they made the move to Blairmore
standing outside their makeshift home; James Warrington, their boarder, could walk only with
the assistance of both a cane and a crutch.

Source: Glenbow Archives

And evidence shows that Ennis and his family were not the only ones who were reluctant to
return to Frank after the slide. Ten days after the townsite had reopened only two families had
moved back into their homes. As Diana Wilson remarks: “there was no great incentive for people
to leave the assured safety of Blairmore.”\footnote{Ibid., 93. The psychological impact the Frank Slide had has also been represented in film adaptations of the event. In the National Film Board’s \textit{On the Edge of Destruction} an exchange between Mr. McGuire of the \textit{Calgary Herald} and Frank-based photographer Mr. Middleton illustrates these feelings: \begin{quote} Middleton: The day after the slide, Frank was evacuated. People went west to Blairmore. 
McGuire: Do you think they will return once the ban has been lifted? 
Middleton: Some will, but some are still afraid.\end{quote}}
Although geologists have since been successful in assessing the geological reasons for the slide, it exerted a quite non-scientific but potent influence over masses of people long before they arrived at their explanations. The First Nations’ belief that Turtle Mountain was a deeply untrustworthy entity carried a widespread cachet after the disaster. When Sick’s brewery produced a history of the region in the 1940s, they eloquently summed up the feelings of many residents: “Perhaps the people of Frank should have listened to the Indians... they believed the mountain had a habit of moving slowly like a turtle and [consequently] one day it would fall! Yet the white man came... [and] built at the very foot of Turtle Mountain.” Others, like Mines Inspector William Pierce, confided to their friends that they believed the Slide had likely occurred because the mine owner condoned illegal and dangerous practices within the mine in order to make more money (for example, not leaving enough coal in a room in order to support the ceiling). Though the town of Frank tried to reconstitute itself (the mine itself re-opened within the period of a month), it never fully recovered.

With part of its newly-constructed railway buried in the slide area, the W.C.C.’s first priority was to re-establish a transportation link between its company town at Lille and the outside world. Once it had previously been possible to gain elevation on the rail line gradually. Now West Canadian confronted a more challenging topography. Its trains needed to gain elevation in a very limited amount of space. The solution was a series of expensive and time-consuming switchbacks similar to the ones initially built by the Canadian Pacific in the Kicking

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McGuire: Do you still think it fortunate to live in Frank, Mr. Middleton?
Middleton: I’m just happy to be alive, Mr. McGuire. Anywhere
67 John Fischer, Our Heritage: A Series of Historical Sketches of Alberta (Lethbridge: Sick’s Brewery, n.d.). This popular production captured the way that many people in the region perceived the event. For a much more academic discussion, see Diana Wilson, Triumph and Tragedy in the Crowsnest Pass (Surrey: Heritage House, 2008), 53-100.
68 Crowsnest and its People, 60.
69 Cousins, 46. Also see Crowsnest and its People, 121,223.
Horse Pass. This only added to the difficulty of maintaining the rail link, which was reliant on sixteen expensive-to-maintain wooden bridges on the seven miles of track between the C.P.R. and Lille. 70

It is probably not a coincidence – though there is little in the way of evidentiary support for this observation aside from the predictable boosterism of the _Blairmore Enterprise_ – that after the Frank Slide the W.C.C. decided not to permanently locate their offices at Lille, but rather to build their Canadian headquarters in the town of Blairmore.71 Selecting a prominent location in what became known as the “new townsite,” their buildings would contain space not just for the mining company’s geological and clerical staff, but also for apartments housing senior management.72 Locating their headquarters at Blairmore brought new capital investment into the local economy.

Having acquired the mining properties surrounding Blairmore, the West Canadian’s Chief Geologist Raoul Green made an evaluation of the corporation’s new holdings: the coal field to the north of town – known as the Greenhill – was believed to be so rich that all the other mining properties W.C.C. owned at Blairmore were temporarily sealed so the company could focus its attention on the Greenhill mine.73 The surface plant was almost entirely rebuilt and a second entrance (known as the #2 shaft) was opened in order to allow for increased mine output. The establishment of the West Canadian’s offices and the development of the Greenhill Mine marked the beginning of a boom that would see Blairmore surpass Frank and Coleman as the economic powerhouse on the Alberta side of the Crowsnest Pass.

70 Jallep, 46.
71 Lille, which became increasingly expensive to operate after the slide, closed in 1912 and consequently the railway line was abandoned.
72 The implications for the ways in which the W.C.C. chose to build will be discussed in more depth in the coming pages.
73 Cousins, 43-46.
No longer a town of transitory migrants with temporary buildings and poorly capitalized mining ventures, Blairmore became a destination in and of itself. Men – and increasingly the women and children who were related to them – moved to Blairmore. The men came for the hundreds of jobs created at the West Canadian’s Greenhill Mine. And for many, it was not just the prospect of a steady income that attracted them, but also the desire to work for a company that was perceived to do things differently. According to Allan Seager, there was initially reason to believe the W.C.C. maintained a corporate philosophy different from that of its competitors. The coalfields in the Crowsnest Pass – and in a larger sense the Canadian West at this time – were generally dominated either by British, American or Anglo-Canadian corporations. On the surface the West Canadian also appears to fit this model as it was floated on the London Stock Exchange and capitalized in English Pounds Stirling. But according to Allen Seager and James Cousins, the corporation was British in name and denomination of capital only, as many investors and people in positions of responsibility at the West Canadian were French.\textsuperscript{74} For those individuals, the corporation represented “the product of French fascination with Canadian mining that reached back ‘at least to the days of the Second Empire.’” Seager argues that the French were more inclined to “thinking outside the box,” in today’s parlance.\textsuperscript{75} Developing this argument, Seager believes that “the W.C.C. Ltd. was very keen on ‘new ideas’ of management and as such they relentlessly promoted them on all fronts...”\textsuperscript{76} It was partly the W.C.C.’s reputation as a prosperous, well-planned company that, according to Seager, drew experienced miners to Blairmore and away from other coalfields and companies.

\textsuperscript{74} Seager, “The Eldorado of the Golden West,” 198-199.
\textsuperscript{76} Seager to Franz, 5 December 2011.
Individuals came – and stayed – at Blairmore. In the twelve-month period following the Greenhill development by the W.C.C., over a hundred and fifty houses were constructed.\textsuperscript{77} For many, the local economy had out-performed expectations by 1906, when the Greenhill Mine had to slow down production not because of contractions in the market for coal, but because the Canadian Pacific Railway could not provide enough empty coal cars for the tipple to load. The \textit{Blairmore Enterprise} reported that “residents are concerned for the C.P.R. seems unable to handle the output of coal from the mines... a call went out for another railway, or for the C.P.R. to double track the present line.”\textsuperscript{78}

As the fortunes of Frank continued to decline, the customs house, telephone exchange and Alberta Provincial Police barracks all found a new home in Blairmore. Along with the impressive new surface plant at the Greenhill, other important non-mining industries opened their doors as well. W.J. Budd and William Alexander purchased land on the south side of the railway tracks at the unheard of price of $1000.00 per acre, opening the Rocky Mountain Cement Company in 1906.\textsuperscript{79} At the same time as Budd and William were laying the foundations for their massive new factory, the Union Bank of Canada announced it would be opening a branch in Blairmore.\textsuperscript{80} The Calgary Brewing and Malting Company also invested in Blairmore, building the town’s first brick building right across the tracks from the town’s new (and permanent) C.P.R. station, while the bricks required to construct such buildings were being manufactured at Henry Pelletier’s Blairmore Brickworks Co. Ltd. When the Canadian Pacific Railway announced

\textsuperscript{77} Cousins, 45.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Crowsnest and its People,} 81.
\textsuperscript{79} Though the company would fail by the time the Great War was over, its plant constituted a massive series of buildings. The following dimensions are all in linear feet: Main Building 74x278; Boiler Room 80x40; Engine Room 66x47; Coal Grinding House 70x45; Crusher and Mill Drier 100x48; Stockhouse 200x64; Machine Shop 80x40; Office and Laboratory 48x36. All were constructed of stone with metal roofs. For details see Cousins, 50.
\textsuperscript{80} Both of these businesses employed a considerable number of people and were permanent in the sense that they not only supplied local needs but also those of a larger market across the region. As a result, they did not close up shop after the building boom was over in Blairmore.
that its regional flagship train (the Spokane Flyer) was to stop at Blairmore, the editor of the *Blairmore Enterprise* declared the town to be “The Eldorado of the Golden West.”  

Along with new entrepreneurial ventures, Blairmore also started to take on the features of a community rather than a camp. When census takers came through Blairmore in 1901, they would have found school being conducted by one Miss Douglas in a converted wooden cabin on the south side of the C.P.R. tracks. The next year, in 1902, the community received its first purpose-built educational facility, colloquially known as the “Little Red Schoolhouse” – a welcome alternative to the settler’s cabin that had earlier done service. When the West Canadian took over mining operations here in 1903, the population grew. When the newly-created Province of Alberta established its legislative framework relating to education in 1905, elections were held for a provisional school board. It was not long after the board came into existence that the decision was made to build a larger school in Blairmore. The Main School opened next to the Little Red Schoolhouse in 1908. It was two storeys in height and could accommodate three classrooms. But much like its predecessor, the Main School was soon too small for the number of students who wished to make use of it. By the time census takers returned in 1911 the *Blairmore Enterprise* reported that a “larg[er] school [is] needed at once. The rapid increase in number of scholars makes present accommodation far too inadequate; a healthy sign for Blairmore.” The board agreed with the *Enterprise*’s analysis, and later that year an addition was opened that was larger than the Main School to which it was attached.  

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81 Cousins, 45.  
82 This was formerly the pioneer home of Felix Montalbetti, one of the town’s first residents.  
83 Jallep, 31.  
84 The town’s provisional school board consisted of G.E.C. Martin, Tom Frayer and Harry Lyons, with Mr. Beebe serving as Secretary Treasurer of the organization.  
this time Blairmore School District #628 reported an enrolment of 216 students, which was almost the same as the total number of residents present in Blairmore just one decade earlier.\textsuperscript{86}

The establishment of religious institutions followed a similar pattern. Though Catholic missionaries were operating in the region as early as 1898, the establishment of St. Luke’s Anglican Church is perhaps most representative of the larger patterns in the community. Dispatched to the Crowsnest Pass in April of 1903, the Reverend F.G. Richard was initially sent to establish a church at Frank to attend to the spiritual needs of Anglicans in the Pass. The Parish of St. Luke’s was opened at Frank, but before services could be held there the Frank slide occurred and the leadership of the church deemed it “inexpedient to establish the church at that time.”\textsuperscript{87} When it became clear Blairmore would surpass Frank as a regional centre, arrangements were made to rent the Little Red Schoolhouse on Sundays and services began at Blairmore on the 10\textsuperscript{th} January, 1904 under the supervision of Reverend R.A. Robinson.\textsuperscript{88} Interestingly, despite the large number of Catholics in the area – they were the largest religious denomination represented in both the 1901 and 1911 census data – they were the last of the major religious groups to establish a church in Blairmore. Instead of a full time clergy member in the town, the needs of Catholics were attended to by traveling Oblate Missionaries and visiting men of the cloth, including such noted personages as Bishop E.T. Legal and Father Albert Lacombe.\textsuperscript{89}

It was during the boom period that various fraternal, social and sporting leagues were established at or near Blairmore. Much like the Anglican Church, the Freemasons had initially intended to establish themselves at Frank, but the slide in 1903 and the subsequent out-migration

\textsuperscript{86} Seager, “El Dorado,” 205.
\textsuperscript{87} Jallep, 84.
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ibid}. While the example of the Anglican Church is representative of the larger shift away from Frank and towards Blairmore, it should be noted that the Methodists and Presbyterians sent men of the cloth to Blairmore late in 1902. They were followed by the Methodists in 1905.
\textsuperscript{89} Interestingly, though the Catholics were the last of the major religious groups in this area to establish a church, the first baptism, marriage and funeral in Blairmore were all performed by traveling Catholic missionaries in 1899, 1902 and 1902 respectively.
of people led them to put off constituting the lodge for three years. On 21 December, 1906 Sentinel Lodge Number 26 was opened for the transaction of Masonic business for the first time.\textsuperscript{90} According to available records, just over a year later the Boy Scouts of Canada set up shop in Blairmore, and by 1911 the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks was also active in the community.\textsuperscript{91} In sports, Blairmore boasted a hockey team, a championship-winning baseball team, a football team, a gun club, a roller skating facility and a billiards and bowling alley.\textsuperscript{92} By 1914 Blairmorites who were not affiliated with one of the town’s sports teams could avail themselves of public skating at the arena, take in a show at the opera house or enjoy the outdoors in a newly-constructed park near the C.P.R. station. While Blairmorites seemed preoccupied by the creation of broadly-defined social and recreational groups, their neighbours in Coleman and elsewhere were forming organizations that were more specifically ethnic in their character. By the outbreak of war in 1914, Blairmore had no explicitly ethnic-based institutions while the Polish Society, Stella D’Italia Society and the Ukrainian Society were all large enough in Coleman to have constructed their own meeting halls.\textsuperscript{93}

The comparatively late building boom at Blairmore had important implications for the ways that people lived their lives here in the years to come. Unlike Fernie, Morrissey, Michel, Natal and Lille – to name other towns in the Valley – the town was not planned by the mining company that came to dominate its local economy. When the West Canadian set up shop in

\textsuperscript{90} Those who had petitioned for a lodge charter to be granted wished to call the lodge “Frank Lodge #26,” but the Grand Lodge of Alberta was also doubtful in regards to the future of Frank. Right Worshipful Brother C.R. Smythe, District Deputy Grand Master, suggested that another name be chosen that would better represent the men who would gather there; it was expected that the membership would draw heavily on Blairmore and nearby Bellevue. The name that was agreed upon – Sentinel Lodge – was decided upon to indicate that the Masons stood as sentinels guarding the entrance to the Crowsnest Pass.


\textsuperscript{92} Jallep, 55-56.

\textsuperscript{93} The one proviso that I wish to make in relation to this is that for some the Masonic Fraternity was considered to be a British-only institution, though because of its constitution I do not classify it as such.
Blairmore, there was already a town.\textsuperscript{94} The company was consequently unable to construct or maintain many of the hated characteristics of other company towns in the region.\textsuperscript{95} It owned no stores; it did not control the means of transportation to and from the community. And despite owning substantial properties at Blairmore, the W.C.C. “chose the sure profits of land sales over the dubious benefits of managing tied housing.”\textsuperscript{96} For town boosters, this resulted in a “town of pretty homes” including those of “the labouring classes who are [consequently] free of the landlord’s grasp.”\textsuperscript{97} Being free from the “landlord’s grasp” is a point that will become critical for Blairmorites later in this study, as it allowed them the stability to continue strike action against their employer without having to worry about the possibility of the company evicting them from their homes during periods of labour unrest or strike action.

There were also important implications for the physical development of the town, particularly when compared with neighbouring communities. In Lille, for example, the West Canadian promoted the settlement of miners in ethnically-centred neighbourhoods, and this was the experience at Coleman as well. Coleman’s neighbourhood identities included such colloquial names as “Slav Town,” “Dago Town,” and “Scotchman’s Hill.” Interviewed in 2008, Helen Czech vividly recalled the ways in which ethnic enclaves at Coleman formed a part of everyday life: “Bushtown was all ‘Squareheads’ and all Polish, and West Coleman was Slav. And Italian town was by itself there. Which it still is... [everyone] used to have their sections alone. They’d have their little Italian store and all that.”\textsuperscript{98} When asked what a “Squarehead” meant, Mrs. Czech

\textsuperscript{94} This provides an interesting foil to both Frank and Lille, which were purpose-built towns designed to serve the needs of one mine and thereby one mining company.

\textsuperscript{95} At the townsites in Lille the West Canadian ensured that space had been provided for organizations such as the Boy Scouts and other groups they felt would help Canadianize the children of the foreign-born portion of their workforce. See Appendix 2 for maps detailing the communities in question.

\textsuperscript{96} Seager, “Eldorado,” 205.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 25 August 1910 and 25 September 1910.

\textsuperscript{98} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0068, “Helen Czech interview.”
clarified that it was slang for those of Ukrainian descent. Czech’s comments were echoed by Mike Harry. When sharing with interviewers his experiences growing up in Coleman, he explained that “the town seemed to be separated. You take West Coleman. They would call that Slav Town. Then you go... around the bluff. On the other side of the hill was Italian Town. Then up on top of the hill was English Town, or they called it [that] anyway. And where the new high school is, we called that part Grafton Town; that was for Belgians.”

The experience was markedly different at Blairmore. Whereas large groups of men – sometimes with their families – emigrated to Coleman in ethnically cohesive groups (and consequently often settled in ethnically defined neighbourhoods), settlement patterns in nearby Blairmore were significantly different. Unlike Coleman, which is geographically quite spread out, settlement in Blairmore was initially limited to a smaller area because of an ongoing legal battle over land ownership between H.E. Lyon (a future Mayor) and land developer Malcolm McKenzie. As local historian and retired school teacher Anne Spatuk points out, that because of the limited amount of land available workers built their homes close to the industries where they were employed, and did not establish ethnic enclaves.

Clear title to the land was established roughly at the same time the West Canadian started to construct a modern surface plant at their Greenhill site in Blairmore. Most of the disputed land fell under their purview. The W.C.C. used it to extended the town’s main street to the west,

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99 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.0019.0002, “Mike Harry interview.” From personal experience I might add that the far west side of town now known rather pastorally as Willow Drive was once the much less inviting “Poverty Lane,” home to Coleman’s German community.

100 When the town started to grow, the two founding pioneers, Mr. Lyon and Mr. Montalbetti, claimed squatters rights hoping to capitalize on the situation; Montalbetti later sold his interest to Mr. McKenzie. Until this legal battle was settled, clear title could not be established over a large part of the available area, which eventually went to the West Canadian Collieries.

building their corporate headquarters, the Greenhill Hotel and luxurious apartments, duplexes and homes for the mine’s most valued managers and employees.

Locally, it was understood that the mine employees and other workers lived in the East End, or the “Old Townsite,” while the mine officials and business owners (who purchased lots from the W.C.C. at a premium) lived in the West End, or the “New Townsite.” The expansion of the mine’s surface plant physically solidified this division. In order to connect the Greenhill tipple with the Canadian Pacific Railway, the W.C.C. constructed a rail link between its operations and the C.P.R. right of way. To the east of the railway spur lies the Old Townsite, to the west the
New Townsite. Though these railway tracks could be physically crossed at will, for many who
grew up with them they represented the division between the haves and have-nots, rich and poor.

The importance of this physical division is still evident in the voices of those who grew
up knowing it, even though the tracks themselves are now long gone.\(^\text{102}\) When asked about
growing up in Blairmore, Laddislav Poriz recalled that “most of the mine managers and the
upper people lived in the West End, and they used to call that the New Townsite. They didn’t
even call it Blairmore! They called it the New Townsite because they were all nice and new
buildings there.”\(^\text{103}\) One term that Mr. Poriz uses here needs to be unpacked, and that is the use
of the word “nice.” Though the word in question varied from interview to interview (“fancy,”
“luxurious,” “expensive,” “warmer,” or “well built” were all used to describe these buildings),
interviewees were all trying to enunciate the same point: mine managers and their families
enjoyed a demonstrably higher standard of living than anyone else in Blairmore. In the words of
Milo Marcial:

> The company officials always lived up the West End, which was mostly company
> houses. The main street, right across from the Greenhill [Hotel] was all company built
> and was supplied with heat from the mine. They had a steamline running across, right
> across the river, insulated, and then underground to all the houses in that area... plus the
> Greenhill Hotel, plus the garage... that was all heated!\(^\text{104}\)

In addition to the luxury of hot and cold running water and steam heating, Anne Spatuk reminds
us that the company also ensured that “pretty well all the homes [in the West End] were supplied
with company power.” The W.C.C. even built a separate elementary school for “the mining

\(^{102}\) Today one would never know the town had ever been divided in this way. The tracks were removed in the 1970s,
and the new courthouse was built where the mine manager’s house once stood.

\(^{103}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number
2012.019.0022, “Laddislav Poriz interview.”

\(^{104}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number
2012.019.0038, “Milo Marcial interview.” The school built by the West Canadian – called the West End School –
was constructed in 1921.
company kids of the West End."\(^{105}\) Thus the tracks came to delineate not only distinct neighbourhoods in Blairmore, but also to differentiate particular ways of life. “We used to call them the ‘big shots,’” Julia Lant said.\(^{106}\) “Because they had the money. They had the clothes, eh? And we didn’t have ‘em... They were richer. [Their parents] had positions and we didn’t.”\(^{107}\) For many, it was as straightforward as that.

When discussing their experiences in Blairmore during the early years, I was surprised to note the frequency with which interviewees answered questions pertaining to ethnicity with answers focusing on class. The following exchange with Elda Bosetti is representative of a larger pattern within the interviews evaluated for this dissertation:

Q: Do you remember there being any tension between any of the ethnic groups?  
A: Not really. Well, we used to think that the people that lived at the West End were the people, you know. They thought they were better than somebody else.  
Q: And who were those people who lived in the West End?  
A: Well, they were mostly big shots that worked at the mine. The mine officials.  
Q: But was there any conflict between say the Italians and the Slovaks or whatever?  
A: Nothing. Nothing bad at all. They were all in the same boat as we were, so we didn’t…. Although sometimes the Italians married to the Italians and the Slovaks married to theirs, but I don’t know how much of that they got. ‘Cos most of the kids were, uh, well, it didn’t matter who you were.\(^{108}\)

For many growing up at Blairmore, it was class that was the most salient personal identifier, not ethnicity. In reference to his childhood in the area around Cement Street, Guido Giacommuzzi

\(^{105}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0102, “Anne Spatuk interview.” This school did not open until 1921 and was quickly purchased by the Blairmore School Board.  
\(^{106}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0093, “Julia Lant interview.”  
\(^{107}\) Ibid.  
\(^{108}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0104, “Elda Bosetti interview,” emphasis in original. Anne Spatuk notes that while there has been inter-ethnic harmony in the past, it was also important for many to marry within their own ethnic community. When asked if most Slovaks tended to marry other Slovaks, she replied “That was the thing, yes. Because they tend to go in clusters. For example, with the immigration policies of the time, which were probably not as strict at the very beginning as they were later, you had to, you could bring an immigrant in, sponsor an immigrant, but you had to provide them with the wherewithal before they could go into the public and do whatever they had to. So that’s how a lot of them came over, sponsorship.” See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0102, “Anne Spatuk interview.”
exclaimed: “You could call that area the League of Nations!”\textsuperscript{109} For others, the East End represented intimations of what Pierre Trudeau would later trumpet as the Canadian ideal: “We lived in East Blairmore, and that was a really multicultural place I guess you might say. There were Slovaks and French and Italians and English and you name it... so families met on a regular basis at weddings and funerals and christenings and so on.”\textsuperscript{110} When asked what divisions existed within the town, Bruno Glacia summed up many respondents’ accounts most succinctly by stating that the only division was between those who had money and those who did not.\textsuperscript{111}

Though children attended the same school, for many people class divisions were never far from mind. When discussing what it was like to go to school in Blairmore, Janet Macura had the following to say about relations between miners’ children and those of mine managers and officials: “Most of the times the kids were so nice, you know. But you never chummed around with them to the point where you saw them every day... they were always sort of in their own bunch, but at school we were all even.”\textsuperscript{112} The time shared with those from the west side of the tracks was also a time of relative equality for John Gibos. He recalled that the only time he felt bad at school was when he was mocked for his clothes: “One of the boys, and he was a bank manager’s son, I came with a pair of [pants] with a whole bunch of patches on and he made fun of me.”\textsuperscript{113} But despite this seeming parity of worth and experience at school, John’s future wife Helen made it clear that the division marked by the tracks was never far from her mind. Did the kids know who was who, she was asked. The reply was terse: “Oh yeah. Sure we did.”\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{109}Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.008, “Guido Giacommuzzi interview.”
\textsuperscript{110}Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0102, “Anne Spatuk interview.”
\textsuperscript{111}Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.006, “Bruno Galicia interview.”
\textsuperscript{112}Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0082, “Janet Macura interview.”
\textsuperscript{113}Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0071, “John Gibos interview.”
\textsuperscript{114}Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0083, “Helen Gibos interview.”
As Helen Czech emphasized, as equally as students might be treated at school, they faced a very different reality outside it. Her testimony should be quoted at length because not only does it establish the degree to which poverty affected the lives of miner’s children, it also contains a phrase at its conclusion that is particularly illuminating:

We played ball. My dad would make us a baseball out of leather because there was no money to buy one. And we’d fill it with mother’s old rags. Dad would sew them in. And I remember my brother saying “and don’t hit it too hard, ‘cos we won’t have a ball.” So my second brother would take the baseball bat, and when he flung it, there was leather and rags all over and no ball. I’ll never forget that. And then you’d see a real race. My younger brother going up the hill and my older brother behind him. And me, I’d go home crying with all these pieces because I loved ball. I loved to play ball! There was only two of us girls there, on that side of the tracks. And then we didn’t go on the other side because the girls there were, um, real good players and real good runners and they had a real baseball to play with, which we didn’t, so we stayed away from that side. That was segregation.\(^{115}\)

And besides, she noted, “they had their own ball teams and their hockey. We stayed on that side, they were up at this end. So it was a division, yes.”\(^{116}\)

And how did the mine manager’s children perceive social divisions at Blairmore? In a particularly refreshing interview, Michel Brusset candidly admitted that he had absolutely no idea what school life at Blairmore was like for the children of miners. His father, who served in several positions at the West Canadian including General Manager, sent him to a Catholic boarding school in Pincher Creek.\(^{117}\) And rather than go by train, Brusset remembered that his father had a car sent to Pincher Creek for the purpose of picking him up: “it was a pretty long trip in those days,” he adds.\(^{118}\) When asked about ethnicity and class at Blairmore, Brusset phrases his response in a way that suggests his relative isolation from the goings-on in town while he was

\(^{115}\) Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0068, “Helen Czech interview,” emphasis added.
\(^{116}\) Ibid.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0024, “Michel Brusset interview.”
\(^{118}\) Ibid.
home from school: “I had the impression they mixed fairly well.”\textsuperscript{119} Michel’s brother Henry’s testimony reflects similar perceptions. When he was asked about the ways in which his parents socialized, his reply reinforces the salience of class divisions: they socialized with “people in the neighbourhood.”\textsuperscript{120}

East-west neighbourhood divisions were not just applicable to mine owners and mine workers, but to everyone who called Blairmore home. During labour disputes the class-based nature of Blairmore’s layout became even more obvious. Thelma Bradley recalled that during the strike of 1932 she had

stones thrown at me and [I was] called a scab because I happened to live in the west end of town where the mine officials resided. Our family was in no way connected with the strike, but because I lived where I did and played with the children of the mine officials, I was guilty by association.\textsuperscript{121}

Simply put, Blairmore demonstrated the most class-based settlement pattern within the urban areas of the Crowsnest Pass.\textsuperscript{122}

**Mining Life – Mining Strife**

Focusing on the pre-war period, the testimony collected above does not evenly square with existing research and analysis surrounding Blairmore’s formative years. The class-based animosity so clear in the oral histories collected for this project seems to seriously contradict arguments made by academics like Allen Seager that “the notion of an underlying antagonism

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0025, “Henry Brusset interview.”
\textsuperscript{121} *Crowsnest and Its People: Millennium Edition*, 519. It should be noted that Mrs. Bradley’s father owned a large store in Blairmore, which could be the reason she was attacked during the strike. Neither Bradleys nor the Pinkneys were pro-union; they publicly supported the right-leaning Citizens’ Coalition at election time.
\textsuperscript{122} The other settlement that owed its existence to the West Canadian Collieries, Lille, reflected a similar class-based layout, though the town was abandoned in 1912 due to the collapse in international coal markets.
between industrial capitalists [in Blairmore] and ‘the community,’ as such, should be put to rest.”\textsuperscript{123} How can we account for this contradiction?

For perspective I turn to the work of Ad Knotter, whose research identifies “characteristics which might explain [a community’s] receptiveness to communist policies and ideas.”\textsuperscript{124} Knotter observes that in towns that have been recently established, the first generation of residents tend to hold a conservative outlook on the process of municipal development. For these individuals, their priority is often the establishment of social and economic frameworks which mimic those from the communities from which they emigrated, while also providing stability in a relatively unstable living environment. It is their children – or the second generation – who constitute the catalyst for class-focused identities and change. They do so because, it is hypothesized, the socio-economic framework, although sufficiently developed to ameliorate some of the hardships of pioneer life, is both too new to be considered an unchangeable ‘natural reality’ and too inequitable to persist without conflict. Knotter goes a long way to help us understand how a seemingly harmonious new community of c.1910 could transform itself into the class-divided town of c.1930. The current historiography focuses particularly on the earlier Blairmore, whereas the patterns I have found in the oral interviews generally come from a later period. They are mainly drawn from a second generation of Blairmorites.\textsuperscript{125}

What was life like for the first generation of miners and settlers at Blairmore? Miners generally preferred to work in larger mines when and where possible. And though this could lead to the increased availability of institutions like churches, schools, social clubs, fraternities and

\textsuperscript{125} It is important to note that in the application of Knotter’s theories – at least as it relates to Blairmore – I have conceptualized “second generation” to mean those who grew up or spent their formative years in Blairmore, not just those who were born there.
sports leagues, for many such social benefits did not constitute the core reason for their wanting to work in larger mines. The reality is that well-capitalized mines were exponentially more likely to be able to pay their workforce each and every payday. They were also reputed to be safer places to work.

According to the 1907 Royal Commission on the Coal Mining Industry in the Province of Alberta – also known as the Sifton Commission – a simple truth was evident throughout the province. The smaller the mining operation, the less likely it was that proper health and safety standards were being realized. “In regard to the sanitary conditions of the Alberta mines,” the Commission reported, “your Commissioners find by the evidence that in all the larger mines the conditions are favourable to health so far as it is consistent with the nature of the employment.”126 Smaller mines, however, were not so favourably looked upon: “In some of the smaller mines, which are ventilated by natural means, the air owing to the conditions of the atmosphere outside varies considerably, and is in some cases responsible for the temporary closing of those mines.”127 The commission recommended that a closer watch be kept over the smaller operations.

And should one be injured during a shift, it was critical to be working for a mine that was both well-established and benevolent enough to provide compensation, either directly to oneself or to one’s survivors. The commission found that although workplace safety and compensation laws were in place, they were of no practical use:

...your Commissioners would report that the evidence taken demonstrates that the provisions of the present law, while they may be fair in theory, are in practice useless; that the expense necessary to conduct litigation under the present system of trial by jury and with the consequent appeals and long delays has in the past rendered it impossible in

127 Ibid.
almost every case for any compensation to be recovered regardless of where the blame may rest.\textsuperscript{128}

The reality for miners was that it mattered a great deal which coal company one worked for. And generally speaking (at least within the context of the Crowsnest Pass) the larger the mining company was, the better wages and working conditions would be. The desperation to find reliable work can be seen in the testimony of Joe Fabien. Having been employed in four different mines in the United States before coming to Blairmore, Fabien told the Commission in no uncertain words why he stayed: “I had to stop travelling.”\textsuperscript{129}

Once miners had settled in Blairmore with the intention of making their permanent home there, many sent for their families to come and join them. Indeed, the majority of voices heard in the oral testimony were all either born at Blairmore or brought there after their father had immigrated to the town ahead of the family. Take for example the history of the MacDonald family. Describing himself as “Scotch” during the interview process, Ross MacDonald was asked if his family had moved directly from Scotland. “According to the family bible, in sixteen hundred and something my ancestors got the word: move to New Scotland, or hang! They chose New Scotland...and my grandfather was a third or fourth generation Canadian who came west.”\textsuperscript{130} Alvina Paulus (née Patterson) shares a similar story. Though her family had not been resident in Nova Scotia as long as MacDonald’s, her father gained his mining experience on the east coast before moving west. When asked if it was common for men to come from the east with previous mining experience, she replied “I think they all did. I think they all started in Nova

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{129} Alberta Legislative Library, “Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Mining Industry,” typescript, 1907, testimony Joe Fabien, 111-114; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{130} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0100, “Ross MacDonald Interview.”
\end{flushleft}
Scotia and maybe things were bad and they left.” Of the seven sons and two daughters, Paulus stated that “quite a few of them” followed her father (their brother) to the Crowsnest Pass. Interestingly, this was a pattern that crossed class boundaries. Even Henry Brusset remembers his father coming to Blairmore first to take up his administrative position at the mine before sending for his wife and two sons.

Because miners were paid roughly the same wage at the West Canadian – regardless of their ethnicity – simple yet important in-migration patterns emerge at Blairmore. Those who had family closer to town were among the first to bring their families to live with them, while those who came to Blairmore from further afield took longer to save the funds necessary to relocate their families. While this pattern may intuitively make sense – after all, the further a family member had to travel, the more the ticket was likely to cost – it had important implications for the ethnic composition of the town. Those who were British-, Canadian- or American-born were able to relocate their families sooner than those from Central and Eastern Europe. This resulted in two waves of immigration, the first dominated by the families of the so-called “British races” and the second largely representing the families of non-British-born individuals or “foreigners.”

This migration pattern has important implications for understanding early society at Blairmore. A growing and stable Blairmore was drawing mining migrants from across the country, who brought with them many of their own understandings about how a coal mine and a coal community should operate. Many of them demanded “British Fair Play.” As the Sifton Commission learned, standards of employment and traditions of craft were transported from the

132 Ibid.
mine portals of Britain and the east coast to the operations of the West Canadian at Blairmore. Miners expected these so-called “British” standards to be upheld.\textsuperscript{134}

It was the combination of an existing labour tradition, the desire of miners to keep their jobs, and a relatively stable and prosperous employer that helped explain the years of relative equanimity and calm at W.C.C.’s Greenhill operations. Though the miners had been organized into District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America (U.M.W.A.) in 1905, they resisted going out in sympathy strikes to show their support for fellow miners elsewhere in the district. And when labour unrest came to the West Canadian for the first time in 1909, the miners were in no way unified in their response.

This labour trouble was initially sparked by a dispute over wages. Until this point, the union had negotiated a Pass-wide agreement with the Western Canada Coal Operators’ Association, also known as W.C.C.O.A., and consequently union members received the same wage scale across several of the largest coal mines in the region. When the Crowsnest Pass Coal and Coke Company (C.N.P.C.C.C.) changed hands, it broke with the W.C.C.O.A. and offered better terms directly to its miners. In order to obtain the same wages as the C.N.P.C.C.C., miners at Blairmore went on strike when their contract came up for renegotiation (despite their union having reached a less favourable agreement with the West Canadian Collieries). While the rationale behind the strike was important – wage parity – equally instructive were the tactics employed by the West Canadian in order to break the strike.

Trying to fracture the solidarity of the union, the W.C.C. attempted to lure what they considered to be the weakest constituent of the U.M.W.A.’s membership back to work. Non-English speaking employees were (with varying degrees of success) used as strike-breakers

\textsuperscript{134} In communicating their wage and safety expectations, miners made it clear that they expected to have parity with legislated norms in Nova Scotia and the United Kingdom. Interestingly, it was British and Eastern Canadian examples that radicals would later hold up as the desired norms for operations at Blairmore.
against their English speaking colleagues. Some acted as strike-breakers because they did not identify with a British union tradition, while for others it was a pragmatic decision relating to the loss of pay during the strike itself. Rumours circulated that the company was trying to organize an ethnically-based union to rival the power of the U.M.W.A. The miners were not able to hold together as a cohesive group within the union and the “eventual outcome was a standoff with the operators conceding nothing to union demands but reopening their pits with unionists still in their jobs.”¹³⁵ This situation repeated itself when the miners went out over similar issues in 1911.

Blairmore by 1914

When Blairmore first appeared in census data in 1901, the numbers told the story of a community with an uncertain future. The population was overwhelmingly made up of single men who (according to the schemes of classification then in vogue) were considered to be largely of British descent. The local economy was dominated by small scale resource production, and there was little to suggest that Blairmore would differentiate itself from many of the other towns in the Crowsnest Pass slated to disappear from the map in the coming decades. Yet the census of 1911 tells us a very different story than that of 1901. The population had exploded to 1137, making Blairmore an urban place according to the Province of Alberta. The ratio of men to women reflected the provincial average, and the local economy had a well-capitalized and -established corporate patron in West Canadian Collieries. Schools, churches, stores and a hospital had been opened to provide for the educational, religious and consumer needs of the community’s two hundred and sixty families. Blairmore seemed to be a community that was on its way to

becoming “established.” It was relatively prosperous for the time and place in which it was located.

Blairmore also benefited from the misfortune of other nearby centres. As we have discussed, the Frank Slide in 1903 shifted the balance of power between the two settlements decisively in Blairmore’s favour. This would happen again in 1912 when West Canadian Collieries decided to close its operations (and consequently the company-owned townsite) at Lille. The reason they gave for the closure was that the ash content of the coal mined there was too high to be profitable in the current market, particularly in light of the extraordinary expense of running the Frank and Grassy Mountain Railway connecting Lille to the outside world. Many of West Canadian’s employees at Lille were offered jobs at the Greenhill mine in Blairmore, and consequently dozens of homes and businesses were moved to Blairmore in 1912 along with much of the mine’s equipment.

As the population of Blairmore grew, so too did the complicated interactions between the different people living there. Ethnicity and one’s lived experiences prior to moving to the Crowsnest Pass shaped many decisions to move to Blairmore. The makeup of Blairmore had not only changed in terms of male-to-female ratios, but also in terms of ethnic and religious demographics as the following tables taken from the 1901 and 1911 census demonstrate.
### Population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1901 Total / % of Population</th>
<th>1911 Total / % of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Men</td>
<td>164 (64%)</td>
<td>427 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Women</td>
<td>16 (6%)</td>
<td>214 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Men</td>
<td>55 (21%)</td>
<td>291 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Women</td>
<td>19 (7%)</td>
<td>177 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed Men</td>
<td>2 (&lt;1%)</td>
<td>7 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed Women</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
<td>12 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced Men</td>
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<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced Women</td>
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<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Given</td>
<td>Not a category in 1901 census</td>
<td>8 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL POPULATION</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>1137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>1901 Total / % of Population</th>
<th>1911 Total / % of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>72 (28%)</td>
<td>293 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>45 (18%)</td>
<td>98 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>60 (23%)</td>
<td>202 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (British)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>34 (13%)</td>
<td>105 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>15 (6%)</td>
<td>34 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austro-Hungarian</td>
<td>6 (2%)</td>
<td>44 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>11 (4%)</td>
<td>224 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>17 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>65 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half Breeds</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Not a category in 1911 census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese and Japanese</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td>40 (4%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Not a category in 1901 census</td>
<td>9 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Origins</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>4 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RELIGION:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1901 Total / % of Population</th>
<th>1911 Total / % of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>71 (28%)</td>
<td>497 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglicans</td>
<td>64 (25%)</td>
<td>152 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians</td>
<td>70 (28%)</td>
<td>265 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>25 (10%)</td>
<td>50 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptists</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>94 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Baptists</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mennonites</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doukhobor</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Not a category in 1911 census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Orthodox</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>14 (5%)</td>
<td>23 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregationalists</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>3 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brethren</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciple</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventists</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pagans</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
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<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Sects</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td>51 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though over half of the town’s residents were still considered to be “British,” Blairmore was also home to ever-increasing numbers from other ethnic groups. The Italian community here almost outnumbered the English, and sizable French, German and Austro-Hungarian communities had also come to call Blairmore home.136 These varying ethnic groups brought with them different traditions relating to mining culture. As miners of all ethnic identities and

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136 The Austro-Hungarian numbers are almost entirely reflective of Slovaks in Blairmore.
experiences fought to establish themselves and their families, they inevitably were at odds with each other over how best to do it.

This chapter has demonstrated that Blairmore would not exist as we know or understand it today had it not been for the role played by capital and the liberal order. It was the desire to protect and enforce sovereignty over the land it had purchased from the Hudson’s Bay Company that caused the Government of Canada to subsidize a rail line through the Crowsnest Pass in 1898, and the potential profits to be made in the shadow of Turtle Mountain that caused Messrs. Lyon and Montalbetti to settle here, Senator McLearn to invest here, and ultimately West Canadian Collieries to locate their Canadian headquarters here. Likewise, it was the promise of security and prosperity (or, one might say, one popular conception of the wide-open Canadian West) that drew many settlers and miners alike to this remote location.

The next chapter will explore the fundamentally important ways that Blairmorites’ worldviews changed between 1914 and 1928. The effects of the Great War, the economic implications of the so-called Roaring Twenties, and the realities of international unionism in tandem with the politicization of everyday life will all be considered in an effort to demonstrate that the radical action with which the town would be associated in 1933 had deeper roots than have heretofore been acknowledged. Building on our understanding of Blairmore as a constructed place, we can come to appreciate the ways that the federal government and W.C.C. unwittingly set the stage for the socialist experiment that would take place in Blairmore in the 1930s.
Chapter Three: War, Trade Unionism and Socio-Economic Transformation, 1914-1929

By the summer of 1914, Blairmore had consolidated its position as an important mining and commercial centre. As former rivals like Passburg, Lille, and Frank faded away, families, businesses and capital all sought to re-establish themselves within Blairmore’s corporate limits. Blairmore acquired the atmosphere and appearance of a typical Western town, not a resource hamlet. And with this transition, an important question arises: How (and why) was Blairmore transformed from a community which in many ways was politically unremarkable to that which exemplified the dream of revolution – and in just over a decade and a half? This chapter will argue that this transformation can be understood in relation to three key experiences: the Great War, the localized failure of international unionism, and the protracted recession experienced by the local economy throughout most of the 1920s.

We will start by engaging with the Great War and its implications for Blairmore. The ethnic and social divides created by the war resulted in three distinct yet important local experiences between 1914-1918. The first (and perhaps most self-evident) is represented by the group of individuals who quickly signed up for overseas action, leaving their jobs in order to serve in the Canadian expeditionary forces. The second – by far the largest group – pertained to those who did not necessarily oppose the war, but did not want to leave their homes, families, communities or jobs to see action on the Western Front. The last set of experiences were those of men, women and children who were classified by Ottawa as “enemy aliens,” and either interned at a camp in nearby Morrissey, British Columbia or were forced to register and were closely monitored by the Canadian State.

This chapter will then proceed to engage with the reintegration of these three groups – and their families – in the immediate post-war period, and consider the implications of this
process for Blairmorites. It will be demonstrated that the combination of these experiences in the immediate post-war period resulted in a localized atmosphere in which an increasingly radical and socialist agenda not only became socially permissible, but started to become one accepted by many miners, their families, and other members of the community. And in tandem with these experiences, the explosive struggle undertaken by Blairmore miners for union representation in line with these increasingly radical views will show that the radicalization of Blairmorites started not during the strike of 1932, but at the end of the Great War.

Finally, this chapter will examine what William Sloan has coined the “Double Depression” at Blairmore and throughout the Pass in the 1920s. Sloan’s terminology is a nod to the reality that by the time the Canadian economy entered the Great Depression at the end of the 1920s, the local economy had already been decimated by years of exploitation at the hands of the town’s largest employer, the W.C.C. Indeed, while much of the Canadian economy had recovered from its post-war slump – the phrase “Roaring Twenties” comes to mind – the lived reality at Blairmore was markedly different. An examination of the community during this period will reveal that while the international union movement and local economies collapsed, this did not concurrently result in the curtailment of radical action or thought at Blairmore. In fact, the inverse will be shown to be true. It will be demonstrated that Blairmorites were able to incubate a local movement which fit generally into a larger ideology of the left but that was also representative of (and responsible to) Blairmorites themselves.

A Community and the Great War

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The First World War is widely considered by many in Canada to constitute a watershed event. Almost everyone – myself included – who attended a public school in this country can remember being taken to the gym or auditorium each and every year to hear from, learn about, and give thanks to the veterans of Canada’s wars. As adults we are reminded annually in the days and weeks leading up to November 11th that Canada – and by extension the things we value about Canadian society – was born on the battlefields of the Somme, Passchendaele, Ypres and Vimy Ridge.2

And yet, as Jonathan Vance posits, the ways in which we remember events like war do not necessarily reflect the ways they were perceived at the time of their occurrence.3 While we may currently view the First World War as transformational for Canadian society, it is important to question how the event (or series of events) was understood at the time. What did the Great War mean to Blairmorites? How did this change as the war progressed? And what implications did the war have for Blairmore’s social, economic and political development, both during the war and into the 1920s?

The declaration of war in August of 1914 created three distinct groups of men4 at Blairmore: those who volunteered to serve, those who did not and those who were not given a choice in the matter one way or the other. For those who were early volunteers, the narrative is much the same here as it was throughout the country: men enlisted not only to defend “the principles of right, of justice, and of democracy, [but also in defence] of Canada’s right to these

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2 Tim Cook, to give an academic example, argues that First World War could be seen as Canada’s war of independence. See Tim Cook, Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting in the Great War (Toronto: Viking Books, 2008).
3 For a much wider discussion, see Jonathan Vance, Death So Noble: Meaning, Memory and the First World War (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).
4 While I understand that this statement might seem to be inherently sexist, at this time the status of women and children was largely defined in relation to the legal status of their father or husband. Details of this pattern – particularly in relation to internment – can be found later in this chapter.
principles.” The Blairmore Enterprise was quick to throw around concepts like “duty,” “integrity,” “honour,” and “British liberty” in its attempts to drum up support for the war. Echoing experiences in towns and villages across Canada, it was those who most closely associated themselves with the propagation of so-called British values who answered the initial call to arms in the largest numbers.

And while the British-born made up the largest contingent of recruits at Blairmore, the town’s unique ethnic composition resulted in the raising of a group of volunteers who were not represented in large numbers elsewhere: the French. Enlisting in almost proportionally equal numbers to those of British birth, the large French contingent in Blairmore was representative not of French Canadiens, but of individuals who were born in France and had moved to Blairmore to take positions of authority at the West Canadian Collieries. The outbreak of war created not only a dialogue surrounding democracy, justice and fair play, but also a number of desirable vacancies at W.C.C. They were filled internally, effectively reducing localized unemployment and providing a small but important boost to the local economy.

In many local histories, the rest of the wartime narrative is fairly straightforward: those who did not go overseas stayed home and laboured in support of the war effort; images of knitting circles and the sale of war bonds have become ubiquitous in commemorations of the war

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8 From 1912-1915 (or in some cases as late as 1916) an economic recession had affected workers in many parts of the country. In Blairmore, however, removal of excess capacity from the ranks of the unemployed (in the form of recruits for the Canadian Expeditionary Force) – coupled with greatly improving coal markets – helped to stabilize the local economy and prevent the hardships felt in places like the Lakehead. For more in the experience in Fort William and Port Arthur, see Michel Beaulieu, *Labour at the Lakehead: Ethnicity, Socialism, and Politics, 1900-1935* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 43.
effort on the home front. But there is one important group of people that does not fit into this tidy home front/western front binary: those who were interned based solely on their place of birth. The closest local historians have come to recognizing what actually happened to them can be found in the work of James Cousins:

Volunteers were largely of British, French or Belgian origin, with a somewhat smaller proportion of other nationalities. This does not necessarily mean that other groups were less patriotic, but many of those of Slavic origin were uncertain of their status. Some Poles and Ukrainians were considered Russian and therefore Allies, while some of their friends, speaking the same language, were classed as Austrians and therefore enemy aliens.10

But what implications did this have for Blairmore’s ethnically diverse population? The silence of many historians on the issue speaks volumes. At best the othering of enemy aliens has slipped from local public memory, or at worst it is being deliberately avoided as it presents a serious challenge to the ways in which we commemorate and remember Canada at war. Recollections of internment do not easily find a home next to the ideas of honour, justice, democracy or the British sense of fair play.

And yet a process of registration – and for some internment – for those born in enemy territory was exactly what the federal cabinet agreed to just two months into the war. In approving Order-in-Council 2721 – An Order Interning Enemy Aliens – the Privy Council dictated that:

It is expedient and necessary to take measures to prevent espionage and also to prevent alien enemies in Canada who are likely to render effective military assistance to the enemy from returning to the enemy’s service, and to provide for the proper supervision and control of such aliens as may be so prevented from leaving Canada, and the detention

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9 See, for example, Crowsnest and its People, Millennium Edition (Lethbridge: Robins Southern Printing, 2000): 330.
10 Cousins, 64.
under proper conditions and maintenance where required of such and said aliens as it may be found necessary to intern as prisoners of war, and that it is likewise desirable considering the lack of opportunity for employment that aliens of enemy nationality who are not likely to add to the strength of the enemy’s forces and who desire to have the means to leave the country be permitted so to do.  

Registration, incarceration and deportation: Order-in-Council 2721 legalized all three options.  

It also laid out a process through which individuals from the targeted populations would be required to identify themselves to the Registrar of Enemy Aliens, provide truthful answers to a number of questions, and then either be remanded to the custody of the federal government, deported, or allowed to remain free “subject to obligation to report monthly to the Chief of Police of the city or in the neighbourhood in which he is registered.” The legislation also indicates that in the event of a father being interned, his wife and children would accompany him into the camp system.  

Effectively, Order in Council 2721 provided the legal framework under which a network of concentration camps was constructed across Canada. And for those who registered at Blairmore, the process became terrifyingly predictable. Those enemy aliens who were considered to be gainfully employed were permitted to remain at their liberty (provided they reported to a police detachment at least once a month to be counted), while those who were  

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11 Order In Council 2721, 28 October 1914.  
12 For local coverage and perspective on this, see as an example, “Canada’s Alien Population,” Blairmore Enterprise, 15 October 1915.  
13 Ibid. The questions put to individuals were “with regard to his nationality, age, residence, occupation, family, intention or desire to leave Canada, destination, liability and intention as to military service, and otherwise as may be put to him by the registrar.”  
14 Although little scholarship focusing explicitly on the experiences at the camp in Morrissey, B.C., exists, an important (and growing) academic interest has been taken in the general topic of internment during the Great War. See Bill Waiser, Park Prisoners (Calgary: Fifth House, 1999); Donald Avery, “Dangerous Foreigners:” European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979); and Lubomyr Y. Luciuk, Without Just Cause: Canada’s First National Internment and the Ukrainian Canadians, 1914-1920 (Kingston: Kashtan Press, 2006). Other useful primary and secondary sources can be found on the webpage of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund at www.internmentcanada.ca.
judged to be unemployed or underemployed were remanded into federal custody.\textsuperscript{15} As for those Blairmorites who were detained, they did not have far to travel. An internment camp opened just over the Alberta-B.C. border at Morrissey, and operated there from 9 June 1915 through to 21 October 1918.\textsuperscript{16} The government also took advantage of the sweeping legislative provisions of the Order to detain those who were known (or suspected) of having radical or anti-statist beliefs.\textsuperscript{17}

Although glossed over in later accounts of life on the home front in the Crowsnest Pass, the registration and internment of some members of the community was not, it is important to remember, carried out under a veil of secrecy. The \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, editorially conservative and generally supportive of the government and by extension the war effort, reported that even before the camp at Morrissey was officially opened over three hundred persons were interned there.\textsuperscript{18} Just as the internment of a segment of Blairmore’s population was not a secret, neither was the Government’s intention to make use of section ten of the Order, which allowed them to demand labour from the camp’s inmates. Internees were required to build and maintain camps, construct roads, clear land and any other undertaking requested of them by government officials.\textsuperscript{19} Though Morrissey would disappear from the map soon after the camp closed, the legacy of those who were held there remains. Every day thousands of travelers who use provincial highway No. 3 navigate a series of tight corners just before the Alberta-BC boundary;

\textsuperscript{15} According to historian Michel Beaulieu, internment “...often had more to do with relieving governments of the burden of maintaining the unemployed than with questions of national security.” See Beaulieu, 46.
\textsuperscript{17} Beaulieu, 46.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 11 June 1915. Prior to this camp opening, the \textit{Blairmore Enterprise} reported that enemy aliens were being taken to Vernon, B.C. See “Local and General,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 23 January 1915.
\textsuperscript{19} See Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Department of National Defense, Vol. 4744, File 2, Major A.E. Hopkins to Sir W.H. Otter.
they were all carved by hand from the mountain by men interned in this particular camp.\textsuperscript{20} It is
thus a cruel irony that while some Blairmorites left their families behind to fight for British
ideals of justice, democracy and fair play, the federal government was equally quick to deprive
their friends, neighbours and coworkers of the same rights.

And what about the majority of Blairmorites, those who were not interned or sent to the
Western Front? Despite what local histories might lead one to believe, Blairmorites did more
than continue to mine while supporting “local Red Cross Drives, knitting, sewing, and raising
money for war charities.”\textsuperscript{21} They too had a unique and important experience during the war years
that should be included in any explanation of the town’s interwar radicalism.

Those who stayed at Blairmore confronted an unprecedented economic situation. The
departure (voluntarily or otherwise) of men created so many vacancies at W.C.C. that the town
enjoyed steady employment, despite a recession which would plague the rest of the country until
mid-1915.\textsuperscript{22} According to B.C.’s Minister of Mines, “No one foresaw or appreciated the trend of
modern warfare, with its unprecedented use of artillery, nor the tremendous amounts of metal
that would be consumed thereby.”\textsuperscript{23} Mechanized warfare transformed the demand for resources:
“In a four-day period along a twenty mile front, the French Army had used 30 million pounds of

\textsuperscript{20} The inappropriate internment of peoples during this time has since been recognized by the Government of
Canada. In relation to the Ukrainian experience, for example, Bill C-331 \textit{The Internment of Persons of Ukrainian
Origin Recognition Act} recognized that “enemy aliens” were interned as a result of their socioeconomic status,
exploded as conscript labour and that their internment represented an “abrogation of Canada’s international treaty
obligations and the setting aside of our country’s political and moral responsibility for those who consequently
endured state-sanctioned indignities, including imprisonment, the confiscation of their wealth, and
disenfranchisement, not because of any wrong they had done, but only because of where they had come from and
who they were.” For a more detailed analysis, see Lubomyr Luciuk, \textit{Righting an Injustice: The Debate Over Redress

\textsuperscript{21} Cousins, 64.

\textsuperscript{22} While scholars like Allen Seager and David Roth suggest that production fell at a rate of about 50%, this number
is in relation to the pre-war production and therefore over-represents the loss by failing to take into account the
decrease in the number of active employees caused by the war.

\textsuperscript{23} See Allen Seager and David Roth, 244.
copper and 8 million pounds of zinc” in addition to massive amounts of iron and steel. As the Canadian commitment to the war effort deepened, the amount of coal required to power railway locomotives and ocean-going vessels, to smelt the iron and steel necessary to build new tanks and artillery, to heat Canadian homes and to provide power to industry increased exponentially. Unlike other communities, Blairmore boomed during the war.

A testament to their strong bargaining position, the U.M.W.A. local at Blairmore signed a new collective agreement in March of 1915 that provided for the extension of wages and benefits for a two-year period. Despite the then-favourable provisions of the agreement (which it should be noted was negotiated in good faith), Blairmorites soon saw the initial prospect of stability offered by the contract eroded (and finally erased) by wartime inflation. Over a period of twelve months, Blairmore’s cost of living had increased by as much as ten percent. The situation was such that by July, 1916 miners in Blairmore and elsewhere throughout U.M.W.A. District 18 found the situation untenable, and decided that a new contract allowing for the massive inflation needed to be negotiated. When an agreement could not be reached with the company, they went on strike. Reflecting their strong bargaining position, they won a settlement with W.C.C., one that amended the previous collective agreement to reflect a 7.5% increase in pay. Remarkably, the agreement was concluded during the “slow” season in the coal markets.

24 Ibid.
25 To truly appreciate just how different the situation in Blairmore was in relation to other parts of the country, I would like to draw a comparison with the situation in Fort William, Ontario (a major transportation hub on the railway that served as the gateway for some of the American coal making its way into Eastern Canadian markets). While the economy in Blairmore stabilized and then improved, in Fort William the economic downturn had not only decimated union membership, but caused many industries to close down altogether. According to historian Michel Beaulieu, “in the first three years of the war, Fort William saw its population decrease from 27,000 in 1914 to 21,000 in 1915 and 19,000 by 1916.” See Beaulieu, 43.
27 A more detailed analysis of strikes between 1915-1917 can be found in Department of Labour, Labour Gazette (Ottawa: L. Tache, 1917), 614.
The resolution of the strike did not, however, bring an end to labour problems for the federal government and the West Canadian Collieries. Just over four months later, miners at Blairmore again decided to put down their tools, pointing out that wages were still being outstripped by inflation, and demanding either a 25% increase in pay or a war bonus tied to the rate of inflation. Neither of the demands being acceptable to the W.C.C., the miners went on strike briefly, only returning on the promise of the Minister of Labour to investigate their claims. Having waited on the Minister to take action – and having received no temporary amelioration to their problems in the meantime – on 17 January 1917 Blairmore’s miners found themselves on strike for the third time in less than a year. It was only at this point that the federal government via the Minister of Labour intervened, ordering the West Canadian Collieries to pay a war bonus of $1.75 per week retroactively from November 1916 to the end of the current contract. In a remarkable departure, it was decided “...that the amount due the employees under this arrangement...should be guaranteed or advanced by the Government, the Government endeavouring to recover [the cost] from the consumer.”

Although these repeated strikes speak to the agency of miners in taking advantage of their strong economic position, they also provide the context in which another important Order-in-Council (P.C. 2777) was debated by the Privy Council and signed into law. Nominally intended to restrain the high costs of living, the Order gave wide-ranging powers to the government so that it could stop hoarding, profiteering and trade cartels from artificially inflating the price of

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28 Ibid. It is not known what, if any, measures were taken to recoup this cost to government.
the necessities of life. Its wording allowed for a broad interpretation which would have important implications for the citizens of Blairmore. Section 2 is worth citing at length:

2. No person shall conspire, combine, or arrange with any other person

(A) To limit the facilities for transporting, producing, manufacturing, supplying, storing or dealing in any necessary of life, or

(B) To restrain or injure trade or commerce in relation to any necessary of life; or

(C) To prevent, limit or lessen the manufacture or production of any necessary of life, or to enhance the price thereof; or

(D) To prevent or lessen competition in the production, manufacture, purchase, barter, sale, transportation, insurance or supply of any necessary of life.

By defining the necessities of life to include fuel, the Order in effect made it illegal to hinder the production or distribution of coal. According to W.H. Armstrong, the Director of Coal Operations appointed under the Order, the Crowsnest strikes of 1916 and January 1917 could not afford to be repeated. “The closing of the mines,” Armstrong reported, had “seriously affected the smelting industries of British Columbia, which were dependant on them for coke. Manufacturing and transportation over a wide area were also hampered.”

The war bonus of early 1917 was the government’s implicit acknowledgement that a short strike in Blairmore could wreak havoc on wartime production. It constituted another unprecedented decision in relation to the Crowsnest coalfields. Using the provisions of Order 2227 it gave W.C. Armstrong the power (in tandem with the Dominion Fuel Controller C.A. McGrath) to set wages and control production of coal within U.M.W.A.’s District 18.

29 The Order defined a necessity of life as “a staple and ordinary article of food (whether fresh, preserved, canned or otherwise treated), clothing and fuel, including the products, materials and ingredients from or of which any thereof are in whole or in part manufactured, composed, derived or made.” Labour Gazette (1916), 1849.
30 Labour Gazette (1916), 1849.
31 Labour Gazette (1917), 613.
Sometimes referred to as the period of co-management, the *de facto* nationalization of the Greenhill Mine at Blairmore had important implications for the community. The new operational structure saw government take control of the mines without purchasing them, guaranteeing profits to the West Canadian and its shareholders while at the same time providing the highest wages that miners at Blairmore had ever been paid.\(^{32}\) The result of the program was immediate and undeniable: production increased to meet demand while Blairmore miners came to be paid $5.00 to $6.00 more per week than their counterparts in logging and manufacturing. They enjoyed a quality of life previously unknown to the vast majority of Blairmore’s citizenry.\(^{33}\)

**Post War Reintegration**

The armistice of 1918 not only brought an end to the Great War, but also marked the beginning of a reintegration process that would have important implications for Blairmore’s future. Although existent local narratives represent this as a fairly straightforward event – veterans were welcomed home and life apparently went back to normal – the reality for Blairmore was once again much more complicated than this narrative allows. It was the Great War and its aftermath that explains much of the radical 1930s.

To understand this argument, we must consider how these three groups reintegrated at the end of the conflict, and how their experiences informed one another from that point forward. Perhaps best known within current historiography is the experience of those who left Canada for military service. As pointed out earlier, many of them enlisted not only to defend “the principles of right, of justice, and of democracy, [but also in defence] of Canada’s right to these

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\(^{32}\) Increases were tied to inflation and were reviewed on a regular basis.

principles.” Inherent within these values (for many) were the concepts of freedom, honour, integrity, justice and a British sense of fair play.

And yet the Canada they returned to was in many ways not the one they had been fighting to preserve. As Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki have argued, democracy had largely been replaced by a government content to rule through Orders-in-Council. When elections were held in 1917 a transparent and egregious amount of gerrymandering resulted in an all-too-certain victory for the government in power. Freedom had been replaced by a censored press, the ability to sit down for a beer or two at the end of a workday had been taken away by prohibition, and “temporary” income tax laws had been put in place to pay for government programs. Cronyism was rampant. For many returning soldiers there was no prospect of meaningful employment.

And while the majority of this was as true in Blairmore as it was throughout the rest of the country, returning citizens like future Red mayor Bill Knight also encountered a situation that was locally differentiated from the larger experience by those who stayed behind. Imagine the surprise, shock or anger a veteran would feel when he returned to Blairmore to learn that his friends and neighbours had been interred while he was abroad fighting for ideas like equality and democracy! And unlike many veterans, Blairmorites could – and did – visit the internment camp.

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34 Wood, 230.
36 See Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, “The Great War, the State, and Working-Class Canada” in Craig Heron (ed.) The Workers Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 11-42.
at nearby Morrissey to see firsthand where the government was holding their friends and relatives.  

The ability to see the internment camp first hand was an experience the importance of which should not be dismissed out of hand. Unlike most other areas of the country, internees from the Crowsnest Pass were kept close at hand because of the wartime shortage of manpower in the mines. Those not fortunate enough to live in the Pass were often sent from one camp to another in an effort to keep them hidden from the public eye. For example Mr. H. Domytryk, a father of four from Edmonton, was initially sent to Lethbridge, then across the country to Spirit Lake, Quebec. By geographically separating prisoners from their community and social support systems, the government was able to hide the realities of internment from a large percentage of the population. For veterans returning to Blairmore, however, the injustice and inherently anti-democratic nature of the imprisonment were much easier to understand.

Similarly, those released from the internment camp at Morrissey when it closed also had a great deal to be disillusioned about, with respect to the Canadian system of government. Held behind barbed wire and under armed guard, daily life had been (by all accounts) almost unbearable. Physical abuse, near-starvation and orders that allowed guards to shoot-to-kill if

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37 Reports such as “Mr. Harry White was visiting the camp this week” are scattered throughout the Local and General Items section of the Blairmore Enterprise. For example, see “Bellevue Happenings,” Blairmore Enterprise, 20 February 1915.
38 It was believed that if a mine went on strike illegally, its owners would be able to re-open the mine using, at least partially, interned labour. It is unknown if those actually interned in the camp – many of them members of U.M.W.A. locals – went along with this arrangement.
39 Even in places like Kingston where internment took place at Fort Henry, the high walls of the already existent structure were effective in hiding the realities of internment from the vast majority of the population. Because Kingstonians were used to seeing the Fort where it was, and because it physically did not change, it was easier for Kingstonians either to ignore or simply be unaware of what was happening.
40 For an example of the inflammatory conservative rhetoric of the day, see “Canadian Citizenship,” Blairmore Enterprise, 1 May 1919; “To Deport Undesirable Enemy Aliens,” Blairmore Enterprise, 30 January 1919.
prisoners tried to escape have all been documented within the camps.\footnote{See Bill Waiser, \textit{Park Prisoners: the Untold Story of Western Canada’s national parks, 1914-1946} (Calgary: Fifth House, 1995).} Internees had their property confiscated, their correspondence censored, and the physical limits of their bodies tested by a system which forced them to perform hard labour not only to maintain the camps but also for the benefit of government and private enterprise.\footnote{See Luciuk, 7.} Guards were known to have mistreated some of the interned, and the man in charge of the operations (Major General William D. Otter) readily admitted that “insanity was by no means uncommon among the prisoners.”\footnote{Ibid., 8.}

And what about the majority of Blairmorites who did not leave town during the war? Although one might intuitively expect that they would have had the least transformative of wartime experiences, Order-in-Council 2777 had in fact fundamentally altered the community in the veterans’ and internees’ absence. Until 1916 the mines had been operated for the benefit of the corporate entity that controlled it – the West Canadian Collieries. The wealth generated from the operation was returned to the corporation’s shareholders in the form of dividends. It had been the accepted reality since the mine opened that it needed to be competitive with other operations creating the same product, and consequently wages, benefits and other expenses (such as safety equipment) were kept to a minimum. If the West Canadian could not produce coal at a competitive rate, it would cease operations.

This all effectively changed in 1917 when the Government of Canada assumed control of the W.C.C.’s Blairmore operations. The Government had effectively brought coal production under its control, creating a system within which miners were paid a respectable living wage and natural resources such as coal were put to work to meet the needs of the state as opposed to serving the narrow needs of capital. According to Allen Seager and David Roth, “For many

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miners wartime government stewardship was but the precursor to full nationalization of the coal mines – a development long called for by miners throughout North America and Europe.”45

Just as veterans and internees were returning to Blairmore and seeking to re-establish themselves and their families, the federal government provided the West Canadian Collieries with notice that it intended to terminate their co-management agreement for the Greenhill Mine. The large profits and high standard of living that had been provided to both the company and the community were immediately jeopardized when the government ended its direct involvement in the town’s economy. The reversion to production for the free market coincided with a post-war contraction in the demand for coal. The excess capacity that had been so valued during the war became an economic liability after it. Not only was the West Canadian unable to provide jobs to all of those returning to Blairmore at this time, but the company consequently demanded a cost savings from its existing workforce in order to remain competitive. Even as the Canadian economy began to recover from its post-war slump, the local demand for coal remained far from its wartime highs. In a matter of months, the unheard-of economic prosperity of 1918 had become an economic recession from which the region would not recover for over a decade.

**Breaking Unions, Making Profits and Destabilizing the Community**

The return of market capitalism to Blairmore had immediate consequences for employees of the West Canadian Collieries. Almost immediately, the company insisted that the only way for it to remain competitive in the market – and keep the Greenhill Mine open – was for employees

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45 Seager and Roth, 246.
to return to pre-war rates of pay. The miners refused, and a series of strikes ensued that would ultimately destroy, at least for a time, the international union movement at Blairmore.

At the end of the war, Blairmore’s miners were represented by the United Mine Workers of America, based in Indianapolis, Indiana. The benefit of belonging to such a large international union was its financial strength; if a strike were called, the dues of members from across North America could be drawn upon to support picketers, thereby ensuring miners and their families with the necessities of life and allowing them to see the strike through to a successful end. Union members at the Greenhill Mine had been paying into their strike fund with the expectation that if and when these funds were needed, they would be made readily available.

When miners at Blairmore prepared to strike against the concessions demanded of them by the West Canadian Collieries in May, 1919 they expected that their union would be supportive – financially and otherwise – of their demands. Of particular importance to unionized miners at the Greenhill Mine was the issue of contract (or non-unionized) labour. In 1919 there were no laws dictating that only one union could represent a body of workers, nor were there laws against employing non-unionized labour to work alongside unionized staff. Essentially this allowed the W.C.C. to hire non-unionized men at lower rates of pay than those provided for in the collective agreement, facilitating the company’s replacement of union jobs with cheaper non-unionized labour. Miners in Blairmore demanded an end to this practice.46

District 18 President P.M. Christophers informed U.M.W.A. brass in Indianapolis of his intent to pursue the issue through to strike action if contract negotiations scheduled for April of

46 This practice had been avoided during wartime by the shortage of miners and the increase in demand for coal. When the war ended, there was a surplus of labour and a falling demand for fuel, allowing the W.C.C. to hire more men on its own discriminatory terms.
1919 were unsuccessful.⁴⁷ Word came back from U.M.W.A. headquarters “stating that if a resolution favouring the abolition of contract mining was passed, the District would not receive financial or other support from the International.”⁴⁸ The solution found by the executive – to go on record as opposed to contract mining in principle (but not in practice) – was highly controversial with Blairmore miners. Calls for an all-Canadian union started to gain traction.

When the West Canadian and U.M.W.A. officials did sit down to negotiate a new contract, the two parties quickly found themselves at odds with each other. The discontent surrounding contract mining was aggravated by a directive from the Dominion Coal Director that miners should work fewer hours in a day in order to stabilize the coal markets. A decrease in hours worked was tantamount to a decrease in pay, and the miners demanded that the directive be withdrawn. When the company (acting in tandem with the Coal Director) refused to negotiate on this point, District President Christophers submitted the question to the union membership for a referendum. A strike became all but certain when the membership rejected the proposal. Binding arbitration was offered by the W.C.C. and the Dominion Fuel Director, but as the majority of seats on the commission would have been allocated to non-miners, this proposal too was rejected. On 24 May 1919 Christophers pulled his men from work without the approval of U.M.W.A. headquarters and the strike was on.⁴⁹

Christopher’s failure to receive permission to strike from U.M.W.A. headquarters was to have important implications for the future of the union movement at Blairmore. Receiving news of the strike, the International refused to provide strike funds, undermining the strikers financially. Many Blairmore miners felt that they had been robbed: how could a strike fund they

had paid into for so many years be made unavailable to them at their time of need? Why should the union brass in another country have the right to make this decision? Robert Livett resigned from the U.M.W.A.’s international executive and a referendum was held to determine if miners wished to remain with United Mine Workers of America representation. The vote was conclusive: 95% of District 18 wished to leave the U.M.W.A.

But where would they turn for representation? The elephant in the room during this schism was undoubtedly the One Big Union (O.B.U.) recently organized in Calgary. The R.C.M.P. was quite clear about the implications this radical new union held for the present situation in the Crowsnest Pass: “it has made rapid strides, and a general strike seems quite possible.”

Rebelling against conservative tendencies in the Trades and Labor Congress that they felt were fully replicated in the U.M.W.A., advocates of the new union championed a distinctly industrial trade unionism that appealed powerfully to Blairmore miners. Rather than representing small sectors of workers like other craft unions, the O.B.U. set as its objective representation for all workers in all industries within a single union. As the preamble of the new organization’s constitution proclaimed:

The One Big Union ... seeks to organize the wage worker, not according to craft, but according to industry; according to class and class needs, and calls upon all workers to organize irrespective of nationality, sex, or craft into a workers organization, so that they may be enabled to more successfully carry on the every-day fight over wages, hours of work, etc., and prepare themselves for the day when production for profit shall be replaced by production for use.

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This document had clear and important implications for Blairmore. It appealed to ethnic equality, which was surely a concern for many given the recent history of the internment camp at Morrissey. It also spoke to the idea that “production for profit shall be replaced by production for use.” Though some flocked to the O.B.U. as a vehicle for radical change, for many Blairmore miners it simply represented a chance to return to a system of co-management that had been the status quo as recently as four months earlier.

As the unfunded strike commenced, miners left the U.M.W.A. in ever increasing numbers to join the fledgling O.B.U. Though their new union had no funds to support the strikers, it did line up behind their demands and bolstered them in as many non-monetary ways as possible. The U.M.W.A. was not, however, prepared to be replaced by the upstart union without a fight. On 10 July 1919, the union’s headquarters sent a three-man commission consisting of Samuel Ballantyne of Ohio, Samuel Caddy of Washington State and William Dalrymple from Oklahoma to the region to take control of the situation. After meeting with the Dominion Coal Controller, the three-man commission announced that because a majority of the District’s executive members were also members of the One Big Union, they “revoked the [local] union charter and placed the District in trusteeship.”

Thus, despite losing the majority of its membership, the U.M.W.A. was plainly not ready to concede defeat to the O.B.U. in District 18. Capitalizing on the radical anti-capitalism inherent within the One Big Union, the U.M.W.A. Commission announced on 29 July that it had re-entered negotiations with the West Canadian Collieries and other members of the Western Canada Coal Operators Association. Fearing the further radicalisation of their employees, the

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52 Ibid.
53 Wesley, 117.
W.C.C. and other operators sought to assert control through the more conservative U.M.W.A., indicating they would rehire only miners who were U.M.W.A. members. As Wesley Morgan has pointed out, “this put the O.B.U. in a very awkward position.”54 The law did not require the West Canadian to negotiate with the miners’ union of choice, nor did it require that the W.C.C. rehire anyone it believed to be unsuitable for the job. By recognizing the U.M.W.A. as the sole bargaining unit through which miners could be employed, the company effectively took the wind out of the O.B.U.’s sails. When the men did return to work in August, known O.B.U. supporters were blacklisted. The strike had achieved little more than the removal of most radical miners at Blairmore from the active workforce.

Although the O.B.U. threatened and executed strike action later in 1919 and again in 1920, its limited financial resources, coupled with the W.C.C.’s refusal to bargain with anyone but the U.M.W.A., ultimately spelled the end of the One Big Union movement in Blairmore.55 This was not, however, the end of the West Canadian’s union-busting tactics. Having effectively eliminated the One Big Union as a credible local threat, they set their sights on the fragile U.M.W.A. local that still existed. Though it was the official representative of miners at the W.C.C.’s Blairmore and Bellevue operations, the vicious fight to remain on top had resulted in what the union historians rather politely term “a bitter legacy.”56 The U.M.W.A. membership was politically divided and suffering both financially and emotionally from the repeated postwar strikes.

54 Ibid.
55 The main point of importance for this research is that the strike did not result in an increase in wages or a right to a closed shop of the workers’ choosing in Blairmore. The O.B.U. never held power here in the same way as the U.M.W.A. or later the M.W.U.C. For more on the O.B.U. in the Crowsnest Pass, see Wesley Morgan “The One Big Union in the Crowsnest Pass,” in A World Apart: The Crowsnest Communities of Alberta and British Columbia, eds. Wayne Norton and Tom Langford (Kamloops: Plateau Press, 2002), 113-119. See also David Bercuson, “Western Labour Radicalism and the One Big Union: Myths and Realities,” Journal of Canadian Studies 9 (1974): 3-11.
56 Ramsey, 131.
When the collective agreement between the union and the West Canadian expired in March 1920, the company once again sought cost savings through wage reductions. It offered the union an agreement that, if accepted, would have “eliminate[d] the accumulated wage increases of the past six years.”\textsuperscript{57} Perhaps not surprisingly this offer precipitated a strike vote, sending miners back to the picket lines for a period of three and a half months. The union local received the paltry sum of $1250 to cover all strike and relief-related expenses.

When they did return to work, miners at Blairmore were able to celebrate a semblance of victory in that the new contract did not contain any wage reductions. As Frank Karas has observed, although the new contract served to temporarily pacify the majority of local miners, their “indignation with the UMW continued to grow.”\textsuperscript{58} When union elections were held later that year, long-time (and right-leaning) international board member Bob Levitt was bounced from his position and replaced with former-O.B.U. frontman Rod McDonald.\textsuperscript{59} In the same election veteran socialist William Sherman of Fernie was elected district president, representing a symbolic removal of the old guard from the U.M.W.A. executive.

The respite from contract strife was not long to last. The reduction of coal orders flowing into the Pass from the country’s railway sector provided the West Canadian (among others) with an opportunity to demand, once again, wage concessions from their employees in 1924. For the fourth time in as many years Blairmore’s miners found themselves on strike. The strike was long and bitter. Meagre strike pay was offered by the U.M.W.A. “because of a similar deadlock in the

\textsuperscript{58} Karas, 37.
\textsuperscript{59} Livett was considered by many to be an insider, and his personal friendship with U.M.W.A. boss John L. Lewis was a bone of contention for many.
United States."\textsuperscript{60} When the strike pay did come, it was “in the form of an order on local stores, the miner receiving the same, stating the store he wished to deal with.”\textsuperscript{61} The sum of $5.00 per week provided to every married miner and $3.00 to every unmarried miner was considered negligible, and since previous strikes and economic hardships had already depleted the miners’ savings, the “crisis deepened personal debts and made the miners more impatient with the U.M.W.A. and its inadequate strike assistance.”\textsuperscript{62}

To put their strike pay into perspective, a married miner supporting a family could expect his weekly grocery bill would amount to approximately $17.42, with rent on a small home costing an average of $5.00 per week.\textsuperscript{63} Even with the U.M.W.A. covering expenses of $5.00 per week, an average miner needed to find $17.42 elsewhere to meet his family’s basic expenses. For many this meant dipping into already depleted savings accounts, while for others this meant asking for credit at local stores. For many miners, it was simply getting harder and harder economically to stay on the picket lines.

Having been out in a series of strikes the preceding years, miners simply could not afford to be without work for an extended period of time. While the union continued to insist on its platform of no wage concessions to the local coal operators, the miners involved had to make a decision: was it better to continue the lengthy strike, or return to work for less money but retaining some ability to provide for themselves and their families? Faced with an untenable economic situation, miners at Fernie were the first to sever their ties with the U.M.W.A.,

\textsuperscript{60} This strike was called in an effort to stabilize and if possible regain some of the war time prosperity experienced from 1915-1919. See Karas, 39. As miner Joe Fortunaso recalled during an interview, ‘strike pay’ did not have the same meaning then as it does today. In this context miners did not receive weekly strike pay in the form of wages; rather, they received supplies supplemented by small and sporadic cash payments. See Joe Fortunaso interview, Crowsnest Pass Historical Association, accession number 2007.004.0001.

\textsuperscript{61} Lethbridge Herald, 16 May 1924.

\textsuperscript{62} Karas, 40.

\textsuperscript{63} Report of the Alberta Coal Commission, 1925, 252; 255.
“organiz[ing] a Canadian union and appoint[ing] a committee to negotiate with the management of the Crowsnest Pass Coal Co.” The new union quickly reached an agreement with the company, one that cut wages but allowed miners to return to work immediately. The miners at Blairmore sought and secured a similar agreement, with 72% agreeing to return to work on 6 April 1925. The inability of the U.M.W.A. to provide adequate strike pay coupled with economic hardship in Blairmore and throughout the Pass resulted in mining communities taking an active role in securing a change in representation. This led to the formation of home locals and the almost-total eradication of the U.M.W.A. in the Valley by the end of 1925.

Shortly after concluding their separate local agreements, the miners of Blairmore called a meeting of delegates from all of the new home locals to establish the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada (M.W.U.C.). While this new organization quickly absorbed all home locals (except Fernie), it remained largely an organization on paper for “we [M.W.U.C.] will not interfere in any way with existing contracts. We plan to go along quietly, increasing our strength gradually.” This cautious approach was reflected in the choice of Frank Wheatley as the organization’s President in 1926. Far from being a radical, Wheatley had stood opposed to the One Big Union and perceived unionism as “a vehicle for the spiritual and moral uplifting of the worker,” not an active agent for political change.

The M.W.U.C. was no monolith. It welcomed members holding a wide range of viewpoints. Perhaps as a result, it was not, in its early years, able to mount a successful campaign

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64 *Edmonton Journal*, 8 December 1924.
65 *Lethbridge Herald*, 19 December 1924.
66 *Lethbridge Herald*, 6 April 1925.
67 Karas, 47.
68 Ibid. The only U.M.W.A. local remaining was at Maple Leaf.
69 This meeting was held 1 June 1925. For more on the need for a Canadian union, see *Edmonton Journal*, 8 December 1924.
70 Karas, 59.
against the miners’ deteriorating position. When it came time to negotiate a new contract in 1928, coal operators put forward offers that represented an increase in pay from 15%-25% over two years, provided that an open shop was maintained. The M.W.U.C. was unable to gain consensus for Pass-wide negotiations and once again agreements reflecting a range of pay increases were signed on a local basis. Only the Blairmore and Bellevue miners working for W.C.C. pushed for a Conciliation Board ruling that recognized the M.W.U.C. as the official bargaining agent of the miners. Their efforts failed and they too signed individual contracts with the W.C.C.. It would not be until the operators again asked for concessions in 1930 that the M.W.U.C. would be in a position to answer them with any strength.

While it is true that the W.C.C. lost railway business during this period – Canadian National Railways had become able to source all its coal requirements from along its own railway line, eliminating the need to purchase about 100,000 tons of coal per year at Blairmore – newly available documents clearly demonstrate that the company itself became more profitable over the same period of time. The company sought wage concessions not because it needed them to be competitive in the marketplace, but in order to increase its profitability. In fact, not only did production at the Greenhill mine increase in the period between 1918 and 1928, but it did so while the cost of production decreased each and every year from 1924 forward.

The company was, in short, being economical with the truth when it pled poverty during contract negotiations in the 1920s. And however obscure its accounting practises rendered its profits, community members, asked to accept wage cut after wage cut, strongly believed the company to be exploitative. The least controversial of the company’s actions may have been the

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72 The Conciliation Board was the apparatus set up in the original contract with the home union to settle disputes between the company and the union. For more on this ruling and how it was interpreted by the radical left, see the Worker, 26 May 1928, 1.
West Canadian’s move in 1920 to expand their physical control over the town and its residents. Despite proclaiming they did not have the money to maintain, let alone increase, miners’ wages, the West Canadian Collieries purchased 15 pieces of prime real estate from the Town of Blairmore in that year, earmarking them for future revenue development. The next year saw a company that had publicly proclaimed itself to be cash-strapped start to develop these sites, ultimately resulting in thirteen rental cottages, an apartment block, a two-room school for the managerial children of the New Townsite, an addition to the mine-owned automobile garage and the renovation of the Greenhill Hotel and Grill. Despite the company’s public utterances, the inescapable conclusion for many miners must have been that the W.C.C. had money — just not for them.

At the same time as the company was legally purchasing and developing properties within the town limits, W.C.C. documents reveal that senior executives were playing a shell game with properties in order to skirt provincial regulations intended to limit the number of coal leases that could be granted to a single entity in any given area. Company executives J. Charbonnier, J.R. Smith and A.R. Grainger legally acquired the mining rights to various pieces of property critical for the northerly expansion of the Greenhill operations. Company documents indicate that once these properties were acquired, its officials hoped “they will be transferred to the company as soon as the necessary papers can be made out.” Though not illegal, the strategy speaks volumes about the tactics and sense of entitlement that came to symbolize the company’s actions throughout the decade.

Perhaps the most obvious and egregious occurrence in relation to this pattern of fiscal dishonesty came during the strike of 1922. The miners, who were out for a period of eight months over proposed wage reductions, witnessed a massive re-investment in the West Canadian’s Greenhill property from their side of the picket lines. Taking advantage of the mine’s idle status, the company authorized major construction projects, including a significant extension to the tipple, a snow shed over the railway spur line, a new horse stable (including corrals and outbuildings), a new machine shop, a new compressor building, new electrical lines and a new road between Cougar Valley and the former townsit of Lille.76 The W.C.C. also built a further eighteen separate rental properties within municipal limits during this time.77 The message must have been as clear then as it is now: the West Canadian Collieries was not as financially destitute as it claimed to be during contract negotiations. It sought wage concessions to bolster profits and dividends. There was a stark contrast between these patterns and the co-management of three years earlier.

Though it was never made public, a report on costs included with the Company’s 1923 Annual Report confirms that the company was increasing its profitability at the expense of its workforce. The itemized report tracked each and every expense associated with the cost of running the Greenhill Mine, and it reveals that between 1921-1923 the company found substantial cost savings, particularly in regards to the cost of labour. Citing a combination of technical improvements – the changes made to the surface plant during the strike a year earlier had made several processes more efficient and thereby reduced the number of employees needed to operate the mine – the General Manager reported that the cost of labour had decreased by 22.8

76 West Canadian Collieries Annual Report, 1922. Glenbow Museum and Archives, Accession Number M-1601-15, p4-5. Cougar Valley is located just to the north of where the Greenhill mine stood, and contained much of the equipment needed (fans, etc) to keep the Greenhill safely operating.
cents/ton while the total net cost of operating the mine had decreased by 16.96 cents per/ton.\textsuperscript{78} Though at first sight such figures may not seem impressive, the company calculated that they constituted a savings of $86,700 in 1923 alone. The report indicated that the credit for these savings was entirely “...a credit to [General Manager] J. Charbonnier only.” Such savings were in larger part found at the expense of the West Canadian’s workforce.\textsuperscript{79}

If there was any doubt as to the motivations of the company to this point, the way they handled themselves in 1924 shows clearly where their priorities resided. When the collective agreement came up for renegotiation, the company demanded further wage concessions and yet another strike ensued. And although the company continued to state publicly that it needed wage concessions in order to remain competitive, behind the scenes it had good reason to recall workers at their current rate of pay. Having long bid on Canadian Pacific Railway contracts for Winnipeg and points further east, management was contacted by the railway to advise them it wished to purchase Blairmore coal for their Manitoba Division. Not only was this contract a large one, but it also represented access to a market that the company had long coveted. But rather than concede to the wage demands of their striking workforce, the company decided it was more worthwhile to push for further wage reductions and bid on the tender the following year.\textsuperscript{80}

And in what had become a predictable trend, the W.C.C. continued to spend money on things like cement sidewalks along the street frontage occupied by its buildings, a new rotary dump, a new dry washery, a new railroad bed and rails along its spurline, and new boilers.\textsuperscript{81} In terms of land holdings, the Company also moved to purchase the remaining holdings of the Franco-

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{80} West Canadian Collieries Annual Report, 1924, Glenbow Museum and Archives, Accession Number M-1601-17, p1.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p2-3.
American Coal and Coke Company and acquired 150 acres of mineral rights “through members of the staff.”

The year 1925 marked a turning point for unionism in Blairmore and elsewhere throughout the Pass with the creation of home locals and the acceptance of longer term contracts for considerably lower wages. Internal documents from the W.C.C.’s Blairmore operations indicate that it was also a landmark year for the company in terms of cost savings, new contracts, the opening of previously unavailable markets, and the all-important cost/ton calculations. The company’s gamble in regards to the Canadian Pacific contract paid off, and they were awarded enough business in Manitoba to send Mr. A. Hamilton to Winnipeg permanently to operate a sales office in that city. Furthermore, with the concessions made by W.C.C. employees, the price of Blairmore bituminous coal could be reduced to the point at which it was competitive with traditionally cheaper lignite coal mined in southern Saskatchewan. And while miners and their families were trying to figure out how to make ends meet with considerably less, the Annual Report of the W.C.C. held that “…the general tone of business is on a much better plane than has been the case for several years past. This condition will be reflected in all lines of business, including ours.”

Despite rather strong competition for contracts amongst the mines of the Crowsnest Pass, the Annual Report of 1925 was correct in its economic forecast. The number of tons shipped

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82 Ibid., p10.
83 West Canadian Collieries Annual Report, 1925. Glenbow Museum and Archives, Accession Number M-1601-18, p4. It should be noted that all W.C.C. reports refer to this individual only as “Mr. Hamilton.” His first initial was found in “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 12 November 1925.
84 West Canadian Collieries Annual Report, 1925. Glenbow Museum and Archives, Accession Number M-1601-18, p5. It should be noted that, as in years past, the W.C.C. continued to spend money upgrading or replacing equipment in addition to once again purchasing land and mining rights.
from the Greenhill mine increased each and every year between 1924-1928 while inversely the actual cost to get the coal onto the market fell each and every year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Tons</th>
<th>Cost Per Ton</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>168,185</td>
<td>Mining Cost: $1.112</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Labour Cost: $1.395</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total Cost: $2.507(^{85})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>227,033</td>
<td>Total Cost: $1.968(^{86})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>241,135</td>
<td>Mining Cost: $0.909</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Labour Cost: $0.881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total Cost: $1.790(^{87})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>297,316</td>
<td>Mining Cost: $0.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Labour Cost: $0.848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total Cost: $1.730(^{88})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>315,284</td>
<td>Mining Cost: $0.874</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{85}\) Engineer’s Report, Greenhill Mine, 1924. Glenbow Museum and Archives, M-1601-17, P1.
\(^{86}\) Engineer’s Report, Greenhill Mine, 1926. Glenbow Museum and Archives, M-1601-17, P2. I would like to note that some of the numbers in the 1925 Engineer’s Report were smudged beyond legibility. The total cost to mine in 1925 was used as a comparison in the 1926 report, and therefore can be accurately reported. The 1926 report did not break the cost down, however, so I am not able to report with accuracy the 1925 breakdown.
\(^{87}\) Ibid.
In fact, a reading of the various W.C.C. reports shows that in many ways the Company went from strength to strength during this period, increasing its sales while consistently decreasing its cost of doing business. The situation was such that economic conditions for the mine were reported to be “...coming back to normal with every prospect for better general business conditions than we have had since the end of the War.”

Thus the only significant problem remaining for the West Canadian moving forward was competition from other Crowsnest Pass mines. Each year the Canadian Pacific Railway put out tenders for its steam coal contracts (usually amounting to around 1.5 million tons) and the contracts would be spread out among Crowsnest mines according to the bid price the mines submitted. Generally speaking, the mine that provided the least expensive bid would receive the largest contract. And so, even though business was good, in 1928 “…it was decided among the

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90 While competing hard with other Crowsnest mines for some contracts, the W.C.C. seems to have come to dominate the bituminous coal market in both Manitoba (sales up 70% in 1926) and Saskatchewan. See West Canadian Collieries Annual Report, 1926. Glenbow Museum and Archives, M-1601-19, p2.
91 Ibid., 3.
92 Competition was limited in this way because this particular region produced the type of bituminous coal that their largest customer, the Canadian Pacific Railway, preferred to burn in their engines. Cheaper lignite or coal with ash contents that were too high (such as that found in mines further north) affected the performance of their steam engines.
93 For various reasons – such as the annual capacity of each mining operation, the possibility of labour unrest and the frequency with which accidents could shut down operations for anywhere from a day to a few weeks – no single mine would be awarded the entire contract. The C.P.R. made a practice of awarding the largest portion to the mine which provided the cheapest quote, but was sure to contract with other mines to provide stability in their supply. And in relation to smaller contracts, operations like the West Canadian often provided quotes which, while standard for larger orders, were well above what more unstable non-unionized operators were willing to offer. During this time, for example, Corbin Collieries was able to win a series of contracts for small shipments to Spokane, leading one official at the West Canadian to posit that “…the only relief we can hope for is that Corbin will not be able to
several General Managers in this district that whenever a contract of any importance came up, it would be in the interest of all concerned to meet and agree upon a quotation that would be satisfactory to all concerned and thereby cut out drastic price cutting.”

In practice this meant that not only could the mines collude to drive up the price of coal coming from their mines, but they could also submit tenders that would ensure “...a more equitable distribution of commercial tonnage among the several mines.”

Interestingly, while the West Canadian estimated that the tonnage shipped from the Greenhill Mine would actually drop under this arrangement, it was thought “...our average price will be increased and the resulting profit will be better.”

Starting in 1919, the West Canadian Collieries slowly but steadily chipped away at their employees’ standard of living. It told workers that in order for the company to survive, they needed to accept wage concessions and then turned around and spent lavishly on land acquisitions and improvements to company property. It broke the United Mine Workers of America, thwarted the O.B.U. and easily manipulated the upstart home local. And while the exact financial details may not have been widely known by Blairmorites at the time, many would have undoubtedly noticed the blatant disconnect between the corporation’s demand for fiscal restraint in relation to their wages and their active agenda of acquisitions and development. For many who called Blairmore home, the West Canadian Collieries did not just break the union in 1925; for many it provided doubts about the entire economic system.

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95 For example, when the contract with Robin Hood Flour came up for renewal, the General Managers decided it should go to the International Coal and Coke Company in Coleman so the Greenhill and McGillivray mines quoted a price of $3.25 per ton, while the International quoted $3.00 per ton. The contract consequently went to the International Coal and Coke Company. This example was provided in Ibid.
96 Ibid., 4.
The economic downturn was aggravated by the collapse of the Blairmore Home Bank in 1923.\textsuperscript{97} Many individuals and organizations – including the Blairmore School Board – lost heavily, and deep inroads were made into miners’ meagre savings, thus “adding to the distrust of existing institutions.”\textsuperscript{98} The residents of Blairmore were further disillusioned by two scandals involving the town council. In 1924, the council voted to give all elected members free electricity and water from the town-owned utility, contrary to the provincial Towns and Villages Act.\textsuperscript{99} In 1925, the town secretary requested a four-month leave of absence to visit his native Scotland; in appreciation of his “faithful” service the council awarded him an honorarium of $240.\textsuperscript{100} This honorarium was paid in a strike year during which council was providing little assistance to the miners or their families.\textsuperscript{101} No sooner had the secretary left than suspicions of irregularities in the town finances prompted council to order a special audit that revealed a shortage of $5000 both with respect to cash and tax roll receipts. He was jailed for two years upon his return.\textsuperscript{102} Many working-class people felt alienated from their local government.

This crisis of confidence was further complicated by the loss of temporary summer employment outside Blairmore. Until 1926, many men had gone to the prairies during the slow summer months to work as transient farm labour, returning to work the mines during the busy fall and winter seasons. Their ability to do so was dramatically reduced with the introduction of the labour-saving “combine” in 1926, and eliminated altogether by the stock market crash of 1929. Thus, in addition to shrinking coal markets and low commodity prices, “an integral labour safety valve during the summer lay-offs of the twenties was closed to the Crowsnest miners and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Crowsnest Pass Historical Society, 86.
\item \textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
remained so for the balance of the Depression.” The severity of the situation for miners can be seen in the Government of Alberta’s estimate that it cost $1900 per annum to support a man, wife and three children in the Crowsnest Pass. The yearly wage for a miner during this period was only $900.

In addition, large-scale relief programs simply did not exist during the 1920s. Miners and their families had to make appeals to the town council for relief in the form of requests for reprieves from taxation, direct monetary benefits or food vouchers. For those who were turned down by council (or too embarrassed to publicly ask for help), fraternal or ethnic associations, such as the Polish Brotherly Aid Society or the Loyal Order of the Moose, were also known to provide temporary help. It was not until after the stock market crash in the fall of 1929 that any coordinated relief programs became available to Blairmore’s working-class community. John Kostyniuk sums up the situation well: “There was no welfare. There was no widow’s pension. There was nothing... If you didn’t make it, too bad for you, Charlie!” Scott Nearing, a contributor to the workers’ magazine Labour Monthly, observed at Blairmore “a sullen, helpless mass of workers being slowly worn down and crushed by the system... a system that cannot pay them a living because there is too much coal being produced by means of modern machine industry.”

An unwritten social contract thus emerged between the miners and their employers: so long as the mines were working enough days at a rate of pay that would provide subsistence, the miners at Blairmore would not persist with militant union action. As local miner John Motil

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103 Sloan, 18-19.
104 Nearing, 122.
105 This often included requests for power and water from the town utilities at a reduced price.
106 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Accession Number 2007.004.0001, “John Kostyniuk interview.”
explained, “it was always the threat of real poverty that was the problem here. We always had something to eat – I never went hungry – but there was always the threat that it could happen.” Though far from guaranteeing prosperity, this social contract mitigated the threat of complete poverty, which was still a vivid memory for many European immigrants.109

Exploring Radical Alternatives

Though it is accurate to say that the strength of organized unionism at Blairmore declined from 1920-1928, it would be incorrect to assume that there was a corresponding decrease in the appeal of radical thinking over the same period. Radicalism was not buried here alongside the One Big Union. In fact, as early as 1922 the Non-Commissioned Officer staffing the Blairmore R.C.M.P. detachment was warning his superiors in Ottawa that trouble could be in the cards sooner rather than later. “The Workers Party,” he reported “is no doubt one of the strongest organizations we will have to contend with in the future. A careful check is being kept on this Party in the Crow’s Nest Pass.” For the uninitiated it might be useful to point out that at this time the Workers’ Party of Canada (W.P.C.) and the Communist Party of Canada were virtually one and the same.111

And as it turned out, Constable Moseley was right to be concerned, as the Workers’ Party of Canada showed important signs of local growth early on. With the help of Blairmore’s postmaster, the force intercepted the mail of suspected or known W.P.C. supporters. It hoped to

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109 It was mentioned in numerous interviews that such poverty was remembered well in the old countries, and as a result was always a real fear for many.
111 When the Party was formed in 1921 the War Measures Act was still in force, thereby necessitating the creation of a public face for the otherwise illegal organization. In 1924, the Workers’ Party was dissolved and the Communist Party of Canada emerged.
acquire intelligence and make arrangements for the surveillance of upcoming meetings and activities. Much to the Mounties’ alarm, one of the first intercepted documents contained directions from the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.) in Moscow instructing local organizers to target local Italians for membership in the Party. “In order to succeed at these aims,” the document declares,

[we] must conduct untiring and practical propaganda amongst the immigrants. The Communist organizations and the Party press can aid in this work most effectively. We are of the opinion that a special committee should be immediately formed [in order to] carry on an active propaganda among [immigrants] as well as a regular and methodical correspondence with the Moscow Bureau.

Italians were the second largest ethnic group according to the 1921 census: the Communists were targeting a significant local group.

And though the W.P.C. initially represented only a potential threat, its ability to attract public sympathy had moved from theoretical to quantifiable by 1 May 1923. In the weeks preceding May Day, R.C.M.P. reports reveal that there was concern the Workers’ Party of Canada would have undue influence over the event. And R.C.M.P. Corporal Stevens was

112 The reason the R.I.L.U. targeted Italians in this directive was “...on arrival in a foreign country where they know neither the language nor the customs, and nearly always without money, they do not find immediate support forthcoming from the unions of their country, which allows them to become they [sic] prey of the exploiters, and isolates [them] from the real life and the solidarity of the working class of the land to which they have immigrated. There is also now the fact that the Fascisti movement endeavours to transform the immigrant workers into agents of the Fascisti government.” While this directive was clearly broad and not tailored to the specific experiences of Blairmore or the Crowsnest Pass it did have potential implications for Blairmore’s large (though not recently arrived) Italian community. See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0002, “Report No. 2577,” 1 March 1923.
113 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0002, “Report Number 5277,” 1 March 1923. The letter in question was attached to this report, and was dated 17 February 1923.
114 See Appendix One for a detailed breakdown of Blairmore’s ethnic composition in 1921.
dispatched to monitor the celebrations, and reported to his superiors at Lethbridge and Ottawa that the event was not only well attended but in many ways seditious.  

Documents filed with R.C.M.P. headquarters indicate that the meeting opened innocently enough, with a presentation from U.M.W.A. District President and local resident William Sherman, who spoke on the current labour situation and the need for unity within the union. He was followed, however, by a succession of increasingly radical speakers, including “Comrade Harrison” who “stated that all workers should demand the eight hour day system,” followed by a Mrs. Clarke of Edmonton who regaled the crowd with a description of her suffering at the hands of police during a strike in Edmonton. But perhaps most inflammatory was the keynote address, delivered by Communist agitator H.M. Bartholomew, who “urged the workers to get together and fight the capitalist [system], stating that the time was not so very far off when the worker would revolt and that was the time when it would be necessary for all workers to unite and stay together.” The meeting was closed with the singing of the Internationale along with “three cheers for the Third International and three cheers for Soviet Russia.” A large red flag surmounted by a small union jack was then paraded from the Opera House where the meeting had been held to the sports field for the commencement of the afternoon program. While these details of May Day are interesting in and of themselves, they also suggest a movement open, as

116 Ibid.
117 Mrs. Clarke alleged that the police had caused her to suffer debilitating physical injuries during her arrest earlier that year. Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0002, “Report,” 2 May 1923. It should be noted that Mrs. Clarke’s name or initials were not provided. H.M. Bartholomew, on the other hand, is well-known in the literature on the C.P.C. See “Miners’ Demonstration a Fair Success,” Blairmore Enterprise 3 May, 1923.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
few earlier ones in Blairmore had been, to the activism of women. It is also particularly telling that local organizers brought Mrs. Clarke to Blairmore. ¹²¹

Though Mrs. Clarke was in the spotlight during May Day celebrations, Blairmorites did not need to go as far as Edmonton to find a female activist to admire. The town was frequently visited by Florence Custance, who had quickly climbed within the ranks of the W.P.C. and its affiliated organizations, serving as Secretary of the Canadian Friends of the Soviet Union and by 1923 representing the Canadian movement as far away as Chicago in high level discussions concerning distribution of relief to German socialists.¹²² It was clear from the formative stages of the Communist movement at Blairmore that it would be a cooperative (rather than dictatorial) undertaking, and that there was a place for both male and female agency within the organization.

As the W.P.C. continued to develop, it did so separately from the union and largely underground. By not interfering with the U.M.W.A., it was able to focus on its larger priorities (which were establishing a stable financial position, publishing material relating to the workers’ experiences and their struggles against capitalism, relief work, advocacy for political prisoners in Canada, and the recruitment of new members) while solidifying the local framework of the organization.¹²³ Records reveal that the lack of an aggressive public program on behalf of the W.P.C. initially left police skeptical as to the organization’s staying power: why, they wondered, would a group dedicated to the overthrow of the existing economic framework cooperate with (or at the very least coexist with) a conservative union like the U.M.W.A.? A report made by Constable Bruce is representative: “while there are branches at Coleman, Blairmore and

¹²¹ The important role played by women will differentiate Blairmore from other radical locales later in the decade and well into the 1930s.
¹²³ Ibid.
Hillcrest, they seem to be doing nothing! The members and sympathizers that are there, in their local unions (UMW of A) and in Conventions, are upholding the constitution and policies of the UMW of A.\textsuperscript{124} Time would show initial reports that “the Workers Party of Canada is practically dead” were premature.\textsuperscript{125} This was, after all, the period in which the Workers’ Party was boring from within, and consequently the activities reported by the RCMP as a sign of their weakness were actually representative of local activists following the party line.

The Workers’ Party of Canada continued to operate as a largely underground organization until the expiry of the War Measures Act in 1924. The lapsing of the Act – which had forced much of the Party’s covertness – allowed the W.P.C. to rebrand itself as the Communist Party of Canada and in so doing operate more fully and openly in the public sphere. The implications for Blairmore were twofold: authorities almost immediately reported a drastic increase in the amount of radical and seditious literature available in the Pass, and the town would play host to C.P.C. operatives on speaking tours with increasing frequency.

The increased volume of anti-capitalist literature grew out of the priorities of the W.P.C. at Blairmore. The R.C.M.P. agents were soon intercepting all manner of “radical literature which comes from Winnipeg, the United States and Russia.”\textsuperscript{126} Monitoring – though not confiscating – the material, the Blairmore detachment sent frequent communiqués both to Division Headquarters as well as National Headquarters indicating that not only were the Communists

“really reading lots of radical literature,” but that they were also “endeavoring to spread the same amongst all workers as much as possible.”

It is important to recognize that the literature being distributed at Blairmore was not specifically printed for local readers, and for a multi-ethnic centre this could pose very real problems for C.P.C. education and recruitment. Indeed, the concerns were such that the Secretary of the Anglo-American Secretariat of the Comintern worried that those who did not have a command of the English language could potentially be “... impervious to any propaganda excepting [that in] their own language.” To this end the C.P.C. reached agreements with other Communist Parties to purchase copies of their literature to distribute to the appropriate diasporas in Canada. Communications from the Anglo-American Secretariat suggested that a regular importation of documents printed in French, German, Italian and Russian (among other languages) would not only prove beneficial to the C.P.C.’s recruitment efforts, but would also help to reinforce the connection between the workers of Canada and their brothers and sisters around the world.

The messages contained in C.P.C. literature were reinforced by frequent, high profile speaking tours featuring key Party operatives such as industrial organizer (and future leader) Tim Buck. Spending time at Blairmore in April of 1925, Buck spoke not just to miners, but anyone who was willing to listen to his message (including both uniformed and plainclothes R.C.M.P.

129 Ibid.
officers). He was accompanied by local activist John Stokaluk. 131 This two pronged recruitment approach did find traction at Blairmore: “On account of these agitators and radical literature,” the R.C.M.P. detachment at Blairmore reported, “Bolshevism and Communism [are] growing slowly but steadily amongst all workers in the Crow’s Nest Pass.” 132

This seeming enthusiasm – or at least the opportunity for growth – prompted the Party to send William Moriarty and noted female activist Becky Buhay to the Crowsnest Pass in 1927. Upon arrival, local Party officials called a public meeting to discuss the situation as it stood in the Crowsnest Pass and to underscore the connection between miners in the Pass and workers in all industries and across all nations. Interestingly, while Moriarty’s speech contained theoretical and political arguments, Buhay spoke to the crowd of men, women and children in a more personal and engaging way. She spoke to the question, “What would it be like to live in a Communist society?” She challenged those listening to think about the accepted constructions of contemporary society in new and different ways. “You know very well,” she told the crowded theater, “the brutality of the capitalist class in every industry. You know very well that your wages [are] reduced every year under the protection of this force. You know that the international capitalists oppress the workers in every way, and knowing all this you are still willing to fight once more for the capitalists?” 133 Buhay pushed the envelope further: “Do you mothers and wives like sending your children and husbands to another war?” 134 The speakers answered these rhetorical questions (“The Communist leaders try their best to organize workers

131 Stokaluk, a future heavyweight in the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, was at this time not representing any union interests, but rather lending his “personal” support to Buck and the C.P.C. cause. It should be noted that I have opted to spell his name “Stokaluk” throughout this thesis, although it can also be found spelled as “Stockaluk,” “Stokaliuk,” and so on. 132 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0002, “Report,” 14 May 1925. 133 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0002, 30 November 1927. 134 Ibid.
so they can only fight for themselves”) before passing a hat around soliciting donations to the Party.\textsuperscript{135}

Though Becky Buhay left town shortly thereafter, William Moriarty stayed in the Pass for the better part of a month, giving talks to any group willing to listen and conducting a series of “Worker Study Courses” aimed at those who did not have the literacy required to access Party literature but were radical or sympathetic to the C.P.C.’s cause. Held three times per week, these meetings addressed such topics as Pre-Capitalist Society, Modern Society, Theories of Human Progress, Economics of Capitalist Society, Imperialism and Working Class Parties.\textsuperscript{136} The importance of this lengthy stay to the C.P.C.’s recruitment drive is reflected in the way that Moriarty’s expenses were met: the Party paid for the entirety of the trip itself, choosing the Pass as a key area for agitation over other locales.\textsuperscript{137} And it was through recruitment and education in this manner that the Party continued to gain favour among miners, workers and their families.

Conclusion

The fifteen years between the opening shots of World War One and the stock market crash were critical for Blairmore, and important in understanding why communist values and radical action would later find so many local supporters. Through a diversity of wartime experiences, many Blairmorites not only came to question the values and actions of the political order but were also inadvertently exposed to a real-life demonstration of the potential benefits

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid. The appeal evidently worked, as R.C.M.P. report that several subscriptions to the Party Paper the Worker were purchased and $16 was collected in support of the Party itself. This is remarkable given the economic situation in Blairmore and throughout the Pass at this time.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{137} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0002, “Report,” 25 December 1927. The normal expectation within the C.P.C. was that local groups would raise enough funds to pay for speakers or other activists sent to them.
that might emerge from government’s control of industry. And it was from this high in 1918 that, year after year, strike after strike, and contract after contract, miners (and by extension their families) became poorer and increasingly more destitute as the decade progressed. It has been shown that not only did the West Canadian act in bad faith, but also that it profited from the poverty and suffering of its employees (and by extension that of the whole town). Simply put, between 1914 and 1928 the residents of Blairmore had ample reason to question the concepts of capitalism and democracy as they had been defined locally. The increasing popularity of radical organizations throughout the decade indicates that many of them were doing just that.

Thus in the closing months of the decade, Blairmore was in some ways a house divided. Though its miners strongly supported the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, it was not active in demanding changes in the way that the One Big Union or even the U.M.W.A. had been in the past. Though it provided an open forum for the discussion of ideas – conservative, communist or otherwise – it did not have the capacity to transform the system as it stood. Likewise, the Communist Party of Canada – though it espoused a fundamental reorganization of contemporary society – existed to this point as more of a conduit for education and enlightenment at Blairmore than as the instigator of real revolutionary change. It is through this period of stabilization and maturation that the union and the Party readied themselves to fight what many consider to be the most important strike in the history of the Crowsnest Pass and which – for some – was held to be the crucial facilitator of radical government at Blairmore.
Chapter Four: The Third Period, Plan Z, and the Radicalization of the M.W.U.C.

As we saw in the Chapter Three, the period between 1914 and 1928 was characterized by significant social and economic change in Blairmore. The realities of war, racism, economic instability and corporate self-interest were forced on this Rocky Mountain town from power centres far away, but each was defined vis-à-vis local lived experience. The result was that by 1928 a local culture had evolved within which avowing principles of socialism – and increasingly support for the Communist Party of Canada – was becoming socially acceptable. But the success of the Communist movement here in the 1930s cannot be attributed to these localized factors alone. Chapter Four will investigate how the actions of the Communist International, the Communist Party of Canada, the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police came together to push Blairmorites ever closer to their “revolution,” the infamous strike of 1932.

We will start by addressing the critical role played in this process by the Communist International (C.I.), exploring the implications of Third Period policies for the C.I. and the Canadian Party. We will see that while the groups worked in tandem, the C.P.C. initially enjoyed a relatively large degree of autonomy in terms of implementing policy within a Canadian context. Specifically, we will look at the way(s) that the International functioned, and the impact of changing Comintern policy upon the Canadian Party itself. The goal of this section is to demonstrate that the Communist Party of Canada was initially able to implement the C.I. line through a process of consensus building, but that with the loss of Jack MacDonald as Party Secretary and Tim Buck’s implementation of class-against-class policies, this ideological flexibility disappeared – at least in the Party’s uppermost circles. This is crucial within a Crowsnest context as local miner and Party organizer John Stokaluk actively used this flexibility
to build a broad and multifaceted coalition in the Pass. Even when the Party line changed, the local culture continued to be defined by this flexibility.

With an understanding of the goals of the Party and the International, this chapter will move on to examine “Plan Z” and the radicalization of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada. It will be demonstrated that, contrary to its representations in current secondary literature, the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada may well have been a child of the Communist Party from the beginning. It will be shown that the development of the M.W.U.C. closely parallels the twists and turns in Party policy, ultimately resulting in its disaffiliation from the All-Canadian Congress of Labour in order to join the red Workers’ Unity League.

Finally, this chapter will question how the change driven by the Communist International played out on the ground in Blairmore. By examining the situation through the eyes both of the Party as well as those charged with keeping the C.P.C. in check – the R.C.M.P. – it will become clear that the real radicalizing force was not the Party itself, but its agent, the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada. Not only was the union able to draw on the collective struggles of the past decade, uniting miners in their fight against an intolerable situation, but because they did not affiliate with the Workers’ Unity League (and were therefore not responsible to the Comintern or the Party) until 1931, Reds like John Stokaluk were able to maintain much of the flexibility required to build a broad local coalition, even after this policy was abandoned by the Party in 1928. In a brilliant stroke of strategy, the union local in Blairmore soft-sold communism until 1931, mixing Communist and left-leaning speakers in order to get their message across without being seen as too aggressive or pushy. And when push did come to shove their gamble paid off, with Blairmore miners voting 92% in favour of joining the Red-affiliated W.U.L. By the end of the chapter we will see how international and national political movements affected radicalism in
Blairmore. By the Strike of 1932 Blairmorites were not only behind the Communist Party, but ready to fight to uphold the values for which they felt the Party stood.

The Communist International, the Third Period and Canada

From its inception in 1921, the Communist Party of Canada was intended to be more than just a political party. While the C.P.C. operated domestically to promote Communism (and through it a Communist revolution), it was also a member of the Communist International (C.I.). Headquartered in Moscow (and also known as the Comintern), the C.I. brought together the world’s Communist parties with the goal of parlaying the Soviet Revolution into a world Revolution. At its congresses member parties shared ideas, gained perspective and jointly established a worldwide strategy for facilitating a proletarian revolution. The principle of democratic centralism was key to the CI’s decision-making process: delegates to congresses were permitted to fully and openly discuss all aspects of policy and strategy, but once a decision had been taken all members were expected to implement it regardless of reservations they may previously have expressed. In this way, the world’s Communist Parties sought to promote world revolution through the harmonization of revolutionary strategy.

During the five years between the establishment of the Comintern in 1919 and Lenin’s death in 1924, the prospects of precipitating a global revolution were considered to be good. In Canada the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 presented a serious challenge to the accepted status quo, while overseas the Bolshevik Revolution inspired the November Revolution in Germany (1918-1919), the Biennio Rosso in Italy (1919-1920), and the Hungarian Revolution (1919). It also informed the creation of the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus (1917-1920), the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920), the Bavarian Soviet Republic (1919), and the Mongolian Peoples’ Republic (1924-1992). While these revolutions had clear and undeniable
support from Communists on the ground, several (most notably that in Germany) were also helped financially and militarily by the Soviet State.¹

The death of Lenin precipitated important changes to the way that the Communist International did business. As we can see in the preceding paragraph, none of the revolutions (with the notable exceptions of those in Mongolia and the Soviet Union itself) was successful in the long term. In fact, as the decade progressed, political and economic stability had come to characterize the major capitalist countries. This pattern presented a problem for both the Communist International and for the Soviet Union.

Despite the physical size of the Soviet Union, the country was far from being self-sufficient, requiring the importation of food, manufactured goods and technology.² As it became increasingly evident that the USSR could not rely upon revolution abroad to create friendly sources of these materials, the Soviet Union started actively to seek trade arrangements with such countries as Britain and the United States.³ But despite the Soviets’ desire to re-establish diplomatic ties, nations such as Britain initially refused to normalize trade or diplomatic relations with Russia, believing that doing so – despite the boost it would give their economies – would strengthen the threat that Communism posed both within their borders and throughout their empires. And even when agreements were reached (for example with Germany via the Treaty of Rapallo), the USSR had very limited amounts of hard currency with which to purchase items on the open market.⁴

³ This diplomatic transition represented a huge step for Russia’s leaders as these countries had supported the White Army during the Russian Civil War.
The Soviet Party’s solution to this problem – called Socialism in One Country – would have significant implications not just for the Soviet Union, but for the members of the Communist International as well. Officially adopted at the Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the doctrine of Socialism in One Country “...held as its central proposition that it was possible to construct socialism in Russia alone – without a proletarian revolution in Europe... International Revolution was thus moved down the agenda of the Communist Party of Russia; internal development was made the first order of business.”

Ideologically, Socialism in One Country represented a significant shift from existing Leninist doctrine. Lenin’s conception of world revolution had maintained that socialism in Europe would come about through a series of interconnected revolutions, one building on the other, until communism had been achieved. Socialism in One Country was entirely revisionist by comparison. Under the new policy, socialism could be achieved in different nations at different times. As Jon J. Jacobson puts it, “...‘complete victory’ became a matter of international relations.”

Thus the policy of Socialism in One Country allowed the Soviet Union to enter into a period of “Peaceful Coexistence” with the nation states it had hitherto been actively seeking to revolutionize. Though this resulted in the easing of diplomatic, credit and trade restrictions for the Soviet state, it also brought to the surface the growing split between Joseph Stalin, a proponent of the new policy line, and Leon Trotsky, who believed that Socialism in One Country was nothing more than the ideological perversion of Leninism. As the split between supporters of Stalin and Trotsky grew, the C.P.S.U. was split into “left” and “right” factions depending on

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whom one supported, Stalin or Trotsky. And though it is well beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss this split in detail, what is critical to know is that Joseph Stalin was gradually able to solidify his control over the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1924 and 1928, and in so doing actively removed supporters of Leon Trotsky from positions of power, influence or authority.

As an organization that existed independently of the C.P.S.U., the C.I. was not immediately or straightforwardly responsive to every shift in the Russian Party. But with Stalin’s then-ally Nikolai Bukharin in charge of the C.I., change was indeed forthcoming. The Communist Party of Canada differentiated itself from many others not only by remaining relatively united behind the Comintern, but also by working with A.S. Lozovsky and the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.) to put these policies to work. Engaging with the idea of peaceful coexistence – that is to say that Party functionaries would work within existing organizations rather than form their own militant unions – the C.P.C. almost immediately sought to organize non-union workers into existing labour unions.\(^7\) They were also active, notably through their representatives in the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, in helping to create the All-Canadian Congress of Labour (A.C.C.L.) in 1927. When amalgamation occurred, both Tim Buck (then the C.P.C.’s Industrial Secretary) and the Stalin-aligned Lozovsky agreed that “the new A.C.C.L. [was] a promising mechanism for organizing the semi-skilled and unskilled mass-production the AFL had hitherto ignored.”\(^8\) And though the C.P.C. did not control the new federation, the tactic of “boring from within” did allow Communist activists to work within the A.C.C.L.’s constituent unions with the goal of identifying and recruiting sympathetic persons into the Party.

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8 Ibid.
But the Second Period was only intended as a stopgap measure – a way to grow the movement until such time as capitalism moved back into crisis and a world revolution was once again considered possible. As early as 1926 – less than one year after the acceptance of Socialism in One Country by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – attendees at the Seventh Plenum of the Comintern “…were instructed to prepare for the ‘revolutionary wave’ that might come ‘fairly soon,’ and to seek the ‘unmasking’ of social democracy which was ‘finally and everywhere standing… on the side of the bourgeois governments.’”9 Thus in 1928 when Bukharin articulated a new line of “Class against Class” (also referred to as the Third Period), the C.P.C. stood as ready as any other member of the C.I. to move forward with a more radical strategy for revolution.

And this brings us back to the focus of this dissertation: the situation at Blairmore and the larger regional and national context within which it existed. As we have seen in the previous chapters, there were many elements of the local socialist movement in Blairmore that could be considered to be organic to that community. The Third Period was not one of them. And though – according to historian John Manley – the Communist Party of Canada “made the easiest transition [of the three Parties which compromised the C.I.’s Anglo-American Secretariat] to the new line,” the reconciliatory leadership style of Party Secretary Jack MacDonald suggests it could not be seen as organic to the Canadian movement either.10

Though in Manley’s opinion the C.P.C. may have undertaken the smoothest transition from the Second to Third Period, it would be incorrect to suggest that the implementation of the new line did not fundamentally alter the Communist Party of Canada. The Party broke with its

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strategy of forming alliances with other left groups, and struck out on its own by organizing new unions (such as the Industrial Union of Needle Trade Workers and the Auto Workers’ Industrial Union), which were tightly aligned with the Red International of Labour Unions. Even unions like the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada in which the C.P.C. held decisive sway, if not outright control, were not safe from this change in policy. Police reports credit Harvey Murphy – himself to be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter – with summing up the situation thus:

The Communists had been the cause of ousting of the U.M.W. of A. because of their capitalistic tactics, and the Communists were trying to make the M.W.U. of C. a militant organization. If this could not be done, then the M.W.U. of C. must be superseded by a new organization in this field, and Murphy stated the Communists would start a new union if necessary.11

As Murphy made plain, there could be little doubt as to the magnitude of change the Third Period would bring to the Party and its affiliated organizations.

At first the process was a measured, strategic one. According to Manley, C.P.C. Secretary Jack MacDonald “…was not prepared to launch red unions willy-nilly. Claiming Moscow’s approval, he stated that union drives ‘could not be pulled from thin air, they must have their roots in objective conditions, and be real.’”12 However for the increasingly radical Executive Committee of the Communist International (and the newly-minted Canadian graduates of the Lenin School), this measured implementation soon was not enough.

In 1928, the C.P.C. was a small, tightly-knit party in which a diversity of opinions was accommodated. Unlike the American or Soviet parties, there was no deep division over the Trotsky-Stalin split – Maurice Spector’s expulsion in November of 1928 lay in the future and did not, despite his hopes, actually generate much of a major schism within the Canadian movement.

– and under the leadership of Jack MacDonald the C.P.C. had managed to progress within the general line put forward by the Communist International without taking any heavy-handed action, such as purges or high-level expulsions. Thus the conversion of the Communist Party of Canada (or at least the Party apparatus) from one that was flexible and accommodating – in the sense that it was based on the principles of democratic centralism – to one that strictly followed the Comintern line was a process that did not happen naturally. It had to be provoked by the Comintern itself.

Regardless of how one interprets what happened in 1929 (Ian Angus, for example, describes it as “Buck’s Coup”) the reality is that several Party members who had recently returned from training in Russia tried unsuccessfully to evict Jack MacDonald and other long-time and well-respected Communists from the Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Canada during its Sixth Convention.13 Although they were unsuccessful in doing so at the convention itself, Stalin’s supporters deployed a combination of pressure and directives from the Communist International to force MacDonald to resign as Party Secretary shortly thereafter. He was replaced by Comintern-ally Tim Buck, who along with his team of Lenin School graduates and Stalinists set about implementing the Third Period in the harshest terms possible.14

The political isolation that the Third Period brought to Communists in Canada can be understood through the actions of the Party in Toronto during 1929, a rough year for the C.P.C. to say the least. Perhaps kick-started by inflammatory interviews given by Communist functionaries to the media – Stewart Smith, for example, famously told the Toronto Star that “The Hope of the Communist Party of Canada lies in a war... Our members will join the

14 A more detailed description can be found in Angus, 183-221.
Canadian army, then take their rifles and turn them on the capitalist class of Canada... in a very short time the streets in Toronto will be running with blood” – conservative individuals and groups increasingly began to demand that the government ban (or otherwise deal with) the C.P.C.\textsuperscript{15} As the din of protest against the Communists became louder, Toronto Police Chief Dennis Draper (among others) was brought on side. Draper warned the Communist Party that Toronto Police would break up any meeting which promoted “disorderly or seditious reflections on our form of Government,” while banning outright any Communist meeting which took place in “a foreign language.”\textsuperscript{16} And in doing so Draper not only effectively put a stop to meetings in Toronto, but set the stage for a major confrontation between the Toronto Police and the Communist Party of Canada.

By eliminating (or severely restricting) the ability of the C.P.C. to hold meetings, Chief Draper was not only challenging the Party, but also in effect issued a warning that freedom of speech and freedom of assembly were not privileges which could be taken for granted in the City of Toronto. While naturally this garnered a response from the Communist Party, it also brought forth protests from groups as disparate as the United Church of Canada and the Trades and Labor Congress. Had the Third Period line forbidding joint action with other less radical groups not been in place, a broad coalition of progressive forces against these draconian measures might have been possible. But with the Party conceding to its C.I. directives, the Executive Committee of the C.P.C. decided it would organize a stand-alone rally at Queen’s Park, despite (or to spite) the ban on their meetings. By the Party’s own admission, they expected a bloody and violent response from Toronto Police:

\textsuperscript{15} Toronto Star, 27 December 1928.
\textsuperscript{16} Angus, 237.
They’ll ride horses upon us. They’ll crash us. They’ll do anything. But we’re going to
stick. We’re going to see it through... We’re going to organize the maximum resistance
along scientific lines. We’re organized. We’re fitted to put up a stand against them... Two
thousand workers are not going to be sat upon; they’re not going under without putting
up a stand.\footnote{Toronto Star, 1 August 1929.}

But the event did not live up to its advanced billing. The Communists who did show up were
neither organized nor able to offer any tangible resistance to the well-trained police officers. Two
of the three speakers refused to take the podium and make targets out of themselves, while the
only person who did try to speak – Tim Buck – took a billy-club to the face. Bystanders and
onlookers significantly outnumbered those actually there to protest.

Despite what was by almost all accounts a punishing defeat for the C.P.C., \textit{The Worker}
informed its readers of a very different event: “Toronto Cossacks Charge 10,000 Workers in
Mad Riot to Crush Demonstration,” its misleading headline read.\footnote{Worker, 10 August 1929.}
And when other organizations (like the Trades and Labor Congress) denounced the actions of the police, they too
found themselves in the crosshairs of the C.P.C.: “The Boss Class and their lickspittles [sic] – the
social-reformists and the American Federation of Labour misleaders, lead the present bloody
attack on the Communist Party.”\footnote{Angus, 241.} The C.P.C. would organize two more rallies to protest their
situation in Toronto. The crowds of supporters dwindled as the Communists burned more and
more of their bridges with organizations that might otherwise have been sympathetic to their
case. The implementation of the Third Period in this way – as opposed to the measured approach
initially undertaken by Jack MacDonald – left large parts of the Party isolated, vulnerable and
stigmatized.

\footnote{17 Toronto Star, 1 August 1929.}
\footnote{18 Worker, 10 August 1929.}
\footnote{19 Angus, 241.}
Returning to life in Blairmore, it is important to question why these actions did not decimate support for the C.P.C. locally. Why did the implementation of the Third Period not have the same divisive effect here as it did, say, in Toronto? Much of the explanation for this—and for the Party’s later success—can be found in the way that the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada was radicalized, and the effects this had on miners, their families and their community between 1928 and 1932.

**Plan Z and the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada.**

Like a phoenix, the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada arose in the Crowsnest Pass from the remnants of the One Big Union and the United Mine Workers of America’s District 18. Upstart home locals came together to form a new “Canadian” union which, though not in a position to offer substantial resistance against the demands of the operators, was entirely under their own control. For some the period between 1925 and 1931 is remembered as almost idyllic: though miners’ standards of living did not improve, they were in full control of their own affairs. They exercised a degree of autonomy that they could only have dreamed about under a U.M.W.A. regime.

The creation of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada may not, however, have been quite as straightforward as the preceding paragraph—and conventional opinion—suggests. Foreseeing the collapse of the United Mine Workers of America in the Crowsnest Pass, the Communist Party assembled “Plan Z” to take advantage of the U.M.W.A.’s increasing unpopularity. This document—believed to have been written by Tim Buck—called for “one of the locals in which we still have some influence” to initiate a meeting of all home locals in order to establish a new Canadian miners’ union. Historians like Allen Seager point out that “The Convention was held,
according to the Party’s plan, at Blairmore on June 1\textsuperscript{st} [1925], at which time the Mine Workers Union of Canada was formally inaugurated.”\textsuperscript{20}

Though we do not know definitively whether Plan Z was the catalyst for the creation of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada or not, it is hard to ignore the striking similarities between the M.W.U.C.’s agenda and the programme of the Communist Party. Just as the C.P.C. was building coalitions and working within existing organizations in order to secure a place of influence, the M.W.U.C. represented a collection of “those opposed to the International for nationalistic reasons, as well as the Communist and non-communist wing.”\textsuperscript{21} And like many organizations in which the Party was gradually building its strength, the M.W.U.C. was not initially an organization which appeared to embrace radical ideas. Indeed, the organization’s first President – Frank Leary of Blairmore – used much of his first press release not to criticize the operators or the economic system which had been repressing miners, but the U.M.W.A. itself:

This organization is determined no UMW of A will be re-organized in the Pass under the control of the present regime. The district officials failed us in a critical hour. Six weeks before the district settlement of the wage question we urged the District officials to take action. They refused, saying they were acting on Instructions from Indianapolis. Separate agreements were therefore negotiated... we will not interfere with existing contracts. We plan to go along quietly, increasing our strength gradually.\textsuperscript{22}

Equally un-revolutionary was the organization’s first constitution.\textsuperscript{23} While making specific provision for equality between all miners regardless of “creed colour or nationality,” the


\textsuperscript{21} Seager, “A History of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada,” 34.

\textsuperscript{22} Report on Labour Organizations in Canada (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1925): 180.

\textsuperscript{23} It is important to note that the M.W.U.C. also initially was careful to drape itself in the robes of Empire and British standards. When describing their union to Premier H. Greenfield, the Coleman local described the necessity for the new union thus: “No dictatorship from people from any foreign country. The policy of labour organizations has been drafted and dictated to us by people who do not reside within the British Empire, therefore as Canadians we feel that we are big enough to look after our own affairs. With this view we formed the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada in the Crows Nest Pass...” Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.289, Roll 8, File 77, “John D. Gillis to H. Greenfield,” August 20, 1925. These documents are located in unnamed fonds at the
document also made it clear that the new union would only pursue the interests of miners “by lawful means.”

Despite having the external trappings of a “respectable” organization, a closer look reveals the success the C.P.C. enjoyed in installing its supporters in positions of authority within the upstart union. Though the M.W.U.C.’s first executive could be said to have encompassed the political spectrum (President Frank Leary of Blairmore was left-leaning, Vice-President John Gillan of Coleman was considered to be slightly right-of-centre and Secretary-Treasurer John Stokaluk was a well-known Communist), the legitimacy and access to miners (and their communities) granted to Stokaluk by virtue of his position on the executive should not be underestimated. While it is true that for the first few years of its existence the M.W.U.C. was not particularly radical or militant, it is also true that Party members like John Stokaluk were taking full advantage of their positions at the local, district and national levels to build support for the Communist movement.

As Steven Endicott reveals in his recent pathbreaking history of the Workers’ Unity League, the industrial policy of the C.P.C. as it applied to mining, essentially one of adhering to the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, was in brazen contradiction with the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.). As he explains, the “Mining Section of that body favoured building entirely new national unions for energy workers in countries like Canada and the United States.” In the Western Canadian context, this would have meant organizing a combined union of oil and

Archives of Alberta. As the depositor of the fonds was named R.A. Shepherd, they will be referred to in this thesis as the Shepherd Fonds, along with the pertinent accession numbers.

24 Report of Labour Organizations in Canada, 1925, p. 26. It should be noted that the inclusion of ethnicity reflects a similar demand in the O.B.U. constitution and speaks to the attempts by coal operators to divide their workforce using ethnocentric and racist arguments.
coal workers. Harvey Murphy, and his advisors Tim Buck and Tom Ewen, thought this policy ill-advised. As Endicott explains, “They believed that the Alberta miners would not be sympathetic to any attempt to establish yet another miners’ union, especially when barely five years earlier the communists had led them in creating the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada. Why not try to set the existing union back on its militant track?” Although often described as a party entirely subservient to Moscow, on this occasion the C.P.C. in essence defied its R.I.L.U. and Comintern superiors. In turn, Harvey Murphy is shown by Endicott to have been quite willing and able to defy orders from Toronto. At least with respect to its policies in the coalfields, the old stereotype of the C.P.C.’s subservience to Moscow, one many other scholars are finding vulnerable to empirical counter-evidence, no longer has a shred of credibility.

The idea that the M.W.U.C. could exist as a union that was “everything to everyone” came to an end in 1931, as the Communist Party of Canada finally brought itself into line with the Communist International and the policies of the Third Period. Cooperation with other allies on the left was out, and the creation of radical organizations completely Communist in their outlook became the priority. It follows then that C.P.C. activists within the M.W.U.C. called for the organization to disaffiliate from the All Canadian Congress of Labour in favor of a new Red trade union center called the Workers’ Unity League (W.U.L.). According to Tom Ewan (who would lead the W.U.L. in the coming years):

The formation of the Workers’ Unity League was therefore, in essence, the formation of a new revolutionary trade union centre, given the authority by its founding convention to charter union locals, councils and regional federations... to provide a trade union structure, organization and policy, designed to mobilize the full strength and maximum unity in any and all economic and political struggles. And to regard the strike as labour’s

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Endicott, *Raising the Workers’ Flag*, 45.
key weapon in determining the social and economic returns for the sale and use of its
creative labour power.\(^\text{26}\)

In order to convince the miners of the need to move from the legal forms of action embraced in
their original constitution to the revolutionary model described above by Ewan, the Party
dispatched a man to the Crowsnest Pass who would become synonymous with Communism in
Blairmore: Harvey Murphy.

While conducting interviews for this project, I quickly realized that for many
interviewees memories of Communism and Harvey Murphy were one and the same. Many
simply could not discuss the Red years at Blairmore without invoking the name of Harvey
Murphy, whether with admiration, disgust, or some combination of the two. Tillie Korman, for
example, did not hide her disdain for the man ("Goddamn Harvey Murphy.")\(^\text{27}\)
Others, such as Alvina Paulus took for granted that Communism in the Pass was inextricable from Harvey
Murphy, and seemed shocked when the connection was not immediately made between the two
("Somebody must have told you about Harvey Murphy?").\(^\text{28}\)
Finally individuals such as Julia
Lant associated the two in a neutral way, acknowledging Murphy was a part of their shared
history without implying favour or disdain ("Last name was Murphy. Harvey Murphy! Yup! So
we used to go to his meetings...").\(^\text{29}\)

The reality is that in the case of Blairmore, there is no way
to have a full understanding of what occurred here during the 1930s without an appreciation for
the unique and important social and political position that Harvey Murphy occupied in this
valley.

\(^{26}\) Library and Archives Canada, Communist Party of Canada Fonds, D12 T.U.E.L. Correspondence Re: A.C.C.L.
Convention, 22 October, 1929.

\(^{27}\) "Tillie Korman Interview," in author’s possession.

\(^{28}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number

\(^{29}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number
2012.019.0093, “Julia Lant interview.”
Born in Kitchener, Ontario in 1900, Harvey Murphy shared some formational experiences with Blairmore miners. Like many of them, he was introduced to radical trade unionism during the upsurge of the One Big Union at the end of the Great War. And just as local miners begrudgingly remained in the U.M.W.A. for a period of time after the defeat of the O.B.U., Murphy was involved with the “Young Progressive Miners’ Movement” within the U.M.W.A., which sought to remove the leadership of John L. Lewis and replace it with a more radical (or at the very least left-leaning) alternative. By the age of 24 Murphy had been appointed a District Organizer by the Communist Party, and over the next few years led strikes with varying degrees of success, notably in Windsor and Hamilton. Though personable, he had a reputation of firmly upholding the Party line.30

And it was this steadfast adherence to C.P.C. policy which brought Murphy into conflict with another local heavyweight, “Big John” Stokaluk, almost immediately after arriving in the Crowsnest Pass. The tension, however, had more to do with internal C.P.C. politics than it did with re-orienting the M.W.U.C. Not only was Big John the Secretary-Treasurer of the M.W.U.C., but he was also an ethnic Ukrainian, and as such was heavily involved with the C.P.C.-affiliated Ukrainian Labour Farmer Temple Association (U.L.F.T.A). The U.L.F.T.A. provided not only a political nucleus for Reds of Ukrainian descent, but performed social and cultural functions as well. According to Allen Seager, “The power and influence of the ‘mass organizations’ [ethnic] was regarded with mixed feelings by many revolutionists themselves. Emphasis on the ‘foreigner’ obviously led to sectarianism and the isolation of the Party along

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national lines, something which Anglo-Saxon Communists regarded as fatal to the organization.”

Documents from the Communist International made available well after his thesis was written confirm Seager’s argument. In a closed letter from the Executive Committee of the Communist International (E.C.C.I.) to the Canadian Party, it was argued that

Not only is this national composition of the Canadian Party a serious handicap in the way of its further growth, but in many respects it does not yet function as a centralized Communist Party, but as a body of federated parties. A large percentage of the party membership still restricts its activities to the respective language organizations and language forms of the organizations are still perpetuated within the Party itself. Such facts as the complete absence of French members in the Party (though the French Canadians make up one-third of the total population and are the most exploited section of the working class), and the low percentage of Anglo-Saxon members show clearly the weakness and isolation of the Party.

Earlier correspondence between the E.C.C.I. and the Party had gone even further, suggesting that not only was the Party’s composition ethnically incorrect, but that language federations like Stokaluk’s U.L.F.T.A. were not pulling their weight in the Party:

The mass work of the Party among the Ukrainian and Finnish workers who are Circled around us has been negligible; our Party leadership in these organizations have conducted no real factional activity, but have continued to carry on dramatic and social work and almost no political activity calculated to bring these large masses of workers into the general stream of the Canadian labour movement... [Language groups within the Party therefore] must conduct real Communist work to the end of actually activising [sic] and vitalising these organizations and bringing them into the general stream of the POLITICAL STRUGGLES of the workers... the Central Committee has not sufficiently fought these errors; has too often capitulated to the demands for leniency of the Ukrainian and Finnish comrades. This is dangerous.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Murphy’s determination to refocus and reform Ukrainian members away from the U.L.F.T.A. in the Pass quickly brought him (and the Party) into conflict with Big John Stokaluk.

Interestingly, though, tension had been building between Big John and the Party brass for some time previous to the split over language federations. Foreshadowing what would become a major irritant for the Party during the 1932 strike and the administration of Mayor Knight, Stokaluk believed that his time was better spent actively organizing. He only sporadically filed the most basic of reports on his activities in the Pass to Party headquarters. And when he was asked to be more diligent in reporting on actions taken in the field, the minutes of the Political Committee reveal that Stokaluk “...sent a letter complaining about the amount of reporting he had to do... and was quite angry that they had expected detailed reports from him so frequently.”34 He felt so strongly about being micromanaged that he offered “…to resign so as to give some of those who complained an opportunity of doing some of the work.”35

Though Stokaluk was implicitly allowed this type of blatant insubordination in 1928, his stand against the C.I.-initiated changes in regards to the U.L.F.T.A. and other language federations was a pill the C.P.C. could not swallow in the Third Period. And in a political culture in which self-criticism had become the norm, Big John refused not only to toe the new Party line, but even to admit that his stance was “incorrect.” According to Party documents, “The line followed by John Stokaluk represents the most dangerous opportunism... [and] after being given

34 LAC, CI, Reel K-275, “Minutes of the Political Committee Meeting,” 23 April 1928.
35 Ibid.
repeated opportunities to correct himself, John Stokaluk still contends he has a correct policy..."36 Stokaluk was summarily expelled from the Party in 1930.

The reasons given for his suspension were telling. Within a Crowsnest context he had undoubtedly been criticized by non-radicals for his political bent, but there is no evidence to suggest that anyone believed his M.W.U.C.-based organizing had been anything but stellar. Indeed, as we have seen, he preferred hands-on organizing to talk and reports. Some of the charges brought forward in relation to his expulsion were highly questionable. They included, for example, his “Refusal to accept Party policy in the mining industry and for sabotaging the organization of the Workers’ Unity League and the fight to turn the Mine Workers Union of Canada into a left-wing union.”37 The document went on to question not only his personal friendship with M.W.U.C. President Frank Wheatley, but also to suggest Stokaluk’s boyish subservience to Wheatley: “Stokoluk [sic] and him [sic] always worked together like father and son (of course Stokoluk [sic] as the son)...”38 Further charges of slanderous gossiping and having a bad attitude also figured on the list of John Stokaluk’s crimes. After much dubious allegation-mongering, the document finally does underline the real reason he had to go:

The Communist Party demands of all its members full support and that once a policy is decided upon by the Party, all members must carry it out even if they personally do not agree with it. Stokoluk [sic] refused to carry out Party Policies; he set himself up above the Party. Thus, he is expelled from the Party; this will not weaken the Party, but will strengthen it. We have removed an element that only served to hinder the Party and the working class.39

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
It seems likely that after numerous and frequent citations from the E.C.C.I. regarding the incorrect role being played by the mass movements within the Canadian Party, that the C.P.C. chose to make Stokaluk a scapegoat. For his part, Murphy closely followed the lead of his Toronto-based colleagues and denounced the U.L.F.T.A. as “a proven right wing bunch.” He stressed that instead of ethnic associations within the Party what the C.P.C. really needed was “good fighting Anglo-Saxons who have no temples or W.B.A.’s.”

An Important Balancing Act

Interestingly, the Blairmore local was, by and large, able to accept the changes in Comintern policy as they played out within the national union without getting itself entangled in the infighting over issues like ethnicity which were wreaking havoc in the C.P.C. as a whole. Despite John Stokaluk’s personal likeability, strong roots in the Pass, place of authority within the Union and influence over the Ukrainian community, there is no evidence to suggest that Stokaluk encouraged anyone to leave the U.L.F.T.A., the C.P.C. or the M.W.U.C. over his expulsion. And thus an important contributing factor in Communism’s later success in Blairmore becomes evident. Although the M.W.U.C. was locally controlled by known Reds, it had not yet affiliated with the Workers’ Unity League, and therefore was not subject to the harshest implications of Third Period policy. Stokaluk might have been removed from the Party, but he was able to remain active in the M.W.U.C. This in effect created two Red organizations in Blairmore – the Union and the Party – with each playing an important (yet distinct) role in local life. For the most devoted cadres, membership in the Party provided the discipline and ideological stimulation that they craved. But for the vast majority of Blairmorites, the brand of Communism being marketed by the Union local was much more attractive. As we will see

below, they managed to strike a balance between promoting the larger Communist message without alienating potential (or future) supporters.

The union was, to an increasingly obvious extent, openly supportive of the C.P.C. in Blairmore. In fact, evidence suggests that within the local itself there was an increasing level of militancy and support for the Party. In April of 1929, for example, the Blairmore detachment of the R.C.M.P. reported that:

All the Communists read “The Worker” and Communist literature, and also subscribe to “The Young Worker” for their children. The Communists in this district were trying to pass a motion to request the Mine Workers Union of Canada to subscribe to “The Worker” for every member of that union and pay for same with union money...41

Thus, while we know the Communist Party was a house divided, the important role played by the M.W.U.C. in a community like Blairmore actually lent stability (and even prestige) to the Party within a local context. The bond formed by miners over the past decade was enough not only to keep the local from fracturing, but to allow activists within it to pursue the C.P.C. agenda as they interpreted it.

In a somewhat ironic twist of events (given the tension ethnicity was causing at a national level for the Party), local Communists actively used ethnic stereotypes to their advantage in order to funnel money to the C.P.C.’s newspaper, The Worker. In April 1929 The Worker printed the names of ten supporters from Blairmore and Coleman who had donated five dollars each in support of the paper. All of the names listed appeared to be Finnish. When the paper was intercepted by the R.C.M.P., they immediately instructed Corporal T.E. Ryan to make a trip from his home detachment of Fernie, B.C. to the Alberta side of the Pass in order to locate the

individuals named as C.P.C. benefactors.\textsuperscript{42} It would be reasonable to assume that tracking down ten individuals in a small, close-knit mining community should have been a relatively easy task. (Anyone who has lived in a small town for any amount of time knows just how true the adage “everyone knows everyone” actually is!) When Ryan reported back to his superiors, however, he was forced to admit that he could not locate even one of the persons he was looking for. The names were not on the payroll of any of the mining companies, nor did they receive mail at the post office. “From the discreet inquiries made,” Ryan stated, “I find that there are no men of the names mentioned known in either Coleman or Blairmore.”\textsuperscript{43}

This set off a firestorm for R.C.M.P. brass: “It is very strange to me that Finnish names... cannot be traced,” fumed Detective Sergeant A.J. Davidson in the RCMP’s Calgary Sub-Division office to the Division’s commanding officer.\textsuperscript{44} When his report made its way to the Commissioner’s office, it was sent back with an order to try again to locate the men in question. Considerable time and resources were allocated to locating the men who were funding \textit{The Worker}: lists were compiled by the local detachment of all Finns in both Coleman and Blairmore and, person by person, individuals were excluded as possibilities. Following this logic, it was hoped that the nine or ten individuals left after such exclusions were noted would be identified as the donors that the Mounties were hunting. In the end this painstaking process of elimination was not successful either.\textsuperscript{45} The search for the individuals responsible lasted until the end of the year with no success. The best the force could do was to speculate that the C.P.C.’s donors “used these Finnish names as a camouflage to send in their donations to the ‘Worker’ not wanting to

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Finnish Communists – Coleman,” 30 September 1929.
use their own names for fear the people they were working for would see them in the paper and discharge them.”

While the mental image of R.C.M.P. officers traipsing all over the Crowsnest Pass in search of radicals who did not exist is somewhat amusing, the devotion of such a large number of man hours and resources to the search is in itself instructive. It is clear that the R.C.M.P. officers took the radical threat seriously enough in the Pass to ensure they knew who the radicals were (and perhaps more importantly, which of them were capable of funding revolutionary activities). For their part, the citizens who sent their donations to *The Worker* had demonstrated not only that they were wise to conceal their identities, but that they were willing (and able) to use dominant social perceptions of ethnic groups to their advantage. To this day the names of these persons are unknown, as are their actual ethnic backgrounds.

Returning to the situation within the M.W.U.C. itself, the local at Blairmore managed to avoid much of the turbulence that marked the transition from the union’s membership in the All Canadian Congress of Labour to the Workers’ Unity League. Indeed, as locals like Lethbridge chose to withdraw from the M.W.U.C. rather than be associated with the Communist movement, miners in the Coaldale local successfully launched a recall campaign against non-radical members of the executive, such as President Frank Wheatley, and saw to it they were succeeded by known radicals such as James Sloan. It was through this process of attrition of the more conservative elements that the C.P.C. slowly gained control over the union apparatus. The Party did not actually convert miners *en masse* into its organization in terms of card-carrying members.

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And thus as Blairmorites turned their backs on the disappointing decade of the 1920s, they did so with a unique political balancing act. Though the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada was becoming increasingly radical in its outlook, the most divisive and controversial aspects of the turn in C.I. policy were left to the Party itself to champion. This created a two-tiered system whereby the majority of those who were sympathetic with or curious about the arguments being put forward by the Communist Party supported the M.W.U.C., while the few who were serious dogmatists or theoreticians engaged with the small Party cells that had developed in tandem with the union. While fights between Communists and moderates persisted in places like Drumheller and further north along the Coal Branch, miners in Blairmore continued to frame radicalism in a more inclusive way.

Plans by the Blairmore local for May Day celebrations in 1930 speak volumes in this regard. To monitor the events, the R.C.M.P. dispatched Corporal J.J. Weaver of the Blairmore detachment to take full stock of the day’s activities and to report back to K Division headquarters. According to Weaver’s report, “there were large crowds of people, including women and children lining the streets of Blairmore to watch the parade... a fair estimate of the total number of people who were in the field where the demonstrations were held would be about 1800 or 2000.”47 Interestingly, the union committee which put together the events seemed deliberate in its attempts to balance Communist agitation and symbolism with other less radical perspectives. For example, the speakers that day included well-known Communists like Harvey Murphy, Tom O’Sullivan and Mike Woipychen, but the committee also included local miner

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(and Blairmore M.W.U.C. local executive member) Evan Morgan. While the first three individuals were indisputably radical in their outlook, Morgan was known locally to have reservations about the Communist Party of Canada. Thus, while Murphy, O’Sullivan and Woipychen delivered fiery speeches denouncing capitalism and calling on miners to rise up against their economic oppressors, Evan Morgan focused on non-radical and non-controversial themes in his speech. Likewise, the organizing committee decided that it would be appropriate to have a large Red flag present during all events, but were also careful to ensure that the Union Jack surmounted it on the flagpole. While this drew the ire of some Party members – Tom O’Sullivan commented that “the two made a poor combination” – for others it represented the coexistence of those of differing perspectives within the local itself.

With the benefit of retrospective analysis, there is one other interesting thing that comes out of Weaver’s Reports: the way that those who were attending the event behaved. In both of the reports he submitted, Weaver is almost deliberate in the assurances he offers to his superiors that no trouble was in the offing at Blairmore. For example, when describing the parade of miners through town, Weaver concedes that there were large crowds, but qualifies this statement with the observation, “I did not notice any cheering.” Similarly, when estimating the effect that the speakers had on the crowd, he reported that “...only a small percentage were interested in the speeches made by the Communists... many of those who were listening did so out of curiosity only.” And this evidence speaks to exactly how important the flexibility exercised by the

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48 Evan Morgan was reputed to be among the wealthiest miners in Blairmore because of the favoured locations assigned to him by the pit bosses at the West Canadian’s Greenhill Mine. See Allen Seager, “A History of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada,” 159.
50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
M.W.U.C. local truly was. Where Weaver sees lack of interest an historian might rather see potential. For example, while there may have been hundreds of people listening to the speeches of Murphy, O’Sullivan and Woipychen out of curiosity, the important part is that they were in fact listening. They may not have been ready to hoist the Red flag over their own houses or take out a membership in the C.P.C., but they were open to what the Party and its representatives had to say. It was this curiosity, this openness to the C.P.C.’s message, that was important. If the placement of a Union Jack on the same flagpole as the Red flag or the inclusion of a man with known reservations about the C.P.C. on the platform with agitators was appalling to some, for others it provided the sense of familiarity that allowed them to be present to hear what the more radical members of the community had to say.

In this way, Blairmore’s radicals seemed content to allow the union local to focus on the needs of the miners while the C.P.C. itself dealt with revolutionary agitation. And this approach appears to have borne fruit for local organizers. Between May Day and the end of September, attendance at meetings sponsored by the Communist Party doubled. More and more one found non-miners, women and children at meetings. As attendance grew and diversified, the content of speeches shifted to meet the changing demographics of those present. Earlier talks, for example, focused on political topics like electoral tactics for the upcoming provincial election or a discussion of the reasons that Labourite candidates were no better than Conservatives or Liberal nominees for office.53 As the crowds grew and changed, so too did Murphy’s message.

The political rhetoric was still front and centre when he mounted the stage at the Orpheum Theater on 21 September 1930. His stump speech had expanded to encompass topics that would appeal more broadly to those in the audience (for example the ability to put bread and

53 Ibid.
butter on the table). But what sticks out most from this meeting was his uncanny ability to foreshadow the ethnic stereotyping and categorization that would come during the strike of 1932. As the officer present tells it:

He stated that all this business of dividing people because of their colour or their religion or what lodge they belonged to or the kind of beer they drank was so much rot. There were only two colours according to him and they were red and yellow. To gain their ends the workers must be Red, and he would be in favour of calling white yellow.54

It was by reading his audience and tailoring his message to be meaningful to all in attendance that Harvey Murphy started to transform those who may have been merely “curious” during the May Day celebrations into individuals who were increasingly likely to support an outright C.P.C. agenda in the future.

### Radicalization

This balanced approach, which had preserved the M.W.U.C. at Blairmore from its founding in 1925 through 1930, did not last long in the new decade. In the winter of 1930 Harvey Murphy left Blairmore for training at the Lenin School in Moscow. The C.P.C. plainly thought the radicalization of the M.W.U.C. was imminent. At the union’s annual conference in 1930 Harvey Murphy, James Farby and others had pushed hard for the organization to disaffiliate from the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, a proposition that passed with only three dissenting votes.55 The proposition that the M.W.U.C. join the Workers’ Unity League was not as easily achieved, however, with the contentious motion put aside until May 1931 when a referendum of all members would be held.

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Victory in this referendum was a critical objective for the Communist Party and key to its plans in regards to implementing the Comintern line. While Murphy was absent, the C.P.C. sent Malcolm Bruce to the field to aggressively promote M.W.U.C. affiliation with the Workers Unity League.\textsuperscript{56} He was joined in the Pass by a figure that surprised many: Big John Stokaluk. Though Stokaluk had been tossed from the Party over his refusal to recognize the new line for ethnic mass movements within the C.P.C., he evidently regretted his decision and through a process of self-criticism had been rehabilitated.\textsuperscript{57} Though Stokaluk himself may not have been able to clinch a victory for the W.U.L. proposition, his personal sociability and gregarious character allowed Bruce access into communities which traditionally distrusted strangers; Murphy, of course, had been a special exception to this rule as he had married a woman from Blairmore.\textsuperscript{58}

With the referendum for W.U.L. affiliation scheduled for 11 May, the celebrations planned around May Day in 1931 could not have been more different from the events which had taken place there the year before. Gone was the somewhat reconciliatory tone. Communist Party activists Malcolm Bruce and Joe Farby, both of Toronto, were brought in as keynote speakers by the organizing committee to address the crowds. Farby and Bruce were joined on the stage by

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 110.
\textsuperscript{57} In order to be reinstated, Stokaluk not only needed to do “punishment” assignments, but he also had to agree to the following conditions:

1. Comrade Stokoluk must unreservedly support the Party Policy in the Mining fields.
2. Comrade Stokoluk will admit his bad approach to the D.E.C. and that he was wrong in not reporting to the D.E.C. before being hired out as an organizer for the MWU of C.
3. Comrade Stokoluk will write a signed article along the above line in the next issue of the “Western Miner” pledging full support.
4. Comrade Stokoluk will lead the fight in Coleman and Blairmore locals of the MWU of C and prepare to pass the resolution (Unity Resolution) and to get the support for the “Western Miner.”
5. Comrade Stolokuk will repudiate the statements made by him that <illegible>.

\textsuperscript{58} Seager, “A History of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada,” 111.
local radicals John Stokaluk, J. Ukrainitz of the Young Communist League, and Archie Fraser. And perhaps in the most stunning departure from the year before, Evan Morgan – who had been relatively apolitical in his May Day speech of 1930 – was invited back to make his first public speech in outright support of the C.P.C. and Workers’ Unity League.

When the C.P.C.-sponsored speakers reached the podium, they pulled no punches when it came to content. Corporal J.J. Weaver was again reporting to his superiors at K Division headquarters, and had the following to say about the comments made by Joe Farby:

During his address, which was of the typical soap box variety, being very fiery and denunciatory, the speaker pointed to the Union Jack... and stated that when the workers had gained control then they would not be compelled to carry [the Union Jack] with them, referring to it as an emblem of misery, starvation, persecution and tyranny, and known as such in Africa, India, and all over the world wherever it was flown.59

He continued his speech by criticizing the “labour fakers” who were challenging the M.W.U.C.’s affiliation with the Workers’ Unity League, speculating that they were doing this “...at the behest of the coal operators, the latter being smart enough to get the labour men to ask for it, [with] the operators and nobody else reaping the benefits.”60 And for those who missed the speakers or were not able to hear what was said, the message was made clear during the parade: “In the parade there were red banners bearing inscriptions such as ‘Hands off Soviet Russia,’ ‘Lift the Embargo on Soviet Goods,’ [and] ‘Women don’t let allow your sons to be slaughtered in Imperialist Wars,’ etc.”61

Also absent from Weaver’s 1931 report was the dismissive tone he had used one year earlier to describe the events. In fact the only criticism he could offer in terms of the success of

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60 Ibid.
the celebrations was in relation to Malcolm Bruce’s speech, and even this was a qualified statement: it was not that people were uninterested in what the speaker had had to say, Weaver told his superiors, but rather that Bruce “appears to be more educated than the majority of the radical labour organizers and that most of his speech went over the heads of the majority of his hearers.”

Weaver’s report covered many of the same topics that he had discussed in reports on previous May Day celebrations: the size of the crowds, the names of speakers and the content of their speeches, as well as other things like the mood of the people and the response to the non-political events like the sports competitions which were also held on that day. What does appear for the first time is concern about the authorities’ ability to control the crowds in the event they got out of control. The Alberta Provincial Police had told the R.C.M.P. that they had credible information that several anti-Communist individuals from nearby Bellevue intended to use May Day to provoke a physical conflict with known Reds and their supporters while they were parading from that town to Blairmore at the beginning of the day. So for the first time since the One Big Union had been active in the Pass, the local detachment had been “...reinforced from Lethbridge, MacLeod and Pincher Creek in case of trouble,” though the trouble they forecast was not in fact forthcoming.

**Georges Vissac Inadvertently Helps the Workers’ Unity League**

Just as the affiliation drive was reaching a frenzied crescendo in the Crowsnest Pass, Georges Vissac, the leading figure of the W.C.C., made an error in judgement which would push

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63 Ibid.
many fence-sitters into the W.U.L.’s camp.\textsuperscript{64} Thinking that layoffs might convince miners on an individual level of a need to maintain decorum, Vissac announced on 15 April that forty men would be laid off at the company’s Bellevue operations and in conversation with M.W.U.C. officials at Blairmore “made it plain that the same thing will happen at Blairmore.”\textsuperscript{65} In a letter to the Premier, the M.W.U.C. asked that he use his good offices to convince Vissac to spread the work among the miners rather than lay off a few of them entirely. “When we put our proposition to Mr. Vissac he told [us] it could not be done and that there would be a hundred men laid-off and probably more and told us that the only thing that could be done for these 100 men was to get them government support.”\textsuperscript{66} They further indicated to Brownlee that they thought the position of Vissac was “unfair” and that it should be “no concern of his” how many men are working in the mine as it would cost him the same thing in wages regardless.\textsuperscript{67}

It is safe to say that the fairness of Vissac’s move was not a great concern to the provincial or federal government. Yet its implications for an already fragile situation were profound. In a letter to the Premier, local Member of Parliament G.G. Coote warned his provincial colleague that “the situation appears to me to be very serious,” and advised him that “it would be much better to have provision made [read: relief made available] for these unemployed before any serious trouble might occur as a result of the throwing out of employment such a large number of men.”\textsuperscript{68} When Coote’s cries for help were ignored, the Hon.

\textsuperscript{64} Georges Vissac and George Vissac are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation depending on whether the speaker anglicized the name.
\textsuperscript{65} Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.289, Roll 55, File 515, “J.F. Dougdale to J.E. Brownlee,” 15 April 1931.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., G.G. Coote to J.E. Brownlee, 22 April 1931.
G.D. Robertson telegrammed from the Crowsnest Pass a warning to the Brownlee Government – “trouble feared.” Action was imperative.69

When Premier Brownlee did propose a solution to his federal colleagues, it was notable for the role it outlined for the provincial government: nothing. In a period where the Province was administering relief to almost every community within its boundaries, Brownlee suggested any solution to Blairmore’s problems would be found not with Edmonton, but in Ottawa. In a telegram, he “suggested Minister of Mines, Ottawa, has much more influence over operating companies than Provincial Government and a word from Minister to Company would assist considerably.”70 And in regards to the suggested relief, Premier Brownlee unceremoniously slammed the door on that possibility as well. In a rather unlikely statement, he advised the Federal Government that “…after conversations with the Department of Public Works, I find there is no work in the Crows’ Nest Pass which could possibly give employment to so many men.”71

When Brownlee refused to act, the Federal Government did. The Honourable M. Gordon, Minister of Mines, was in quick contact with Georges Vissac “to induce them to keep all their men on the payroll at the present time” while the Minister of Labour agreed to make available federal relief in the Crowsnest Pass in the event that the layoffs did occur.72 And though that relief would come in the form of a new relief camp near Hillcrest, Alberta, the reality was that the federal government considered the situation volatile enough that immediate action was

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70 Ibid., J.E. Brownlee to G.G. Coote, 28 April 1931. Also see Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 39.289, Roll 55, File 515, J.E. Brownlee to G.D. Robertson, 25 April 1931.
72 Ibid., G.G. Coote to J. E Brownlee, 27 April 1931.
warranted. One must ask why the provincial and federal governments had such divergent opinions on the matter? The answer can be found, I believe, in a report made by the Alberta Provincial Police to the Premier’s office: “seniority will be the deciding factor regarding the lay off, but I have no doubt that this company will endeavour to get rid of some of their Communist element if possible.”

Where the Premier saw the possibility of exporting his problem, the federal government sought to contain theirs. And in the end federal intervention won the day; Vissac agreed to back away from the massive lay-offs and share work amongst all miners, keeping even the most radical men on the job, at least for the time being.

Interestingly, when this relief camp was set up it exacerbated many of the frustrations that it was intended to relieve. Sergeant G. Jones of the Alberta Provincial Police reports the following application process: “I did not on this day take an application for relief from these men, but had them sign their names on a list. Later proceeding to Hillcrest [I] interviewed the mine officials and G.L. Cruikshank, M.L.A., and then picked out those who were the most deserving.”

What remains hard to determine is how Mr. Jones, along with mine and government officials, determined exactly who was – or was not – “deserving” of relief, thus opening the process up to claims that the process was unfair and biased against Reds and agitators who were as deserving of relief as those who were taken on in the camps. This selective hiring only exacerbated earlier complaints regarding relief work in Blairmore. (The Mine Workers’ Union of Canada had written to the Premier to complain that the rate of pay violated the social minimum in the Crowsnest Pass, and asked that they be paid more: “[W]e are writing] to put up a protest against the wages [of] .40 per hour [paid] to the men on relief work in

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Blairmore. As you must be aware, 50 per hour is the least paid to the workers for this kind of work in the Pass and we feel that this is a direct cut in the standard of living.”75) It is thus clear that for miners in the Pass, even getting a position in the much-maligned relief camps would not solve the problems of the destitute, as the rate of pay was considered to be too low to allow workers to make ends meet.76

Affiliation

When the time came to vote on the affiliation of the M.W.U.C. with the Workers’ Unity League, the results in Blairmore very closely echoed what Corporal Weaver had reported only ten days earlier. The Reds had turned the curiosity about the radical left of 1930 into massive support for affiliation with an overtly and unapologetically Communist union centre in 1931:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCAL</th>
<th>FOR</th>
<th>AGAINST</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>% FOR WORKERS UNITY LEAGUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bellevue</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blairmore</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleman</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corbin</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The results of the affiliation referendum at Blairmore marked an important milestone in the history of the town. For the first time it could be definitively said that an absolute majority of the miners there voted for the radicalization of society on the lines suggested by the Workers’

75 Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 693289, Roll 55, File 515, Mine Workers’ Union of Canada Local no. 1 to Premier Brownlee, 13 May 1931.
76 Interestingly, even this meagre amount of money and work was rolled back during the strike of 1932, with the Premier cancelling relief reviews “until the situation has somewhat cleared up.” See Archives of Alberta, Accession Number 69.289, Role 55, File 516, J.E. Brownlee to A.A. McKenzie, 12 March 1932.
Unity League. But more importantly, the margin of victory at Blairmore was so great that it also effectively puts to rest the arguments that certain ethnic blocs were more (or less) prone to radical ideas than others. With only twenty members opposed, a large majority of M.W.U.C. supporters who were either Canadian or British-born had chosen affiliation with the red W.U.L., and through it the Red International of Labour Unions. Where margins of victory were slimmer, for example in Coleman, it was still possible for the so-called “True Blue British Element” to claim that the W.U.L. and the Communist Party of Canada were foreign to British ideals. No such claim was possible at Blairmore. The result also cemented Blairmore’s position as the new radical hotbed of the Crowsnest coalfields.\textsuperscript{77}

Buoyed by the unprecedented level of support given to them by Blairmore miners, the Communist Party of Canada lost no time in trying to expand its support base. The Party advertised widely for a meeting on 2 June 1931 to establish a branch of the Young Communist League in Blairmore, with a similar meeting to be held in Coleman the next day. This meeting is important as it marks the first time that the Communist Party used the M.W.U.C. Hall as a venue for meetings and recruitment. It thus went beyond a barrier it had been careful to maintain before affiliation with the W.U.L.\textsuperscript{78} The meeting was well attended and Farby put his case to the sixty people present. According to Corporal Weaver, present in plain clothes:

Farby stated it was very necessary for the young people to become organized into a youths’ section of the Communist Party under the guidance of the Communist Party. It

\textsuperscript{77} It is clear that more conservative citizens expected the provincial government to step in and eliminate (or mitigate) what they considered to be a radical and illegal force in their communities. One miner, for example, wrote to Premier Brownlee stating “…the union has voted to affiliate with the Unity League which is pure and simple the Communist Party… surely your government is not going to sit still and allow the Communist Party to dominate a bunch of loyal British Subjects?” Thus while it is evident retrospectively that the government (and specifically its police agencies) was aware of the problem and monitoring it, it is also clear that this cautious stance was perceived to be inaction by individuals who resided in the affected communities. See, for example, Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.298, Role 18, file 167, C.H. Hanley to J.E. Brownlee, 2 June 1932.

\textsuperscript{78} It should be noted that the meeting was originally scheduled to take place on the grounds of the M.W.U.C. hall in Blairmore, but due to inclement weather it was moved inside.
was more difficult to organize the older men 100% as they had old trade union ideas implanted into them, and it was necessary to overcome this, whereas with the young men just coming up if they got started off right in years to come they would be the undoing of the capitalist class.79

Though the success of the event in terms of recruitment is not known, $1.35 was collected at Blairmore in support of Farby. This marked a distinct victory when compared to the same event at Coleman, where no collection was taken.80

**R.C.M.P. Observances and State Repression**

Such meetings were not without risk, something that Joe Farby would find out first hand. Just after these recruitment drives took place, “…repressive measures were taken against the Alberta Communists, with the raiding of their Calgary offices. Most of the Party’s leading militants in the province were arrested, including James Farby, Phil Luck and John O’Sullivan – all of whom had been active in the miners and unemployed workers’ movements.”81

Given that Blairmore’s commitment to the Workers’ Unity League (and through them the Communist Party) was relatively new, one might be forgiven for thinking that such intimidation tactics would have proven successful. Such, however, was not the case. Far from backing down (or taking their radical action underground), the executive of the Blairmore local of the M.W.U.C. called for a parade and mass meeting on 1 August 1931 to “fight against the growing police terror.”82 And should things get out of hand, detachment commander Weaver was clear in what he believed would happen: “the police will be object of the ‘reds’ attacks,” he warned his

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80 Ibid.
82 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Communist Party Of Canada (Crow’s Nest Pass),” 21 July 1931. They also made their objections quite clear in a letter from the Blairmore local of the M.W.U.C. to the Premier, which stated “We the workers of the Crows Nest Pass strongly protest against the imprisonment of 41 workers in Calgary. Therefore we demand their immediate release.” See Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 693289, Roll 55, File 515, Mine Workers’ Union of Canada Local no. 1 to J.E. Brownlee, 31 July 1931.
superiors.\textsuperscript{83} When Weaver’s report arrived, it is clear that it was taken seriously. F. Humbly, commanding officer of the East Kootenay Sub-District immediately offered to send reinforcements to Blairmore.

As the first of August approached, police scrambled to get as much information as they could about the upcoming event, but with little success. Though some unimportant information leaked out of the local in dribs and drabs, traditional sources of police intelligence were coming up dry. In a particularly refreshing moment, the usually-calm Weaver let a tone of frustration seep into his communications with Division Headquarters: “May I say that it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure any definite information as to what takes place at the union meetings inasmuch as they are more or less in control of the ‘red’ element and the anti-reds do not bother their heads to attend regular meetings.”\textsuperscript{84} As the day in question approached, the local detachment prepared for the worst, blind to the details that had been agreed upon by the M.W.U.C. with respect to its plans.

An analysis of the reports submitted to R.C.M.P. headquarters after the event is revealing, both in terms of the strategies employed by the M.W.U.C. as well as the light it sheds on the ways that the police force itself was handling the escalating radicalism in the Pass. In regards to the former, separate reports were filed by Corporal Weaver and by Detective Corporal T.E. Ryan, who was one of the reinforcements sent to Blairmore from Fernie, B.C. In his report, Ryan paints a picture of a well-attended protest that doubled as a community event:

The parade proper was led by twelve young girls singing the “Red Flag.” Several banners were carried by foreigners in the parade bearing the following inscriptions: “Women fight against war – do not allow your sons to be slaughtered.” “Down with Imperialist War


against the Soviet Union.” “Protest against Bennett’s starvation budget.” “For the Non-
Contributory State Employment Insurance.” “For the Release of all Political Prisoners.”
[and] “Workers, rally behind this demonstration.”

Whereas such events had been distinctly male-focused in the past, now the organizing committee
put children front and centre at the beginning of this parade. In the coming months and years, the
involvement of the community itself – not just the miners – in parades, protests, strikes and
celebrations became an ever-more-evident phenomenon in Blairmore. This theme of inclusion is
repeated in the banners carried in the parade itself, many of which made a specific mention of
women and children.

Such inclusivity could also be found in the addresses delivered by Malcolm Bruce and
John O’Sullivan. While Bruce’s discourse contained the level of theoretical content we would
expect from a Communist of his calibre – he dwelt on such issues as unemployment and the
corrupting nature of capitalism on government – he also spoke of the human cost that
capitalism was exacting right here in Canada. Having recently been back to Ontario, he noted
that “in Toronto, Ontario last April two hundred girls slept in the public parks and in order to
obtain food they were forced to sell the only commodity they possessed: their bodies. Some of
them being as young as thirteen years of age.” When O’Sullivan replaced Bruce on the stage,
he repeated many of the same themes and topics, but focused special attention on the R.C.M.P.
Having just been released on bail after the arrests in Calgary that had sparked this day of mass
protest, O’Sullivan warned those in attendance that “the police were not there to protect the

Report Re: Communist Party of Canada (Crow’s Nest Pass),” 4 August 1931.
Malcolm Bruce spoke three days later in Bellevue, the strategy was the same. Detective Corporal Ryan notes that
“His remarks at this meeting coincided very closely given in Blairmore... [with] the majority of the audience [being]
women and children, the women being specially invited to attend.” See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S.
Nest Pass),” 4 August 1931.
public but to intimidate the public.” He then took care to point out each and every plainclothes Mountie and Alberta Provincial Police member in attendance known to him.\footnote{Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Communist Party of Canada – John O’Sullivan – Agitator,” 4 August 1931. It should be noted that T.E. Ryan was not pointed out, suggesting that he was not known as a Mountie to O’Sullivan. This was a trend that continued from this point forward. Later in the month while addressing a crowd at Coleman John Stokaluk also took pains to point out the plainclothes policemen in attendance. According to the report filed later by an officer in attendance, “At every meeting held in the interests of the working class in the Crow’s Nest Pass during the last two years at which he had taken part a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman had been present, he stated, and also the Provincial Police...He further said that he was well aware of the fact that every word he uttered at this meeting would be reported to R.B. Bennett and his Minister of Justice, the Honourable Hugh Guthrie, and he might be the next one to be put in the jail.” See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Stokaluk – Coleman, Alberta,” 24 August 1931.}

O’Sullivan’s close attention to the police presence foreshadows the most interesting part of Detective Corporal Ryan’s report. Given the significance of its content, I have reproduced it below:

At 2:35 pm I met Malcolm Bruce near the Cosmopolitan Hotel. He said “How are you Ryan?” He introduced me to John O’Sullivan, agitator from Calgary, who was also a speaker. Bruce invited us to have a glass of beer. While we were drinking beer O’Sullivan asked me what I did for a living. Before I could reply Bruce said to O’Sullivan “What’s that to you? I told you Ryan was a friend of mine. That’s good enough for you.”\footnote{Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Communist Party of Canada (Crow’s Nest Pass),” 4 August 1931.}

This begs the question – particularly in light of Corporal J.J. Weaver’s complaint that information was becoming increasingly hard to get from within radical circles – what was the nature of Detective Corporal Ryan’s relationship with Malcolm Bruce? One possibility is that Bruce was doing double duty, serving as a Party functionary while also as an R.C.M.P. informant; this would explain why he felt the need to protect the identity of Ryan when O’Sullivan asked what he did for a living. I believe this scenario is unlikely given Bruce’s stature in the Party and the lack of firm evidence (other than this report) to support this theory.
What is more likely is that T.E. Ryan had been undercover in the field (posing as a miner and C.P.C. sympathizer) in order to collect information on radical and otherwise undesirable groups. There had been reference in R.C.M.P. documents from the Fernie detachment to someone known as “Secret Agent No. 24” who was working inside the Crowsnest Pass Coal and Coke Company’s Fernie operations, and had been the source of information on meetings held by Harvey Murphy, Malcolm Bruce and other speakers as they made their way through the Pass.\footnote{Crownsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: May Day Celebrations – Crow’s Nest Pass,” 23 May 1930.} If he had a privileged relationship with persons of interest, that would explain why the RCMP sent Ryan to Blairmore from the Fernie detachment (which was not part of K Division) rather than reinforcements from somewhere like Lethbridge, as they had done in the past. It would also explain why Bruce may have thought socializing with him was appropriate. After all, publicly socializing with a known R.C.M.P. officer during a parade and mass meeting to denounce “police terror” was inadvisable. Finally, it would explain why Corporal Ryan was not pointed out with Weaver and other members of the police forces during O’Sullivan’s speech.

Though the mass meeting “to fight against the growing police terror” was uneventful in that it was peaceful, orderly and without physical confrontations, it also marks – as mentioned earlier in this chapter – the important beginnings of Communism as a community movement in Blairmore. C.P.C. and union activists clearly engaged with the working-class community as a whole, and increasingly there was a response from the local society’s composite groups. Particularly worrying for the R.C.M.P. was the number of native Blairmorites who had signed up for the Communist cause. In relation to the Young Communist League, for example, Corporal Weaver worried that because the leader – Mary Thomas – was local, “...[she] knows everyone in
Blairmore [and therefore] no doubt she could – and has – secured a certain membership.”90 What is particularly interesting is that many of the community-based social activities of the growing Communist movement in Blairmore were the glue that held the movement together. They bore a striking resemblance to the cross-class happenings in organizations like the U.L.F.T.A.

While the Red movement continued to grow and diversify at Blairmore, an important gap was becoming increasingly evident within the organization responsible for keeping tabs on them: the R.C.M.P. Much like the rest of the force, Corporal J.J. Weaver of the Blairmore detachment initially attributed support for the Communist Party to the “foreign element,” but by May Day of 1931 it was apparent in his reports that he understood that local support was more widespread than the familiar “foreigner = Communist” formula could encompass. A cumulative reading of his reports indicates that he was well aware that the Reds enjoyed broad support across the community. The same sensitivity cannot be attributed to his superiors.

Given the increasingly loud and public presence of the Communist Party in Blairmore, Inspector W.W. Watson was dispatched to town from K Division headquarters in Edmonton at the end of September, 1931 to report on the situation. Unlike Weaver’s assessments, which were starting to offer real insights into the composition of the organization – at least as far as it was making itself known through community events – Inspector Watson’s report contented itself with ethnocentric rhetoric. While he conceded that the Communist Party had a following in the Crowsnest Pass, he held to the belief that it was supported mainly by foreigners: “these are the people who are trouble makers! They don’t want to work and have the idea in their heads that in a short time they are going to have Canada under Soviet rule, in fact they all talk saying

capitalism is dead.” Moving on from the narrative that foreigners were both lazy and Communist, Watson went on to further describe the people he felt were at the heart of the Communist movement in Blairmore:

Most of these foreigners are not educated, can’t even read or write. They are very easily led by the Communist agitators as they are unable to read papers of any kind. The ones who are able to [ , ] read only the papers that are published by the C [ommunist] P [arty]. When an agitator takes the platform the foreigners listen to every word and believe all that is said. When the speaker starts telling them what a wonderful country Russia is for the working man the audience goes crazy with enthusiasm and applause... they are ignorant and their imaginations are easily inflamed by the speakers.

Watson’s report – disturbingly racist even by Depression-era standards – had important real-world implications for the force. Early in 1932 the miners in Blairmore, Bellevue and Coleman would go out on strike under the M.W.U.C. banner for the first time, and the result would be violent. Many R.C.M.P. officers would pour into the Pass in order to protect the corporate interests and property of the West Canadian Collieries, the International Coal and Coke Company and the McGillivray Creek Coal and Coke Company. And when they arrived they came prepared to do battle with an isolated and disenfranchised segment of society: immigrant miners. Instead, ill-prepared and uninformed, they were met with force by an entire community.

**Conclusion**

While it may be tempting to see Blairmore as an outlier in terms of the Communist movement in Canada, this chapter has demonstrated that such is not the case. While there were undoubtedly a series of events during the 1920s which had unique and important implications for this Rocky Mountain town – such as the co-management of the coal mines during the war or the egregious financial excesses of the West Canadian Collieries – they alone did not result in

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92 Ibid.
election of a Red town council here in 1933. As this chapter has shown, there were important international factors external to Blairmore which also played a role in Blaimorites’ increasingly radical stance.

Having achieved an understanding of the relationship between the C.P.C. and the C.I., it is possible now to understand how and why the Communist Party changed during the period of time in question. This is particularly important given the key role the C.P.C. played in the formation, expansion and radicalization of the most important organization in Blairmore: the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada. We have seen that its history to now has paralleled the policy objectives of the Communist Party of Canada, suggesting that there may substance to the suggestion that Plan Z had more than a little do to with the creation of the union. Yet when we consider the paths taken by the M.W.U.C. and the Communist Party together, we see that – at least in the case of Blairmore – a unique situation arose. While the Communist Party itself locally maintained the same hard line during the Third Period as it did in Vancouver, the Lakehead and Toronto, the M.W.U.C. local was able, at least until 1931, to carve out a discrete Red role for itself. By avoiding the harshest extremes of the class-against-class policy and continuing to pursue a socialist (but inclusive) agenda, the union was able to continue to build broad support across disparate groups in Blairmore. And when the time came to choose between the union and the more “respectable” elements of society in early 1932, the rich dividends of this policy become evident.

Finally, we have gained insight into the ways that the R.C.M.P. was operating in Blairmore and throughout the Crowsnest Pass at this time. It is clear not only that police brass were keeping tabs on the situation locally, but that the force was willing to invest time, money and man-hours into making sure they had the best chances possible of knowing what radicals in
Blairmore were up to. And yet as we will see in the next chapter, the mishandling of the massive strike in 1932 – in part driven by the less-informed attitude of police outside Blairmore – would serve only to further solidify support behind the union and, through it, the Communist Party of Canada.
Chapter Five: Strike.

The miners’ strike of 1932 is the stuff local legends are made of. It is telling that eight decades after the fact, the now-elderly residents of Blairmore who experienced the events as children are able to vividly recall what they saw – and how they felt – during those long eight months. That is because this strike was different from anything that Blairmore had ever experienced. This was an all-out strike, and not just in the sense that all members of the union (including the maintenance men) were on the picket lines. The community was on strike with them. To the horror of respectable publications like the *Calgary Herald*, the twenty-four hour picket lines were being staffed not just by men, but by women and children, too. Much of this strike was fought in the town itself. It was a daily event, and it touched every street, neighborhood and corner of this community.

That a strike happened in 1932 should not have come as a surprise to anyone in Blairmore. Unresolved tensions with the West Canadian Collieries stretching back over a decade, coupled with massive poverty and the increasing popularity and relevance of radical thought, made for a perfect storm. Some even suggested that it was inevitable and, given the content of the interviews undertaken in 2008, I would tend to agree with them. What struck me as salient was the fact that none of the 135 people interviewed for this thesis could definitively identify what grievance actually caused the strike. This suggests that the strike was not really about the event that precipitated it. Rather, it was the cumulative reaction to years of repression and exploitation that caused – and sustained – the strikers over those eight gruelling months.

The evidence provided by Erma Dogtherom reflects this pattern of reasoning within the oral testimony. When explaining the reasons her father went on strike, she explained:

They had nothing, you know. And how Dad provided for us, that big family? And not only our family either! He’d grow so much [sic] vegetables and there’d be chickens going
out the door to other relatives because they were poorly off. It was horrible times, you
know! And the bosses from the mines were from Belgium, most of them, and they were
living in almost mansion type houses in Blairmore. The unfairness was terrible! And all
the people expected was to just make a living for their families, no compensation or
nothing... I don’t know how he did it.¹

Poverty, deprivation, and helping one another out when possible were frequent themes in the
other interviews. So too was the deep division between rich and poor in Blairmore.

Confirmation of just how different the day-to-day lives of miners were from their top
boss – Greenhill General Manager Georges Vissac – comes from a very unlikely source indeed:
the former Assistant Manager’s son. According to Henry Brusset, Georges Vissac and his wife
were unable to conceive children of their own, so they adopted twin boys from a local couple
who could not financially afford to keep them. For reasons known only to Mr. and Mrs. Vissac,
“...they didn’t want the kids to know they were adopted. Kept it a secret from the kids. And they
showered them with all kinds of things. They kept them separate from anybody who might tell
them. They had, you know, people to look after them. They never left the yard. They had
Shetland ponies and all this sort of thing.”² In a town with only 1629 residents, it is
inconceivable that this kind of spending would have gone unnoticed. And that it was occurring at
the same time as the company was seeking wage concessions from an already dirt-poor
community would all but guarantee that it would be resented. In fact the situation was so bad in
Blairmore that the R.C.M.P. agents, who typically demonstrated little sympathy with the
impoverished people around them, admitted that “the miners here have been living on meagre
wages for the past two years and more, and conditions have been steadily growing worse as time

¹ Crownsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number
2012.019.0005, “Erma Dogtherom Interview.” It should be noted that the majority of the pit bosses and fire bosses
were Belgian, but that most of those on W.C.C.’s executive team were born in France.
² Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0025, “Henry Brusset interview.”
goes on… it will not be surprising if there is some trouble which develop[s].”\(^3\) While Georges Vissac was able to provide his children with Shetland ponies and hired help, the miners he employed were barely achieving sustenance by combining their meager pay with hunting, fishing, gardening and trading with other families in order to obtain the necessities of life. Blairmore at this time was truly a town divided. By engaging with eyewitness testimony, police reports and documents from the Communist Party and Communist International, Chapter Five will examine the strike of 1932 and the effects it had in Blairmore and throughout the Crowsnest Pass. This chapter will show how the strike of 1932 brought the dissent and anger that had been simmering beneath the surface to the fore, setting the stage for the election of a Communist town council and school board the next year.

**The Straw That Broke the Camel’s Back**

In theory, strikes in Blairmore were quite easy to predict. If the union and the West Canadian Collieries could not come to mutually agreeable terms, employees either stopped work or were locked out until the two sides were able to come to an agreement on a new wage scale. And even during the bitterest conflicts, there was usually a so-called gentleman’s agreement between the two parties that a small number of maintenance men would continue to be allowed to cross the picket lines and do their jobs so that there would be no damage to the mine itself.\(^4\) When miners walked off the job on 23 February 1932 their contract had not yet expired, and

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\(^3\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, J.J. Weaver to the Officer Commanding, 27 January 1932.

\(^4\) In many ways this was a mutually beneficial arrangement. Mine shafts that are left untended will flood, causing massive damage to the mine. Not only would fixing flood damage cost the West Canadian money, but it would also delay the re-opening of the mine and consequently extend the period in which the miners (and by extension their families) were earning no wages. Thus, for the benefit of everyone, a small number of men were traditionally allowed (with no social consequences) to cross the picket line and ensure the mine was properly maintained for the duration of the strike.
when they established their picket lines no one who belonged to the union – not even the maintenance men – was permitted to cross them. This would be a different kind of strike.

Working only one (or at the most two) days per week, miners at the W.C.C.’s Blairmore operations had to make the most of each and every minute they were able to spend in the mine. Because they were paid by the amount of saleable coal they mined (and not by the time spent in the mine itself), it was imperative that they remove as much coal as they possibly could during each and every shift. But hard work was only half of the equation. The real variable was the location in the mine they would be assigned to work, and that decision fell to the W.C.C.’s Underground Manager Harvey Blake.

Hired in 1929 to increase the efficiency of Greenhill’s underground operations, Blake instigated such cost-cutting techniques as the removal of the pillars in order to get “100% recovery.” For the miners assigned the task of removing the pillars – which were large parts of the coal seam that were traditionally left untouched to ensure the roof did not collapse – the payoff could be as much as $50.00 in a single day, but the process also represented a marked – but perfectly legal – decline in the overall safety of the mine. Miners who were not English, Scottish or Welsh were not likely to get good places if Blake had anything to do with it. According to Allen Seager, “Blake made no secret of his ultimate intentions. His reported boast that he would make Blairmore a ‘white man’s camp’ seared the soul of that community and laid the foundations for future conflict.”

When the whistle blew for work on 22 February 1932 it is very likely that miner Jim Zonek not only arrived at work with the intention to work as hard as he could. It is also likely

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6 Ibid. While robbing the pillars had been acceptable practice in other mines in other parts of the country, it was considered to violate the safety and security of the mines in the Crowsnest Pass. This perception arose, in part, because coal had been so plentiful when operations first commenced at the turn of the century.
7 Ibid.
that, being a “foreigner,” Zonek had been assigned a place that was less than lucrative. But what started as a normal day at the Greenhill Mine for Zonek and his colleagues would soon be anything but. It is not known exactly why Pit Boss Danny Rees ended up telling Zonek to go home, but he did. It is known that Zonek, probably embarrassed by being singled out and outraged at the prospect of losing some of his already meager pay, responded forcefully. He told Rees to ‘fuck off.’ After he refused the demand that he apologize – in writing, no less – he was thereupon fired for insubordination.⁸

The dismissal of Jim Zonek touched off a series of events for which nobody in the upper levels of the M.W.U.C. or the Communist Party had planned. Outraged miners packed the Blairmore union hall that evening and, after discussing the matter, it was moved by one Turner and seconded by Edward Wormesely that the Blairmore local of the M.W.U.C. strike until Jim Zonek was reinstated. The strike vote passed with a healthy margin, and the next morning – 23 February 1932 – the mine was surrounded by pickets. Miners at the West Canadian’s Bellevue operations came out in a sympathy strike on 24 February, followed by Coleman miners at the International Coal and Coke Company on 14 March and McGillivray Creek Coal and Coke on 19 March. In all, 1255 men would walk off the job.

None of this, of course, had been in the plans of either the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada or the Communist Party. In fact, when the union had held its annual convention in Calgary just a month earlier, it had been agreed upon that the locals would wait until one of the coal operators tried to impose wage reductions on its workers, at which point a general strike of all members would be called with the goal of not only pressuring the operators into submission,

but also of demonstrating the power and strength of this important revolutionary body. Jim Zonek had undoubtedly derailed these plans with two monosyllabic words.

And while the Party and the union publicly stood by the workers ("this is your strike!") *The Worker* exclaimed, internal documents show they were less than impressed with the way the strike was playing out.\(^9\) When explaining the situation to his colleagues at the Anglo-American Secretariat, Leslie Morgan not only described Zonek’s behaviour as “vile,” but mused “it sounds ridiculous, but this was actually the basis on which the strike was called.”\(^10\) Morgan went on: “our comrades have adopted a certain position of ‘strike at any price,’ whether or not there was going to be a wage cut, and again, in this regard we made a mistake. I would not say that the present strike could have been avoided, but if our comrades had been very clever ... we would have been in a much stronger position today...”\(^11\) Of course, Morgan was referring to the strength of his Party, not to that of the union local or of the strikers themselves.

And this is where the duality of radical organizations in Blairmore discussed in the previous chapter became a problem. While a strong union had allowed the Party to build up its support in Blairmore rapidly, it also meant that the power dynamic between the C.P.C. and the M.W.U.C. was not, to use Party terminology, correct. “In many places,” the Report of the District Organizer claims, “our comrades are leaders in the Union, but yet they do very little Party work outside of that. In reality, the Union is leading the Party, rather than the Party leading the Union.”\(^12\)

Perhaps even more alarming from the Party’s perspective, when the miners went out on strike many elements of the Party stopped functioning altogether in Blairmore. Ideally, in a well-
conceived strike, each element of the Party apparatus - the Young Communist League, the Women’s Auxiliary, the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, and so forth – would have had a unique and important role to play in the unfolding drama. But this was not an ideal situation for the Communist Party of Canada. Its strategists received no advance warning the strike would occur. In fact, when the strike was called many of these organizations were largely abandoned, with their members concentrating their efforts on supporting union-organized pickets, parades and relief: “they are all occupied with one thing or another. Union meetings, mass meetings, are frequently called and everything else is put to the side.”¹³ Again, internal documents capture the frustration of C.P.C. brass: “while the P[arty] was an influence in a general way, and the P[arty] members played a decisive role in the strike, they are not yet organized into mine units, do not function very well as units, and as units of the P[arty] did not play a proper role” in the overall strategy of the strike.¹⁴

The West Canadian Is Ready

Though the Communist Party of Canada had no immediate plan of action in February 1932, the West Canadian Collieries did.¹⁵ As early as 1931 Georges Vissac had confided to George Coote, the area’s Member of Parliament, that he believed further reductions in wages would be necessary when the contract between the W.C.C. and the M.W.U.C. expired in the

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¹⁵ The Provincial Government had prepared itself too. Perhaps still worried about what Georges Vissac might do (in light of their interactions with him in April of 1931), the government sent “Mr. Patterson, M.L.A., to go to the Crows Nest Pass to make a private investigation of the situation there with respect to unemployment and the possible danger of a strike in the coal mining areas there. We felt that his association with the Mine Workers Association would enable him to size up the situation a little more accurately than anyone else could do.” Though the contents of his report are not known, that the provincial government had prepared itself to receive it demonstrates that it too was worried about the situation in the Pass and wanted to be informed if and when a strike broke out. See Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 83.488, File 42, Box 1, J.E. Brownlee to R. A. Smith, 30 May 1932.
Spring of 1932. Having written to Coote, Vissac explained his reasoning: “...this depression will not end until we have seen a thorough deflation. We must be able to reduce our selling price. We have done it already to a small extent, by reductions in costs and a reduction in the salaries of all our officials. We must go further.”16 And by “go further,” the man who showered his adopted children with luxuries from France, owned the only Shetland ponies in the Crowsnest Pass and employed a household staff of five to look after his family’s every need suggested that those in his employ “…could afford to cut out items such as orange juice from [their] diet, and that Canadians in general would be better off if they ate more bread.”17

To be fair, when the management of the Greenhill Mine realized that the miners intended to strike (rather than walk out in a single day of protest) they did half-heartedly offer to re-hire Jim Zonek. Given what was being written in the miners’ press, however, Vissac and company must have known that their offer would not be accepted. It was clear from the beginning to all involved that this strike was never really about Jim Zonek. According to one miner,

For the last twelve months during which the West Canadian Collieries operated, their employees, particularly in the Blairmore mine, were tyrannied [sic] over and subjected to many indignities by certain officials. The breaking point was reached when an attempt was made to compel a lad to abuse himself before a number of bosses because he answered back when his boss swore at him. The strike was called to protest this despotic action, as well as to insist that a verbal agreement... to the effect the work be equally divided, be observed by management.18

For the West Canadian, resolving the strike was not about Jim Zonek either. In fact when the miners rejected the W.C.C.’s offer to rehire Zonek and return to work the company took advantage of the situation to try to rid itself of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada altogether. Declaring that the union was a Communist organization – and therefore illegal – all three coal

16 Glenbow Archives, Coote Papers, Box 14, File 15, “Vissac to Coote,” 31 July 1931.
operators declared they would not consider negotiating with the miners until all of their employees had renounced the M.W.U.C. and agreed to return to work under the auspices of a non-radical union.¹⁹

As rumours circulated that the mines’ largest customer, the Canadian Pacific Railway, was prepared to blacklist coal from mines which had M.W.U.C. representation, a split emerged within union locals. Particularly in Coleman (where the vote to affiliate with the Workers’ Unity League had not been nearly as decisive as it had been in Blaibmore) a strong anti-Communist sentiment was emerging under the leadership of individuals like David Gillespie and William White. It found much support among the Polish and British communities there. The urgency of the matter was compounded when the collective agreement between operators and all three union locals expired on 31 March 1932. Many in Coleman felt they had made their point, and that solidarity with their brothers in Blaibmore was simply coming at too high a price.

“There are Czars in this Country but They Don’t Wear Crowns:” May Day, 1932

May Day was often a large and loud affair in Blaibmore, but 1932 was bigger and noisier than most. In the middle of the largest strike the Crowsnest Pass had seen in a decade, thousands of miners came together in solidarity to watch the parade, listen to speeches and take part in the traditional sports and games that happened each and every year. The strike aside, though, this year was different in one very important way: the organizers were fully aware that they needed to pay close attention to each and every word they said. Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada made much of what they wanted to say illegal. And they knew it was not just idle intimidation on the part of the Federal Government. Everyone was well aware of the trial of Tim Buck and his colleagues, and they were also aware that he was now languishing in Kingston Penitentiary.

The change in tone was noticeable not only to those on the ground, but also to the gaggle of Mounties who were temporarily in the Pass to ensure that law and order was maintained. “I might say,” commented J.J. Weaver, “that immediately following the conviction of the eight Communist leaders at Toronto and the opinion given by Judge Ouseley of Moose Jaw relative to the M.W.U.C. and the W.U.L. being illegal organizations, a decided change was noticeable here amongst the red element and they were very guarded in their public utterances.”

They knew they were now being watched for punishable offenses, and were careful to use phraseology which kept them squarely within the letter, if not the spirit, of the law.

This was evident in May Day celebrations in this year of years. As speaker after speaker took to the platform – R.C.M.P. noted that John Price, Andrew Dow, Harvey Murphy, Frank Leary, Mary North, William Peters, Rock Sudworth and Douglas Jones all had a turn speaking – various R.C.M.P. members present were forced to admit that while the Reds all spoke on the subject of “capitalism, unemployment, and the present strike in the Pass,” “nothing was said that could be made the subject of a prosecution.” Indeed, when Harvey Murphy took the platform for the last time, he “advocated a policy of non-violence among picketers in Pass towns. He urged those in charge to see to it that drunkards and hoodlums were excluded from the picket lines as violence on their part would strengthen the operator’s position, and that their policy should be one of argument and appeal.” In his comments on this report, Inspector Duncan relayed to his superiors that “I believe, from enquiries, that this attitude is genuine.”

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23 Ibid.
With these concerns in mind, May Day celebrations in Blairmore progressed along the same lines as they had the year before. The parade slogans made it plain that the miners were intent – where possible – on avoiding legal complications:

Workers’ Children Refuse to Starve in a Land of Plenty.
Join The Y.C.L.
Repeal Section 98 and Release the Eight.
Our Future is in Our Youths: Join the Young Communist Party!
Workers of the World Unite!
No Wage Cut, No Lay Off, Right to Organize.
Demand Immediate Relief.
Abolition of Vagrancy Laws.
Down with Bennett’s Starvation Budget.
Hands Off Chinese Soviet.
Right to Choose Our Own Union.
Demand Free Speech and Assembly.
Send Food Not Mounties.
Women Fight Against War: Do Not Let Your Sons Be Slaughtered.
Class Collaboration Means Working Class Suicide.
Remember Estevan [this with revolvers].

Although it was illegal to belong to the Communist Party or to advocate the overthrow of Government, it was not technically illegal to suggest that one ought to join the Communist Party. In this context of wishing to remain within the law while still challenging the status quo, the Red flag was demonstrably absent from this year’s celebrations, but symbolically so too was the Union Jack.

**Violence**

Until 4 May 1932 the situation in Blairmore and throughout the Crowsnest Pass was politically and emotionally charged, but never violent. Pickets, parades, mass meetings and demonstrations occurred with dizzying frequency, but to the credit of all involved the only thing
hurled between the strikers and the R.C.M.P. were words. Georges Vissac was about to change all that.

When it became obvious to the authorities that the strike would entail more than a day-long walkout, they met with the coal operators and laid out the ground rules for police protection if and when the employers wished to re-open their mines with scab labour. According to police documents, Mr. Vissac “...had promised Inspector Duncan that he would not open the mine without giving the police 48 hours notice so they could be prepared to give the necessary protection, and had agreed with the other operators not to take any action without their consent.”\textsuperscript{25} It is not known why Georges Vissac did not abide by his agreements. Perhaps there had been a miscommunication of expectations between himself and Inspector Duncan or perhaps the massive May Day celebration only a few days before had breached the limits of his patience. But at noon on 3 May, 1932, and with less than 24 hours notice to the police, he “moved all his fire bosses from Blairmore to Bellevue” and announced that he intended to open that mine with 45 non-unionized miners.\textsuperscript{26}

The reaction of the miners was swift and coordinated. Every available striker – save the numbers needed to maintain skeleton pickets at the mines in Coleman and Blairmore – rushed to the West Canadian’s Bellevue operations where they reinforced the 24-hour picket around the mine property. This picket now consisted of at least 300 strikers – no small feat, considering the mine only employed 339 men when working at full capacity.\textsuperscript{27} When they arrived, strikers – both male and female – were met by Great War veterans Sam Patterson and Bill Knight of

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
Blairmore, who tirelessly drilled the crowd in military formation. Once a sense of cohesion had been achieved, the group was briefed by Harvey Murphy as to strategy and tactics.

The response of the R.C.M.P. could not have been more different. It had stationed a very small number of men at the mine to observe the pickets, but with no advance notice from the West Canadian Collieries that it intended to try to re-open the mine, the police were helpless to stop the massing crowd until reinforcements arrived in appropriate numbers. The police never did get the numbers they felt they needed to safely carry out the operation. The result on 4 May was close to pandemonium.

The R.C.M.P. plan – executed under less than ideal conditions and with insufficient members of the force present – was to place the strike-breakers in the back of large trucks and escort them, surrounded by officers on horseback, on to the mine property. It would be easy to understand how intimidated these officers might have been when they saw the massive crowd of men, women and children, and equally easy to comprehend the amount of fear, anxiety and anger that must have been felt by the strikers, particularly in light of the police violence which had occurred in Estevan, Saskatchewan the year before. According to long-time resident Bertha Yagos, as soon as the trucks appeared violence was inevitable:

I remember a lady from the dairy, Mrs. Rushko… anyway, they were a Ukrainian family. [Did] you know they brought men in with stockards [sic] on the trucks? That’s how they brought [scab] workers in, the police, you know. And she chased that truck, an’ she grabbed the back. And I can still see her, and she had the slats, you know, she grabbed the slats of the rack. And she’s hanging onto that and the police was hitting her hands with a club. I can see that as plain as if it happened right now. I bet he broke every one of her

29 On 29 September 1931 striking coal miners in Estevan Saskatchewan were also met with a large contingent of R.C.M.P. They had been on strike for three weeks, and just as was the case in Blairmore and throughout the Pass the Communist Party of Canada played an important role in their strike. Violence broke out when a miscommunication pertaining to locations at which large numbers of strikers could gather (and conversely where they could not) led R.C.M.P. officers to open fire on a crowd of strikers. For more information and analysis, see Stephen Endicott, *Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners’ Struggle of ’31* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).
fingers. And he’s lucky he went home alive… we got mad. That was a terrible thing to do… we went after him and he took off.30

Recalling the same event, Gordon McIntyre states that the R.C.M.P. “arrested one lady, and the crowd came together on top of the police and when the crowd separated the lady was gone. They couldn’t hold on! So the next day they came [looking for her] with their fourteen horses… and made a wedge right through that crowd.”31 Other women used household spices like salt and pepper as weapons, throwing them in the eyes of police officers, their horses and the strikebreakers.32

And when such women were not on the picket lines themselves, they were in the community making known to those strike-breakers who had escaped the chaos at the mine that there would be significant repercussions as a result of their actions. Again, Bertha Yagos recalls: “I remember, well I don’t need to say his name, but there was this guy coming down the road… He had no business going to work… Anyway, [a woman] goes out on the road, grabbed him, and she ripped the sleeves right off that parka. Wanna’ know what strength is? Some of those women were nuts.”33 Another woman – “she was a big, fat woman” – knocked a police officer into a coulee when he was walking to the strike area. “I didn’t join the force to be executed or knocked over a cliff,” he is reported to have said after the strike was over.34 According to the Calgary Herald, it was the women, not the men or the Communist agitators, who were the most “active and noisy” people involved in this confrontation.35

30 Crowsnest Museum and Archives Accession Number 2007.004.0001, Bertha Yagos interview.
31 Gordon McIntyre interview, Crowsnest Pass Historical Society Archives, no accession number. Interview is in VHS format, and is located in the lower drawers of the TV stand on the main floor of the Crowsnest Museum.
33 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Accession Number 2007.004.0001, Bertha Yagos Interview.
34 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, “James Cousins Interview.”
35 For a detailed account of the role played by women during this conflict, see “Police Guard Coal Mines at Bellevue,” Calgary Herald, 4 May 1932 and “Police Use Batons to Disperse Mob of Miners and Women at Bellevue,” Calgary Herald, 5 May 1932.
In all, the fight lasted two full days, with strikers taking turns and maintaining a constant picket around the mine property. Though police reinforcements did arrive, the situation was so fraught that by noon on 5 May 1932 Georges Vissac removed himself, his wife and children to Spokane, Washington. From there he conceded to the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada that the West Canadian Collieries would not re-open its mines with scab labour until an agreement had been reached with local miners. But in this promise, as in his other agreements with the police and fellow coal operators, Georges Vissac proved to be insincere. According to the surprisingly critical assessment of R.C.M.P. Assistant Superintendent W.F.W. Hancock,

If [Vissac] had carried out his word I think that possibly the more moderate element might have got the upper hand over Harvey Murphy and his crowd, but he did not do so. He brought his fire bosses down from Blairmore and they, with fire bosses at Bellevue, numbering in all about 60, started to take out coal which is very unethical and stirred up the strikers to such an extent that the situation arose which necessitated my being sent out to make a survey.36

And when Hancock arrived in Blairmore, he could not have been more firm in his conclusions: “the consensus of opinion seemed to be that although the conduct of the strikers was inexcusable, the W.C.C. were considerably to blame for the condition of affairs... and that if a definite line of policy had been followed rather than the vacillating methods adopted, that things would have gone back to normal.”37

When Assistant Superintendent Hancock interviewed Mr. Roberts of the W.C.C. (who was left in charge when Vissac quit Blairmore) he was surprisingly firm with the company. For many who remember the incident, the R.C.M.P. was an organization that lacked agency – that is to say, it acted largely in the interests of the state and corporations, and not in the interests of the residents themselves. Yet, RCMP files suggest that the police actually harboured their own

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37 Ibid.
independent evaluations of the unfolding Blairmore situation. As Hancock reported in his account of his conversation with Roberts:

In view of the operators’ demand for adequate police protection I asked Mr. Roberts, who is acting manager of the W.C.C. during the absence of Mr. Vissac, to come down to the police detachment, which he did. I asked him what were the intentions of the company in regard to their future operations and pointed out to him that we would not be prepared to furnish protection indefinitely for his fire bosses to go down and dig coal. He would either have to close his mine properly and just allow the fire bosses to carry out their ordinary duties when the mine is closed in which case the miners would have no objection and there would be no [violent] picketing, or else if he wished to take out coal for commercial purposes he would have to do it in a proper manner by signing an agreement with those who wished to work, in which case we would be prepared to furnish the necessary protection. He advised me that the company was not digging coal for commercial purposes, but [was] simply taking out what fell from the roof and must be got rid of for the proper protection of the mine. This I knew to be incorrect... However, he stated that he had no authority to define any policy and Mr. Vissac was the manager and he was at the present time in Spokane. I therefore suggested that Mr. Vissac be asked to come back so that the situation could be properly handled.38

Vissac did come back, and eventually the fire bosses returned to “proper” strike-related duties. What is striking is the degree to which the RCMP’s local representatives distrusted the company’s truthfulness.

It was from these experiences that something new in terms of strike strategy at Blairmore emerged: the booing parade was born. Assembling banners and carrying little ones on “wagons, bicycles [and] anything they could put up, even tricycles,” strikers would march down each and every street in town up to three times a day, singing while they marched and upon reaching the house of a scab, fire boss or company official the crowd would turn en masse and “boo” at the house.39 As they wound their way through town, Erma Dogtherom recalls that “I was told to perform, and I remember the words exactly:

Hang all the bosses
On the sour apple tree

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38 Ibid., emphasis added.
And the scabs
To keep them company!40

James Cousins remembers another:

The police are having
A jolly good time
Taking the scabs
Up to the mine!41

And for those who were being booed, the experience was horrible. Even though Helen Giacomuzzi’s father refused to cross the picket line, he also made known that he was anti-Communist and therefore could not support the strike. The Giacomuzzis were placed on the scab list and for days on end booed at all hours of the day and night. The experience was so frightening for their little girl, Helen, that she hid under the porch when she heard the strike supporters coming down the road.42 And perhaps she was smart to do so: Albert Aveledo recalls as a child watching others not only yell, but throw rocks at the fire bosses as they came to and from work each day.43

The decision as to whether to return to work (or not) divided not only the community, but families as well. According to Helen Czech, all her father wanted to do was earn a living: “He said this is my first chance...of a dollar and happiness. And I don’t wanna’ do anything, he said, to hurt it or my family. And so, he said, I’ll tend to my job.”44 Not only did this place him on the scab list in the eyes of the M.W.U.C., but caused a rift in his family. When asked if anyone held a grudge against him, Czech responded that “My brother-in-laws... they never came to visit us

41 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, “James Cousins Interview.”
42 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0099, “Helen Giacomuzzi Interview.”
43 Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0070, “Albert Aveledo Interview.”
44 Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0068, “Helen Czech Interview.”
for two years... Dad was an ‘outsider.’”\textsuperscript{45} For miners who may not have been in agreement with the Workers’ Unity League but who were not willing to put their families through the anxiety suffered by the Giacommuzzi and Czech families, the solution was to find the money necessary to return to the old country on the pretext of a family emergency.\textsuperscript{46}

The Ku Klux Klan

This psychological warfare on the part of the M.W.U.C. was quickly met – specifically in Coleman – with the emergence of an organization that many of us do not associate with Canada: the Ku Klux Klan. James Cousins remembers the Klan’s recruitment drive in May of 1932. He was approached by a man who asked if he would mind playing God Save the King and Onward Christian Soldiers for their group later that evening. The man indicated that the meeting had a speaker who had come in from out of town. “So this one made a big speech, and I had heard that sort of stuff before. It was sort of gutter stuff about these ‘dirty Catholics’ and ‘dirty Communists’ and all the rest of it, so I just went home... but a few days later some of the young guys who were there lit a cross across the hill on the other side.”\textsuperscript{47} The news of this first cross burning was reported by the \textit{Lethbridge Herald} on 18 May 1932: “A fiery cross burned for about half an hour last night on the mountains that overlook [Blairmore]. It was watched by hundreds.”\textsuperscript{48}

And for those who had seen the crosses burning, like Alex Gierulski, they were inextricably linked to the strike. As we discussed in Chapter Four, the M.W.U.C. locals in Coleman did not

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} Helen Yanota’s father Mr. E. Pozzi did exactly this in order to avoid publicly taking sides. A devout Catholic, he was not able to support the Red-affiliated union, but at the same time he was also not willing to become a martyr or endanger his family. Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0041, “Helen Yanota Interview.”

\textsuperscript{47} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, “James Cousins Interview.”

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Lethbridge Herald}, 18 May 1932.
vote as overwhelmingly in favour of the Workers’ Unity League as had the local in Blairmore. The size of the anti-W.U.L. vote in Coleman allowed those who were opposed to Communism (and opposed to the strike) to cloak themselves in the Union Jack and represent themselves as the True Blue British element. According to R.C.M.P. reports it was these people, the so-called “respectable citizens,” who made up the Klan movement in the Pass.

In reports forwarded to RCMP brass, Staff Constable R.J. Connor observed from Blairmore that the Klan “had over one hundred [members] on the roster in the Pass, all of whom are good citizens from between the towns of Pincher Creek and Natal.” He went on to inform his superiors that well known Klansmen J.C. Galbraith and A.P. Van Buren – both of Calgary – were regular visitors to Blairmore “from which they operated in the other towns of the Pass, organizing membership for the Ku Klux Klan.”49 As it turns out, Blairmore was not only the centre of the Communist movement in the Crowsnest, but of the Klan as well.

The Klan of the early 1930s diverged, to a certain extent, from its post-war stereotype. Once again, Staff Constable R.J. Connor can be of assistance in understanding the K.K.K.’s appeal. Attached to his report are not only statistics pertaining to Klan membership, but also the cards they were discretely distributing to drum up support. These cards describe the organization as: “Pro-British, Pro-Protestant, [in favour of] Law and Order [and] Commercial Cooperation.” Their slogan “One Flag – One School – One Language” was remarkably similar to that of the then-mainstream Orange Lodge and was diametrically opposed to those used in the parades by the radical miners.50 It should also be noted that the Klan also criticized the role that women had

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50 Ibid.
been taking in events like the 4 May confrontation, a far cry – in its books – from women’s “natural” activities.51

So relatively mainstream were some of the Klan’s predispositions considered to be in the 1930s that the organization was publicly recognized as a “service club” by the Government of Alberta.52 In fact, Alberta was the only jurisdiction in the British Empire to grant the Klan this kind of official recognition. Premier Brownlee claimed it was a matter of “free speech,” but with the mass arrests and charges of sedition that were to be laid at Blairmore and Bellevue against strikers later in the year, many wondered if he might not be under the influence of the Klan himself.53

It was against this backdrop of strike-related violence and instability that the Klan successfully made inroads into the Crowsnest Pass. In some cases miners who did not support the strike were disinclined to oppose it publicly, lest they be added to the list of houses calling out for the intimidating attention of the booing parades. And business people who were against the strike were also placed in a similarly sticky situation. After all, in a town dominated by one industry, it was simply not good politics (or good business) to alienate a key constituency. Which union supporter would shop at a store when the owner came out against the union? Who would vote for a man who did not support what many believed to be their fundamental and inalienable right to strike for a better standard of life? Perhaps equally important, who wanted to subject themselves to the social consequences of opposing the strike?

For many such strike opponents, the Ku Klux Klan must have seemed an ideal solution.

51 For a complete discussion of the Ku Klux Klan in Alberta, see William Peter Baergen, *The Ku Klux Klan in Central Alberta* (Red Deer: Central Alberta Historical Society, 2000). Notwithstanding its title, Baergen gives a clear and concise account of the overall provincial activities of the Klan.

52 The K.K.K. would incorporate as a charitable society (in the same way, for example, as the Masonic Lodge had) under the *Societies Act of Alberta* on 17 September 1932.

53 Baergen, *The Ku Klux Klan.*
Its law-and-order agenda was clearly attractive to the more conservative elements of the valley who had seen their towns and villages turned upside down during the course of the strike. The support for traditional sex roles addressed what many believed to be scandalous behaviour by women and children and the demand for prohibition sought to curb the worst of the booze-fuelled violence. And, of course, the Klan was a secret organization. Nobody had to know you were a Klansman or Klanswoman, and so there such individuals paid little or no price for their acts.

For many in the community, the Ku Klux Klan allowed those frustrated with the contemporary political and social situation to turn their frustration into tangible action. The burning of a cross sent a powerful message to the community, and was clearly intended by the Klan as a challenge to strike leaders and known Communists. The organization also sent unsigned letters threatening key strike leaders, or simply painted “K.K.K.” in bright red on the side of buildings in order to get their message across. An example of the former now finds a home at the Glenbow Museum and is re-printed below:

Source: Glenbow Archives
Mr. William Peters was not only a striker, but also a father, husband and Communist. Threats like this one must have caused someone like Peters to think very seriously about their involvement in the strike. After all, we only need to return to the testimony of Alex Gierulski to understand the effects these kinds of tactics had on many of those who either saw the crosses burning, or were targeted by the letters: “Heck! They were burning crosses up here on the hill and everybody was scared.” Nobody was quite sure who was behind the Klan.

**Coleman Leaves the Strike**

The escalation of violence during the month of May, 1932 appears to have shaken many miners in Coleman off the fence and into the camp of those who wanted to break with the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada and form their own home local. According to James Cousins, many miners in Coleman were uneasy with the violent turn of this strike: “You get people stoning people, knocking over policemen, turning over trucks and violence of that type... which was not present in the twenties. The twenties was sort of a ‘friendly holiday’ type of strike. They were serious enough, you know, as far as principles were concerned...” Nonetheless he suggests such strikes never reached the violent crescendo that was then enveloping the Pass. We can hear in Cousin’s testimony echoes of a reverence for the concept of British law and order, and through it understand why the conservatives in Coleman increasingly held the upper hand.

Despite the hard work of Coleman Communists Rock Sudworth, Andy Dow, Archie Dow and Andy Fraser, when the Coleman Local of the M.W.U.C. of Canada met on 14 May, a surprise motion from the floor was entertained which would have seen the local leave the Mine

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54 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0108, “Alex Gierulski Interview.”
55 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, “James Cousins Interview.”
Workers’ Union of Canada and stand alone as a home local. With 297 votes in favour to 227 against, the motion was carried and representatives of the conservative side of the room were elected to open negotiations with the International Coal and Coke Company and McGillivray Creek Coal and Coke. This was exactly what the M.W.U.C. brass had been worried about when the strike was first called: if the strike were lost, the union would lose its strongest district, and the largest group of local workers in the Workers’ Unity League would be defeated. This calamity was to be avoided at all costs.

The union organized a massive meeting of all Coleman miners to urge them to reconsider their decision. On their way from a strategy meeting in Bellevue to the mass meeting the M.W.U.C. supporters had called in Coleman, another first occurred: someone opened gunfire on their vehicle. Up to this point – perhaps because of what had transpired in Estevan the year before – there had been plenty of violence (both actual and symbolic) but no firearms had been used by either side. Now that line had been crossed. Though conservatives suggested that the car had been hit by “a wee little rock from the Frank slide,” individuals like Bruno Gentile who were interviewed years later confirmed that not only was the car fired upon, but “they very nearly killed the President of the union!”

When the meeting commenced, John Stokaluk accused the Ku Klux Klan of shooting at him, and according to eye witness testimony things went downhill from there. The miners elected a chairperson who was a moderate, and then voted to throw the Reds out. A riot ensued:

...it came to blows in the Community Hall... I was standing behind a guy who picked up a chair and hit a fellow by the name of Sandy Irvine over the head. Sandy got up and let this Russian have it – this big Russian – I forget his name, but oh, there was a riot! There were guys bouncing off of doors and jumping down the basement and out the [coal]

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57 Ibid.,” 152; Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0006, “Bruno Gentile Interview.” It should be noted that Gentile is referring to John Stokaluk, the President of the Coleman Local, not Sloan, the President of the M.W.U.C.
chutes... but the cops were all out there and they moved in.\textsuperscript{58}

This was the last meeting the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada ever sponsored in Coleman. On 23 May, the newly re-named Coleman Miners’ Association (C.M.A.) reached an agreement with the two operators in that town and they started to rehire men who belonged to this new union.

The problem with this supposed settlement was that the Coleman Miners’ Association’s constitution explicitly forbade known Communists from taking out a membership. One had to be a member of the C.M.A. to be considered for employment in the closed-shop mines of that town. So effectively the deal meant not just a localized end to the strike, but the miner-sanctioned discrimination against fellow miners who happened to be radical in their beliefs. The result was extremely divisive in the community. As retired miner Pete Youschok recalls: “when they broke that strike [at Coleman] and the men went back to work, there was men, working men, standing up there with the boss and he’d say, ‘that’s a Red, and that’s a Red,’ you know, guys coming looking for their jobs after the strike. The boss just shook his head – ‘no job for you.’”\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{Georges Vissac Once Again Overplays His Hand}

Perhaps sensing that the liquidation of the Coleman local of the M.W.U.C. would shortly bring the strike to a successful end for the West Canadian Collieries, General Manager Georges Vissac decided to post a “list of 70 Communists who would not be rehired under any circumstances” by his company.\textsuperscript{60} His arrogant assumption that the strike would soon be settled to the company’s advantage (and on the same terms of discrimination achieved for the International and McGillivray mines) was paralleled by the establishment of a Citizens’ League

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Adam Wilson conducted by Allen Seager, cited in Seager, “A History of the Mine Workers Union of Canada,” 153. It should be noted that it is entirely likely the “big Russian” Wilson is referring to is John Stokaluk even though Big John was in fact Ukrainian.


\textsuperscript{60} Seager, “A History of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada,” 155.
in Blairmore under the guidance of a Mr. Smith. (A similar league was already in existence in Coleman under the tutelage of the Reverend A. Partington.)$^{61}$ The purposes of these organizations was to bolster the morale of groups that were both anti-Red and pro-British. The Blairmore group’s correspondence with Premier Brownlee speaks to the perspective of this particular group of people. They asked: “Is this thing going to go on until it is too big to handle? Why are these agitators allowed to act in this way? Why are the peaceful citizens allowed to be insulted?”$^{62}$

In response to the booing parades, the Citizens’ League played the ethnic card forcefully, and decided to have a parade of their own. Billing the event as one consisting of “true Canadian citizen[s] loyal to the British Flag,” the parade marched down Main Street with participants such as the International Order of the Daughters of the Empire, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the non-Red members of the West Canadian Collieries band, the Masonic Lodge and the Boy Scouts. Attendance was low, and the entire event has been summed up by Allen Seager quite aptly as “a pathetic attempt to imitate the mass demonstrations of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada.”$^{63}$

The situations at Blairmore and Coleman were far from identical. Ethnically the towns were populated by very different groups. Their experiences over the past decade had differed wildly. To use a popular expression, the West Canadian Collieries had a terrible habit of riding the miners hard and putting them away wet. Though the International and McGillivray were no corporate angels, they had also avoided the excesses of disrespect that the W.C.C. had inflicted upon its employees. There was a reason that Blairmore voted so overwhelmingly in favour of the

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Workers’ Unity League: many in the community desperately desired fundamental change in their lives.

With the West Canadian demanding the right to discriminate against the most active strikers in Blairmore, miners only needed to look a few kilometres down the track to understand what the implications would be for one out of every four families affected by the strike: complete unemployment. When the mines went back to work in Coleman, they had excluded one hundred and twenty five men for their activities during the strike. Returning to work now had very real and tangible consequences for many in that community.

Given the unsubtle attempt of the Citizens’ League to divide Blairmore into those who were with “British democracy” and those who were not, it is useful at this juncture to question the role that ethnicity played in keeping Blairmore miners on the picket line. For scholar Allen Seager this was the very thing which ended the strike to the Company’s benefit in Coleman. The Blairmore Enterprise offers an important window into the ways ethnicity shaped the experiences of the strike. Owned and edited by W.J. Bartlett, an individual well-known for his conservative commentary, the “town paper” was not a venue in which one might expect to find any sympathy for striking miners. Yet its editor resisted any simple equation suggesting “foreigner = communist.” A thorough reading of the Blairmore Enterprise during the strike reveals that Editor Bartlett chose to define the struggle not in terms of an association between ethnicity and radical tendencies (as other editors throughout the Crowsnest Pass demonstrably did), but in terms of an impasse between the miners’ union and the company.

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64 Ibid., 154.
65 The author’s observations as to Bartlett’s political leanings are based on a general reading of the Blairmore Enterprise from 1930–1938. In addition to writing editorials supportive of conservative politicians both locally and in the provincial and federal arenas, Bartlett also held leadership positions with the Masonic Lodge in Blairmore.
66 See, for example the following articles reprinted in the Blairmore Enterprise from the pages of the Coleman Journal, Fernie Free Press, and the Kimberly Press: “Voice from the Strike Area,” Blairmore Enterprise, 7 July
Though Bartlett did not publicly air his opinion as to the connection between place of birth and radical activity, the topic was brought forward by numerous letters to the editor. In his first of many letters to the *Enterprise*, striker and radical Ralph Wootton complained that “an anonymous campaign against foreigners has been carried on in the press, suggesting that there would be no peace in the Crow’s Nest Pass until such time as all miners were of British nationality.”  

Wootton went on to criticize Rocky Mountain Member of the Legislative Assembly George Cruickshank for announcing “it was time that English-speaking people assert themselves.”  

Wootton’s letter contained a bombshell: a majority of the strike leaders, he claimed, were British and “a goodly proportion of them [were] returned soldiers.”  

Armed with this revelation, Wootton asserted that “no longer will there be the slightest danger that cries of ‘deport the foreigner’ will lower the morale... of the strikers, or that spurious appeals to patriotism will cause the British to secede from the main body [of the union].”  

For Wootton, miners were united not by ethnicity but by common cause.  

Wootton was not the only Blairmorite to take advantage of the space available for letters to the editor. Mr. William Oakes – himself a miner but opposed to the influence of the Communist Party of Canada in the M.W.U.C. and to the overall aims of the strike – waded into the quagmire of ethnicity and its relationship to the strike. Rather than denounce the strike as the agitation of foreigners or as non-British in its composition, Oakes complained that “all this corruption and strife can be blamed on the British born members of our organization; these men...
can read and understand our constitution, which is printed in the English language only…”71 Putting his faith in the constitution of the union, Oakes expressed “every sympathy for our foreign-born brothers and co-workers. They are only too eager and willing to be guided by the English speaking members.”72 For Oakes, the composition of the local radical organization was problematic because it had too many Anglo-Saxon Communists, not because it had too few.

Just who was rightly to be considered British was not as cut-and-dried an affair as one might expect today. Above and beyond her dismissal of the strike as a Red plot, Ms. Lilly Rowe invoked a more powerful concept than had been previously discussed: ethnicity as something that could be assumed, discarded, or ascribed regardless of where you were born.73 In regard to those who were opposed to the strike, Rowe observed that there existed “a body of men, all British, not all of them of British birth, but all of British principle” who recognised their duty as men was to take care of their families and not “swell the ranks of the unemployed.”74 By ascribing British qualities to those who were foreign-born, Rowe suggested that whether or not one was born in Canada or Great Britain, Britishness was something that could be acquired. She also observed that the inverse was also true: ethnicity could be socially removed. It is clear that to Rowe ethnicity was something that could have been obtained by any of the foreign-born in Blairmore.75

The fluidity of ethnicity at Blairmore is documented in the employee register at the West Canadian Collieries. When employees were hired by the company, they were required to report their full name, marital status, names of dependents and their ethnicity. Miners provided their own information and consequently were able to reveal how they categorized themselves

71 William Oakes, “Correspondence,” Blairmore Enterprise, 14 July 1932.
72 Ibid.
73 Lilly Rowe, “Correspondence,” Blairmore Enterprise, 14 July 1932.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
ethnically, rather than how the company perceived them. As all miners were fired during the strike and re-hired after an agreement had been reached, an examination of the re-hired employees at the end of the strike demonstrates the emergence of a new, yet telling and important category: “Canadian.”

While being Canadian was not an ethnicity officially recognized as yet by the state, a full 18% of miners declared their ethnic heritage to be Canadian. Interestingly, the largest decrease in ethnic identity was from individuals abandoning the category of “British” in favour of a self-declared Canadian identity.

For identity to be ascribed, the arguments of Rowe had to mean something to the individuals against whom they were directed. The striking radicals, who were stripped of the social privileges that their native or British-born status had previously afforded them, also had a very clear conception of what ethnicity and identity meant. Julia Johnson wrote in disgust to the *Canadian Miner* in regards to the way that ethnicity had made an appearance within the strike:

“let the ‘loyal’ citizens draw the line between nationality, creed and colour. We the workers know there is no such thing. We are a brotherhood and we will fight side by side for mutual cause.”

It is clear that for Julia Johnson class and shared experience meant more than presumed ethnicity.

As a member of the Communist Party of Canada, Johnson might have been expected to cast the struggle within a class rather than an ethnic framework. Yet oral histories conducted with other non-communists who lived through the strike reveal similar sentiments. While ethnicity still played an identifying role in the following interviews, it clearly overlaps with a larger class-based identity (“we”). When Bertha Yagos shared her memories of Mrs. Rushko being beaten until she let go of a truck carrying scab labour to the West Canadian’s Bellevue

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76 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, West Canadian Collieries Fonds, Accession Number 92.29.1, “West Canadian Collieries Employee Records”

operations, the existence of a larger group is also present in the statements “we got mad” and “we went after him.”\textsuperscript{78} This “we” represents a larger community identity which transcended ethnic affiliations.

In their testimony, Mr. and Mrs. John KrKosky also noted the importance of this newly-realized social and class-based identity: “One of the main things is that they pulled together, and you know, they couldn’t possibly do all that they did do if they hadn’t pulled together. For \textit{everything}.\textsuperscript{79} When Irene Mole was asked to identify who attended a miners’ picnic, she responded “Everybody! The whole! All of them! There was not one nationality, either. There was everything you could think of. We were all the same!”\textsuperscript{80} Though strikes necessarily involved high levels of stress, Bertha Yagos emphatically stated that there was always one accepted rule: “we never, never, pick at each other’s races. Never!”\textsuperscript{81} It was thus with a renewed sense of solidarity and shared identity that the strikers continued to hold out for what they considered to be fair terms from the West Canadian.

This solidarity of purpose and fluidity of identity was no doubt helped along by the social life fostered by the Blairmore local and Communist Party respectively. It seems that both union and Party brass understood the need for there to be more to the strike than simply maintaining the picket lines; they needed to maintain morale as well. And so they acted in unison not only to promote the goals of the Party but also to ensure that strikers at Blairmore would not suffer the same fate as their brethren in Coleman.

In addition to the provision of sports days, massive rallies and direct relief from the Workers’ Unity League, the M.W.U.C. and the Communist Party were also very successful in

\textsuperscript{78} Crowsnest Museum and Archives Accession Number 2007.004.0001, “Bertha Yagos Interview.”
\textsuperscript{79} Crowsnest Museum and Archives Accession Number 2007.004.0001, “John KrKosky Interview,” emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{80} Crowsnest Museum and Archive Accession Number 2007.004.0001, “Irene Mole Interview.”
\textsuperscript{81} Crowsnest Museum and Archive Accession Number 2007.004.0001, “Bertha Yagos Interview.”
relation to groups which they had not engaged with extensively in the past: women and children. The surrender of Coleman to the operators’ demands seemed to re-energize the Women’s Auxiliary of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada. By mid-June they not only had seventy active members, but had produced a feeling among the wives of strikers that “this strike is different from any other. Before, everyone was idle, now everyone is busy – it’s a question of the right to live.”\textsuperscript{82}

As we saw earlier in this chapter, the Young Communist League at Blairstown had ceased to function actively at the beginning of the strike. According to Party documents:

The League membership and youth sections of the M.W.U.C. were not sufficiently prepared for the strike struggle and [had] no clear line of action worked out. The result is that the youth section ceased to function at the beginning of the strike... the YCL members participated in the activity, [but] the league as a body did not come out as a leader of the young miners, thus concealing its leading role. Due to those mistakes, the League was unable to recruit members from among young miners and thus consolidate its position in the mines.\textsuperscript{83}

Yet what the Party considered to be an error in April presented itself as an opportunity in May when it sought to consolidate its social position among the miners.

Around the same time as Coleman folded their M.W.U.C. local and returned to work, a new organization came into existence in Blairstown: The Miners Children’s Club (often referred to as the M.C.C.). In reality a front for the Young Communist League, this organization sought not only to educate “young miners” in Communist theory, but also to provide them with social activities that would keep them happy and motivated. Such a program not only freed their parents to devote more hours to the strike, but psychologically lifted a heavy load from their shoulders. The children quite liked belonging to the organization. When asked about the strike, John Gibos recalls that “They actually had a club for the kids. It was ...[the] M.C.C. Miners

\textsuperscript{83} LAC, CI, Reel K-299, File 1675, “Letter to District 8,” 11 April 1932.
Childrens’ Club... they put on all kinds of does ... little concerts, little picnics... I remember that.”

When asked if it made him feel special, his reply is telling: “Yah, it did. Because there really wasn’t any television, and there wasn’t any money when they were on strike to go to the theater and see a show, so any entertainment was welcome.”

By mixing ideology with social activity, the Young Communist League went from being a non-functioning entity in late February of 1932 to being able to claim an active membership of 128 seven months later. This showing was even more impressive considering that at the District Eight organizational conference in June of 1931, Blairmore delegate Comrade Mary Thomas stated that “there were only ten members in Blairmore” adding that she thought under the circumstances there “should have been more.”

Clearly pleased by the reversal of the YCL’s fortunes in Blairmore and throughout the strike zone, Thomas and her organization could claim to be successfully championing the slogan put to District Eight leadership by YCL headquarters: “to catch up and surpass the Party membership!” Blairmore also stands apart from much of the national experience at this time because the Young Communist League here was made up of almost equal numbers of men and women.

And while keeping the children happy and healthy was clearly a priority for the M.W.U.C. and the Communist Party, so was keeping their striking parents well fed. As the events of 1925 suggested, penniless and hungry strikers could quickly lose the will to fight. It did not help matters that the W.C.C. was believed to be paying those miners who had agreed to go back as non-union labour in a bid to break the strikers’ solidarity in Blairmore:

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84 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0071, “John Gibos Interview.”
85 Ibid.
It is evident [we read in a contemporary YCL report] that the other coal operators are putting pressure upon Vissac not to settle, and are giving every help, financially, especially to strike breakers. The Citizens League and the R.C.M.P. are very active in trying to undermine the solidarity of the miners. In spite of all these attempts, the miners are standing solid. Frequent mass meetings of all the miners, including Coleman, are held. The manoeuvres of the bosses and their agents are exposed at every step. The picket lines are kept up all the time, [and] the youth take part in all the activities in connection with the strike.87

The West Canadian Collieries was rumoured to be paying as much as $1.00 for married men and $0.75 for single men daily. The C.P.C. acknowledged that it was of critical importance that the Workers’ Unity League (and through them the Workers’ International Relief) ensure comparable relief reached their members. And in this aim they succeeded. According to the R.C.M.P. “the striking miners are being well provided for in the matter of rations by the Workers’ International Relief, which is splendidly organized, supplies and money being sent from all parts of the Province, sufficient to take care of everyone.”88 Having lost the battle at Coleman, it was quite clear that the C.P.C. and M.W.U.C. were not at all willing to call it a day in Blairmore.

The Strikers Issue Their Manifesto

Such material assistance to the strike was complemented by Communist efforts at education. In the days after the Coleman defection, the Communists issued a “Manifesto of the Communist Party to Miners of the Crowsnest Pass.” Printed covertly in Calgary, several hundred copies of the Manifesto were mailed to strike leaders in Blairmore for immediate dissemination. Because of the Manifesto’s radical language, the copies could not simply be handed out. They had to be covertly nailed to power poles, tacked to bulletin boards or shoved beneath doorways. The copies of the Manifesto printed in Calgary would never be distributed in the Pass, however,

87 LAC, CI, Reel K-299, File 1679, “Minutes of the Y.C.L. Sub-District Conference – Crows Nest Pass,” September 3-4 1932
as the entire shipment was seized by the Postmaster and handed over to the R.C.M.P. detachment as evidence.\textsuperscript{89} And yet to the surprise of those authorities who were in receipt of this seized shipment, the \textit{Manifesto} still appeared \textit{en masse} in Blairmore a few days later. It has since become known that Mrs. Mary North – known for her work with the Young Communist League – also had a mimeograph machine stashed in her basement. It was very likely that this machine made it possible for the C.P.C. to re-print their \textit{Manifesto} so quickly and efficiently.\textsuperscript{90}

The Communist Party used the \textit{Manifesto} to re-focus the remaining strikers on the larger picture, not just on the local issues which had initially informed their struggle. “Miners of the Crow’s Nest Pass,” the document proclaims, “The Capitalist system is now in its crisis and in the process of decay. Not prosperity, but wage-cuts, mass lay-offs, starvation and police clubs are facing workers unless a determined struggle is waged against them! The capitalist system can no longer give you jobs!”\textsuperscript{91} And to drive home this point, the \textit{Manifesto} pulled no punches in relation to the situation in Coleman. As soon as the time was right, the document warned, the coal operators would use the very home locals in which the respectable elements saw stability and prosperity “to put through a mass lay-off in the near future and to put across a wage cut of 20%... do not for a moment think that the ‘home local’ set up by the operators can be turned into a union that would fight for the interests of the men.”\textsuperscript{92} The District Executive Committee of the Communist Party then took things one step further:

Miners of Blairmore and Bellevue! Do not permit Vissac and his stools within your ranks to break your strike \textit{in such a shameful manner as in Coleman}! The militant workers throughout Canada are with you in your struggle and they expect you will wipe out the

\textsuperscript{90} Michael Downey to Kyle Franz, 23 September 2012.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
black betrayal of the strike in Coleman by such [a] militant struggle as will win victory for yourselves and the whole working class. Stand solid behind your militant union!93

They were taking a risk by so explicitly seeking to re-define the strike through a radical lens. After all, in Coleman it had been the overtly Communist agenda that had scared some away from the M.W.U.C. But it is clear that on this question neither party nor union was willing to be flexible. “The only possible road to real prosperity of the working classes,” the Manifesto argued, was “the overthrow of the Capitalist system, the establishment of a Workers’ Government and the building of Socialism in Canada.”94

The Government Rethinks (and Reacts)

When it became evident that Blairmore was not going to capitulate to the owners’ demands (or be crushed by the social and financial stresses of the strike itself), the Government of Alberta started to evaluate the legal options available to it. This was a process that gained urgency after copies of the Manifesto of the Communist Party to the Miners of the Crowsnest Pass fell into Government hands. After the eruption of violence at Bellevue on 4 May 1932, charges of unlawful assembly were indeed laid against Harvey Murphy, but the R.C.M.P. was careful not to make mass arrests. In its report to Government, Assistant Superintendent Hancock pointed out that the only charge available to the force at the time was “under the vagrancy section of the code” and that attempting to arrest the local leaders of the strike committee “might

93 Ibid, emphasis mine.
94 Ibid. It is also important that this refocusing of their attention along Party-sanctioned lines entailed taking up the fight for causes outside the Pass. On 23 July 1932, for example, a mass meeting was called to inform the community of the plight of Hans Thernes. This individual had been arrested in connection with a W.U.L.-led strike in Calgary, and had been sentenced to six months in prison; when his term expired he was to be deported to his native Rumania. As Rumania was then under the control of “fascists,” the meeting “vigorously protest[s] against this brutal and high handed treatment and [demands] his immediate release.” The individual in question was, however, deported and his ultimate fate is unknown to this author. Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession number 69.289, Roll 8, File 74, “Resolution,” 23 July 1932.
have led to bloodshed and would not have been justified under the circumstances.” Only if the Attorney General informed the force that he believed the rallies organized by the M.W.U.C. and its allies constituted acts of “unlawful assembly” would action be taken in the future.96

The Attorney General of Alberta lost no time in collecting a legal opinion on the matter. Interestingly, of all the options that this document laid out, pressing charges under Section 98 of the Criminal Code was not mentioned. Local strikers and Reds had, it seemed, stayed firmly within the letter, if not the spirit, of the law. In regards to the booing parades – a constant irritant for the R.C.M.P. and very real scare tactic for those who were being targeted – J.J. Frawley told the Department that in order to convict anyone under section 501 of the code (dealing with intimidation), it needed to be established that the parades were actually “compelling the person whose house was surrounded from doing something which they had a lawful right to do.” In Frawley’s legal opinion, “I understand that such is not the purpose of the congregating, but that it is merely a demonstration on the part of the strikers to express their feelings towards the mine owners and strike-breakers.”98

Fawley was somewhat less narrow in his interpretation of “unlawful assembly,” which in Alberta at this time was defined as follows:

An unlawful assembly is an assembly of three or more persons who, with intent to carry out any common purpose, assemble in such a manner or so conduct themselves when assembled to cause persons in the neighborhood of such assembly to fear, on reasonable grounds, that the persons so assembled will disturb the peace tumultuously, or will be such assembly needlessly and without any reasonable occasion provoke other persons to disturb the peace tumultuously.99

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96 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
Frawley was of the opinion that “if, under all the circumstances, there is reason on the part of the law-abiding citizens of Blairmore to reasonably fear the assembling of the striking miners will cause a breach of the peace, then the offense of being members of an unlawful assembly has been committed.” But looking back at the police reports it is quite evident that this would be harder to prove than Frawley imagined. The R.C.M.P. was convinced that Harvey Murphy was sincere in his calls for non-violent action, and legally speaking the mines, located in their own separate areas, were not located in any “neighborhood.” This left the booing parades as one of the few activities open to prosecution – but Frawley had explicitly ruled that course out of bounds.

Frawley advised the Attorney General that the best chance at successful prosecution did not lie in Canadian law at all, but a decision made in Britain in 1902 in the case of *Wise v. Dunning*. Unlike the current provisions in the Criminal Code of Canada which required a conviction in order for a justice to require a person to “give security to keep the peace and be of good behaviour for a period not exceeding twelve months,” the example based on British Common Law dispensed with the requirement for a conviction altogether. Essentially *Wise v. Dunning* established that anyone could be hauled in front of a magistrate if the police believed the individual in question intended to breach the peace or to cause meetings to be held which would breach the peace. If the breach did in fact occur, the person would then forfeit whatever money or property they had put up as a bond and be remanded into custody without ever having a proper trial. In the case cited as an example, the individual in question served two months in

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100 Ibid. Fawley cited the cases of *R. v. Patterson* (1930) in Ontario and *R. v. Jones and Sheinin* (1931) in Alberta as the basis for his analysis.

101 According to Frawley’s memorandum, “It has been decided that common law jurisdiction as to crime is still operative in Canada, notwithstanding the Criminal Code, being subject to the latter is repugnancy (sic) between the Common Law and the Code.” See ibid.
prison. “Accordingly,” Frawley wrote, the Department of the Attorney General could act on the belief that if there is evidence that breaches of the peace have occurred at any of the meetings addressed by Harvey Murphy and others in the Blairmore district, I see no reason why a [charge] couched in the information in the Wise case should not be preferred against Murphy and the others with the object of having them bound over under surety bonds to be of good behaviour and keep the peace, otherwise be imprisoned.102

Thus when it became evident that Blairmore would not capitulate and that its Reds remained defiant, the Government determined the time had come to take concrete legal action.103

“Hail, Hail, Lethbridge Gaol”

Though it is not known if the strikers knew that the booing parades were their safest means of protest or not, what is clear is that they were used throughout July, not only with increasing frequency but also with greater intensity. The R.C.M.P. worried that, having thrown the gauntlet down in their Manifesto, the Communists had increased “the possibilities of a clash between the two elements.” This danger was only compounded when two men left the M.W.U.C. and declared themselves for the home local.104

The size of the booing parades had grown exponentially, from a few dozen when they first started to a group of 250 persons, 42 of whom were women and 27 children, taking to the street on 14 July.105 “Hail, hail, Lethbridge gaol!” the children shouted as the parade wound past not only the houses of known strike-breakers but also of every non-unionized official of the

102 Ibid.
103 It might be noted here that shortly after this document was prepared by the Attorney General’s office, the Minister himself received a letter from his federal counterpart Hugh Guthrie, outlining the “serious condition[s] at Blairmore” as he understood them. Though he did not ask what the provincial government’s plan was in regards to what was going on in the Crowsnest Pass, this kind of communication may have helped reinforce that the time had come to take legal action. See Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 83.214, File 4A, “H. Guthrie to Lymburn,” 8 July 1932.
And just when many felt they had seen it all, there came something that shocked even the police. Led by Mrs. Mary North, Miss Angela Roman and Miss Hilda Johnson, a parade made up entirely of children commenced through town. It was estimated that eighty boys and girls made up the parade, and just as in “adult” booing parades they sung popular songs while they were walking, stopping at each marked house to “boo” its occupants. Constable E.B. Butcher, brought in because of the strike, noted that after booing each house in the New Townsite twice, they concentrated their attention on the working-class houses of scabs and their families. “When they were passing the house of one Mrs. Pete McEwan and [Mrs.] Marcieau, they started shouting and booing much louder than they had done at the house which they had previously passed.” Butcher reports that a very distressed Mrs. McEwan came out of her house and into her yard “and commenced shouting and waving her hands, she had a dog with her which commenced barking but did not make any move towards attacking the children.” The demonstration then took a more forceful turn: “At this point the parade stopped and they all gathered around and someone commenced throwing stones. By this time there was a large number of women around shouting and waving their hands, shouting ‘scabs’ at Mrs. Marcieau and Mrs. McEwan.” In a tactical triumph, the M.W.U.C. and C.P.C. had managed not only to shock and shame scabs, the officials and their families by sending their children on the booing parade in their place, but to avoid any charges stemming from the violence. All the police present could do was “order them to keep the parade moving, which they did...”

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106 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid. In his comments on this report, Inspector K. Duncan candidly indicates that “This was only a childrens’ (sic) parade, but had it been the usual parade of the Reds, the result would have possibly been different.” See ibid.
It seems that children shaming the respectable citizens of Blairmore was the development that finally forced R.C.M.P. Inspector K. Duncan to act. On the same day the children’s booing parade was held, Duncan sent an urgent radiogram to the Attorney General of the Province:

I have just returned from Blairmore where the situation is again critical. Stop. Citizens are exasperated at the activities of the Reds and threaten to take matters into their own hands unless some sort of action is taken at once to prevent parades, etc. Stop. My carefully considered opinion is that the time has arrived when the Department should authorize the prohibition of all parades in that area as unlawful assemblies as a means of preventing a serious breach of the peace. Stop. Will you please advise me of the Department’s attitude in this respect as soon as possible in order that I may take the necessary steps. Stop. I consider the question calls for immediate action.  

This was followed the same evening by an ominous telegram from the Citizens’ League to the government. Demanding that “all parades should be stopped indefinitely,” J. Corbett of the League warned that if action were not forthcoming from the Government, “reprisals are threatened...” Although Duncan’s radiogram spoke to the need to keep the peace, the telegram which followed it seems to confirm that moderates and citizens were indeed willing to take matters into their own hands.

Through a series of near misses and individuals being out of their offices when the telegrams arrived, it took a full two days for cabinet to meet and approve a parade ban specifically for the Crowsnest Pass, a first in the history of the province. And it seems that the two-days delay was almost enough to push the Citizens’ League over the threshold of

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112 Ibid. It should be noted that this was not the first time the Citizens’ League had telegraphed the Premier. Once organized, its members seized every opportunity to cast the struggle as one in which their rights as British citizens were being violated, and invoked ideals of British justice in order to get a response from the Premier.
113 Once it was clear the Government would act, a much longer formal letter was sent by “the coal miners of Coleman, Blairmore and Bellevue opposed to Communism, for the information of the Premier and the Government of Alberta” in which three “suggestions” were made: “A: That the Government take note that the strike now being carried on in the Crow’s Nest Pass is unpatriotic and revolutionary. B: That instructions be issued to the police to arrest summarily all persons found picketing or disturbing the peace, and C: That such other steps be taken as will enable us to get back to work.” Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 83.214, File 4A, “Memorandum,” 2 August 1932. For more examples of Citizens’ League telegrams, see Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.289, Role 55, File 516, “Citizens League to J.E. Brownlee,” 8 June 1932; Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.289, Role 55, File 516, “Citizens League to J.E. Brownlee,” 11 June 1932.
vigilantism. On the afternoon of 16 July, M.W.U.C. activists had scheduled a massive rally against the proposed restrictions on their right to free speech. But rather than stay in their homes and passively deal with the situation, miners who supported the home locals turned up at the meeting and “began to interrupt the speaker.”114 Unable to stop Harvey Murphy from speaking, the moderates tried to turn the Reds’ effective booing parade tactics against them, “shouting and booing” during his speech and causing feelings to “become intense on both sides.”115 If police reports are to be believed, a riot was only prevented by the Rev. Mr. Lark, the United Church Minister from Coleman, who took the stage and shamed the moderates into submission: “... up to this point the strikers had kept a very orderly meeting and that if anything was started it would be the moderates that started it.”116

But while the Citizens’ League failed to break up the mass meeting, they did ultimately succeed in winning their ban on parades. After Murphy left the platform that night Inspector Duncan had a private word with him, informing him of the ban and advising that “no further parades in the Crow’s Nest Pass area would be permitted.”117

Perhaps anticipating the legal trouble to come (or perhaps recalled by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party) Harvey Murphy did something that it seems neither his colleagues in the union or his enemies in the Citizen’s League expected: on 17 July, just one day after the ban took effect, he boarded Canadian Pacific passenger train number 12 bound for Ontario. As word spread that he was leaving town, a crowd of about two hundred people gathered at Blairmore’s train station to see him off. In an impromptu speech, he offered these words before climbing up the stairs and into his car:

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115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
The Farmers’ Government has banned parades. It forbids you, the taxpayers of Blairmore, to march in your streets! People are beginning to say that now I am going away this strike will be over. How foolish! How can one man keep a strike like this going? The strike is still on.\textsuperscript{118}

John Stokaluk continued to organize for the union and Angela Roman declared herself to be more resolved than ever “to teach the children all the more songs to sing at their meetings.”\textsuperscript{119}

Yet the very next day the R.C.M.P. delivered thirty-six court summons to the most active members of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada; they would have delivered one more had Murphy not slipped from their grasp the night before.\textsuperscript{120}

Critically, it was not the R.C.M.P. that brought the charges forward, but members of the Home Local and officials from the West Canadian Collieries who alleged that the accused had caused a breach of the peace on 16 July. It appears that the W.C.C. had hired local solicitor and noted Mason J.E. Gillis of Blairmore to put the charges together on behalf of itself and the home locals.\textsuperscript{121} It seems that both the West Canadian and the police were of the same mind, and perhaps as a matter of strategy Georges Vissac had made it known to Murphy that he might want


\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. The Mine Workers’ Union of Canada continued to send written protests to the Government as well, repeating demands for “Withdrawal of prohibition against parades; Repeal of Section 98 of the Criminal Code; Release of eight working class leaders in Kingston Penitentiary; Non-contributory life insurance; immediate [and] adequate relief.” See Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.289, Role 8, File 74, “Mass Meeting to J.E. Brownlee,” 1 August 1932; Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.289, Role 8, File 74, “Re: Blairmore Situation,” 4 August 1932; Archives of Alberta, R.A. Shepherd Fonds, Accession Number 69.289, Role 8, File 74, “Resolution Against the Anti Parade Edict of the Brownlee Government to the Striking Miners of the Crow’s Nest Pass,” 11 August 1932.


\textsuperscript{121} Though there was an interesting conversation between Gillis and the R.C.M.P. When it was learned that Murphy was leaving town, Inspector Duncan attended the personal residence of Magistrate Gresham “to get the necessary warrant, but J.E. Gillis advised me that he had received instruction from his clients not to ask for Murphy’s arrest at this time.”Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Harvey Murphy – Besetting Sec 501 CCC – No Fixed Abode,” 20 July 1932.

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to leave town: “...as far as the situation in the Pass is concerned, his absence is very beneficial...”\textsuperscript{122}

With the departure of Harvey Murphy and the bringing of charges against so many, strikers remained on the picket lines but their tone became altogether subdued.\textsuperscript{123} Perhaps sensing that now was the time that a conclusion to the strike might be possible, both sides acted: Vissac “asked members of the ‘home local’ at Bellevue and Blairmore not to hold any more meetings,” while representatives of the miners sent a delegation to Edmonton in hopes that the Premier would receive them.\textsuperscript{124} And though Premier Brownlee did sit down with the delegates, they were forced to return to Blairmore having made no progress: the Premier clearly indicated the reason he met with them was “as a courtesy” and that he did not intend to do it again. He sarcastically offered to send to Russia any striker keen to go.\textsuperscript{125} The situation must have seemed even more demoralizing when, on 25 July, two women charged earlier in the month were convicted by Judge Gresham for causing a disturbance by booing and – as suggested by J.J. Frawley – were held over on peace bonds and made to pay court costs. Police considered

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} According to police reports sixty men and twelve women were the standard complement for the picket line. Though they did not stand in the way of fire bosses and officials entering the mine property, they did walk as far as possible around the property to continue to jeer and boo in their general direction so they could be heard by their targets for the longest period possible. Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada – Crows Nest Pass,” 25 July 1932.
convictions in the remaining cases to be forthcoming.\textsuperscript{126} A later meeting of the local determined that if securities were demanded, “no bonds be furnished, and a gaol term be taken.”\textsuperscript{127}

And thus a temporary stalemate was reached. Members of the M.W.U.C. continued to picket the mine, but without the morale-building drama of the booing parades, the miners’ spirits seemed to decline. For the first time in months it seemed as though the will of the M.W.U.C. local at Blairmore might be broken. It was reported that on 4 August, members of the M.W.U.C. bargaining committee sought a meeting with Vissac but were denied. This must have been particularly disheartening in light of information from nearby Corbin, B.C. where miners had accepted a new contract with no strike action at a wage reduction of 4%.\textsuperscript{128}

**Vissac Overplays His Hand – Again**

Just as the situation was looking bleakest for the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada – all of their most effective activities had been declared illegal and their energetic and personable leader Harvey Murphy had disappeared to points east – Georges Vissac once again made a decision which would fundamentally influence the strikers and help to bring this eight-month ordeal to a close. He once again ordered his fire bosses to start digging coal for commercial use. This complete disrespect of the strike process – earlier referred to as “unethical” by the R.C.M.P. agent – reignited the passions within the men, women and children on the picket lines. Indeed, it

\textsuperscript{126} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “R.C.M.P. Report Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crow’s Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” 25 July 1932. It’s important to note, however, that any temptation to put forward large-scale charges by the West Canadian or home locals was discussed with local officers by Inspector Duncan, who stated that “under present conditions wholesale prosecutions for petty annoyances is not the course to pursue.” This, of course, was not known to strikers.


must have gone a long way in reminding the weary, tired and poor strikers that they were not only fighting for their union, but also against a company that treated them with disrespect. With reference to the company’s decision, John Stokaluk announced that “the Strike Committee had decided to send an ultimatum the following day to Mr. Vissac... if no reply was received by [August] 12, a stronger picket line would be organized for the 13th and [the company] would be treated to more than ‘booing.’”

If there was any doubt as to the M.W.U.C.’s intentions on the picket line, it was dispelled by the order that passed from person to person in Blairmore: everyone was urged to report for strike duty.

When asked about his intentions by Inspector Duncan, Vissac’s reply was that he had no intention of acknowledging or replying to the letter sent to him by the strike committee. His suggestion that he would simply put out a tender for the construction of a large fence around the furthermost limits of the West Canadian’s property was treated by police with disdain. For a short period it seemed that further violence was inevitable as Stokaluk, Leary and other M.W.U.C. local executives prepared for a massive picket and Vissac remained convinced that the R.C.M.P. had a responsibility to protect his property. Indeed, it is clear that the R.C.M.P. had made arrangements to have reinforcements present and extra horses were on their way to Blairmore.

The solution came from unexpected quarters: Bill Knight, a member of the Strike Committee (and the future Red Mayor of Blairmore) arrived unannounced at the R.C.M.P.

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130 Ibid.
detachment seeking an immediate meeting with Inspector Duncan. During this meeting Knight made it clear that “under the circumstances the strikers would come off ‘second best,’ and furthermore he and a confere had been informed that Premier Brownlee intended to look into the whole question and asked me when this was going to be done.” Given the summary dismissal from the Premier’s office the M.W.U.C. delegation had received just two weeks earlier, it is curious as to why Knight would have held on to this belief. One possibility is that it was a false pretext under which he sought government intervention in order to avoid a violent clash. Another is that one of the government’s men in the field – it is known that Secret Agent 125 was in Blairmore at this time – suggested to Knight that this was the case. Inspector Duncan informed Knight that he was unaware of an investigation by the Premier, but advised he would look into the same as soon as possible. He also warned Knight that by picketing the next day as planned, the miners “would be doing the most foolish thing possible, as I was quite convinced that if the Government had any intention of intervention, behaviour of this nature would immediately prevent it.”

Despite over 800 persons turning up at the West Canadian’s property the next morning, the Strike Committee decided to call off the picket on the advice of Bill Knight and the entire Committee descended on the R.C.M.P. detachment later that afternoon. According to Duncan, “the gist of the conversation was to the effect that they had only one question which prevented the settlement of the strike: discrimination.” True to his word, Duncan contacted the Premier’s office and asked that Premier Brownlee come to the Pass immediately to try to negotiate an end to the strike once and for all. When the Premier agreed – “I think at an early date I will take a drive through Blairmore and try to size up the situation personally” – Inspector Duncan ordered

133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 “Picket Line Stopped,” The Lethbridge Herald, 15 August 1932.
his reinforcements back to their home detachments as a sign of good faith.\textsuperscript{136} And in a refreshingly candid moment, when Vissac complained about the situation, Duncan reported to his superiors. “I fail to see any necessity for Mr. Vissac’s attitude.”\textsuperscript{137}

And so on 19 August 1932 Premier Brownlee slipped quietly into Blairmore to meet with a small delegation from both the M.W.U.C. Strike Committee and the West Canadian Collieries. Gone was the bombastic attitude he had displayed in his second-floor office in the Legislative Assembly. Instead instructions went out to members of the force that Brownlee “simply wishes to discuss the matter quietly….\textsuperscript{138} By all accounts, both the Premier and the M.W.U.C. entered negotiations in good faith, the union’s only stipulation being that the strike was to be settled on the basis of no discrimination or blacklists against any of its members. And initially it seemed that the parties had finally come to an agreement. During the meeting, “Mr. Vissac told the Premier there would be no discrimination.” Then as soon as Brownlee had left, Vissac turned around and denied he had ever said such a thing.\textsuperscript{139}

The miners had genuinely searched for a solution to the impasse. Now, the RCMP observed, the failure of negotiations “have over the last day or two developed [into an increasing] hostility towards the company and those men signed on for work…\textsuperscript{140} And so it seemed that the situation had returned to square one: “If it was trouble the operators wanted,” John Crawford told a crowd at the bandstand ten days after the Premier’s intervention failed to

\textsuperscript{136} Archives of Alberta, 83.214, File 7A, “J.E. Brownlee to Mr. Lymburn,” 15 August 1932.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., “K. Duncan to Sergeant Jones,” 17 August 1932.
produce results, then “they would give it to ‘em!”141 The assembled crowd decided to give a negotiated solution one last try; they cabled the Premier and asked him to return to Blairmore to see the deal through.142 Until that time, pickets were re-erected, police officers shadowed and the mood shifted into high gear once again. Harvey Murphy returned to Blairmore, presumably to save the M.W.U.C. from making a deal with the devil. He was promptly arrested as he stepped off the train onto the station platform.

It is not known if Georges Vissac contacted Premier Brownlee behind the scenes or vice versa, but unbeknownst to the strikers the two had made contact in the days after the Premier had tried to negotiate a truce. Worried about the possible strain on his own corporation, Vissac declared that he had “torn up” the blacklist the West Canadian had been compiling and that “the strikers would be rehired as soon as conditions of trade permitted, provided that the Provincial Government guarantee that relief would be offered to those who the W.C.C. could not immediately hire back.”143 Vissac also demanded that the agreement be signed by both the home local and the M.W.U.C., with neither having the benefit of the check-off system. Symbolically, the agreement was signed on Labour Day, 1932.

Conclusion

It would be pure speculation to ask whether miners at Blairmore and Bellevue would have decided to go on strike in 1932 if they had had any premonition of the hardships that eight months of strike action would bring to themselves and their families. Fed up with a company that treated them as expendable and took for granted the supremacy of the bottom line, miners went

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out on strike against a decade’s worth of grievances with the West Canadian Collieries. The residents of Blairmore (and the employees at the Greenhill) were only human, and they could only be pushed so far in the name of corporate self-interest. The strike of 1932 was the result of the West Canadian Collieries taking their employees – and their community – for granted.

The strike itself represents an important turning point in the history of Blairmore for several reasons. Whether fairly or unfairly, those on strike were promptly painted by outsiders looking in as radicals. Even those who had primarily non-political reasons to support the strike were tarred with this brush. The reality was that if you were on strike at Blairmore, you were considered to be Communist. And oddly enough, this provided a unique opportunity for many individuals who would not have necessarily stood with the Communist Party had the situation been different. Because the police, the government, the press and their colleagues assumed all strikers must be Reds (or at the very least sympathetic to the Red cause), strikers had nothing to lose by standing with the Communists. After all, if everyone assumes the worst and you will have to deal with the consequences one way or another, it presents an opportunity to “test drive” the ideology. If it does not fit with your beliefs it can always later be jettisoned. In this way hundreds of people were able to experience what it meant to stand with the Communist Party, and to have their brethren from across the country and province stand with them.

And this brings us to the important (and successful) linkage between the miners’ strike at Blairmore and other members of the Workers’ Unity League. Unlike previous strikes conducted under the United Mine Workers of America, the W.U.L. came through each and every week with strike relief donated by fellow workers. Having been abandoned and left to fend for themselves in the strikes of 1925, strikers at Blairmore must have noted a marked difference between the support one received when standing with a pro-capitalist union when compared with that
provided by a Red one. The reality is that the W.U.L. kept its promise to striking miners, and nobody in Blairmore was left to starve. This important lesson in solidarity must have reinforced the notion that Communism, in practice, worked.

The strike of 1932 also brought with it the solidification of a working-class identity in this Crowsnest coal town. In the Coleman local conservative elements devised a game of divide and conquer, playing on a combination of fear and intimidation in order to drive their message home. That this did not work in Blairmore can be seen in its citizens’ reaction to the fiery crosses of the Ku Klux Klan. The Blairmore local never lost sight of the prize: a contract with the principle of non-discrimination at its heart.

So while the West Canadian Collieries could save face by saying that after eight months of strike action, the miners it employed were no richer, the union too could claim victory. And victory in this case was far from monetary. Victory was the undisputed ability of miners to force the W.C.C. to sit down as equals at a table with their elected union representatives and sign a contract. Victory was knowing that Georges Vissac, who had treated the miners and their community with such contempt for so many years, had to recognize their right to the union of their choice. Victory was the ability to look at their friends and relatives in Coleman and elsewhere and know that while Blairmorites had suffered months of added poverty and stress, they were able to be open and honest about who they were. Though both the Communist Party of Canada and the West Canadian Collieries may have been re-thinking their strategies after the ink had dried on the Blairmore local’s collective agreement, what is clear – at least to this scholar – is that the miners of this Rocky Mountain town had been radicalized, and in the process had stood for – and protected – the values of democracy and equality in which they fundamentally believed.
Chapter Six: A Fair Deal Government

Until 1932, the signing of a collective agreement between the West Canadian Collieries and the miners of Blairmore had meant two things: that work would resume as soon as possible and – for at least a little while – there would be peace between the two parties. Much like parliamentarians working together in committee after clashing on the campaign trail, miners and the company in the past would come together after the conclusion of strike action to quickly fill outstanding orders and restore the W.C.C.’s reputation for stability and timely delivery of coal and its associated by-products. Even after the emotional and hard-fought strikes of the 1920s which broke the United Mine Workers of America and enforced punishing wage concessions, there was a sense that once an agreement had been reached both parties had to live with the results, at least for the term of the contract. And despite the nastiness and length of the strike, this might well have been the case in 1932, had it not been for Georges Vissac. Notoriously emotional and unpredictable, W.C.C.’s General Manager set in motion a series of events that helped facilitate the election of a Communist town council and school board early the next year.

Chapter Six will start by examining the actions of Vissac and other officials at the West Canadian Collieries, showing that although they had agreed to a settlement of the strike on the basis of non-discrimination, they had in fact maintained an unofficial blacklist and intended to use it to keep perceived troublemakers off the company payroll. It will be shown that the actions of the Company were so resented by Blairmorites that men, women and children were prepared to return to the poverty and social chaos endured during the first eight months of the year in order to force the W.C.C. to live up to its end of the bargain, destroying any hope of peaceful coexistence between the company and its workforce. Ultimately it will be demonstrated that the actions of the company, along with several social, political and religious factors, would come
together to help facilitate the election of a Communist Town Council and School Board in February, 1933.

Having considered the months leading up to the election, this chapter will then analyze the local agenda undertaken by the newly-elected Red administration. (The wider implications of their political agenda will be discussed in Chapter Seven.) It will be shown that it was necessary for councillors to continue the charade of being “Red” rather than “Communist” in order to avoid the full implications of the law under Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada. It will also be shown, however, that this did not prevent the newly-minted legislators from undertaking a massive political and social program that would change not only the way that people lived their lives in Blairmore, but the way they perceived the role of government in this Rocky Mountain town.

**Broken Promises**

A joint meeting of the Blairmore and Bellevue locals of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada was held on 3 September 1932 to decide whether or not to accept the agreement negotiated between their bargaining committee and the West Canadian Collieries. First and foremost, “Vissac had said that he wishes to stress that there would be no discrimination [against M.W.U.C. supporters or known radicals in the re-hiring process]...”1 This declaration was important. When the strike had ended at Coleman four months earlier, 125 men had not been hired back because of their suspected radical sympathies. Equally critical was the point that Vissac and the West Canadian were forced to recognize the M.W.U.C. as one of the representatives of the miners, and deal with them accordingly. The miners also won an important

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symbolic victory with the company verbally agreeing “to withdraw the [legal] prosecutions that
had been entered [into] at the instigation of the company.”\(^2\) It is not an understatement to suggest
that this agreement – which was accepted by a vote of 318 to 4 – had the potential to represent a
new beginning in labour-management relations in Blairmore.

The resumption of production was to have been a fairly straightforward affair: those who
wished to be reemployed at the Greenhill Mine were asked to report to the mine office and apply
for work. It was not surprising that “practically without exception, every former employee has
sought employment.”\(^3\) But unlike in previous years, the process took much longer than anyone
had expected, causing much anxiety for those who had applied for work but had not yet been
rehired. According to Sergeant Jones of the R.C.M.P., the stress was evident throughout both
Blairmore and Bellevue: “There is apparent considerable dissatisfaction at both places, and at
night groups of men are excitedly discussing the situation on the streets. Feeling between the
moderates and the red element is running high.”\(^4\) And the reason for this was made clear a few
days later. Though the West Canadian was re-hiring members of the M.W.U.C. in small
numbers, without exception each and every member of the rival conservative-leaning Home
Local was reemployed. According to Harvey Murphy, “discrimination is just as rampant as
ever.”\(^5\)

With men desperate to return to work and Vissac flagrantly flouting the non-
discrimination clause in the very collective agreement his company had signed only a week
earlier, a new development became obvious: men were leaving the M.W.U.C., declaring

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Report Re:
Mine Workers Union of Canada – Crows Nest Pass,” 7 September 1932.
\(^4\) Ibid.
September 1932.
themselves to be moderates, and promptly (within a day) being rehired by the company. This was made possible by the terms of the collective agreement itself.\(^6\) While the West Canadian was forced to recognize the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada as the bargaining agent for the majority of its workers, the agreement fell short of calling for a closed shop. Miners had to belong to a union, but they were able to choose between the M.W.U.C. and the much smaller Home Local.

Observations of corporate favoritism and anti-M.W.U.C. hiring practices rested upon more than idle speculation. There is evidence in R.C.M.P. records to show that Georges Vissac was not only more favourably inclined to rehire men who belonged to the Home Local, but actively violated the non-discrimination clause of the collective agreement by promising men a job if they crossed over. According once again to Sergeant Jones, “One case at Blairmore particularly aggravated the M.W.U.C. This was that of John Danco whose name was on the laid off list, and to whom Mr Vissac promised a job if he would sign up with the Home Local. This he did earlier in the week, and was then given work.”\(^7\) When news of Danco’s rehiring became known, a union meeting was called and an unprecedented action was taken. Just twenty days after the M.W.U.C. local had agreed to return to work, the membership voted to authorize wildcat strikes at any time, on any day, without any notice whatsoever to the company.\(^8\) The implications of this strike vote were not lost on Inspector K. Duncan, who had spent most of the strike stationed in Blairmore. In a letter to the Divisional Commanding Officer he laid things out in black and white: “The ‘possibilities’ in connection with this are serious.”\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid., “K. Duncan to the Officer Commanding,” 26 September 1932.
The police placed much of the blame for the situation on Harvey Murphy. Yet after a long and grueling strike that had come to a negotiated agreement, many in Blairmore must have felt deceived. Some turned to a tactic that had been successful in the past: intimidation. Groups of miners who had not yet been taken back at the West Canadian’s Greenhill operations started “standing around in the street as the miners went to work,” and though they did not attempt to keep the miners from doing their jobs, their message must have been clear to all who saw them. The cover of night led to bolder acts of intimidation and violence. Three of the men who crossed from the M.W.U.C. to the Home Local had the windows of their houses smashed while Bert Simons, the first man to defect to the Home Local in order to expedite his re-employment, was the object of particular brutality. Returning home from Bellevue, Mr. Simons was met around 9:30 at night

...by two or more men and very badly beaten. Mr. Simons is a returned soldier who lost his left eye in the war and had it replaced by a glass eye. This glass eye was kicked into his head by his assailants [and broken] in several pieces which had afterwards to be extracted in Bellevue hospital. Apart from this he was slugged by some heavy instrument, rendered unconscious, and kicked unmercifully about the face and body.

And while attacks on a dark path at night are perhaps understandable in the sense that there is little probability of getting caught, the situation escalated dramatically when a crowd swarmed the home of another defector, some men harassing its occupants while others remained outside destroying their vehicle. In a similar attack, Albert Derbyshire was held against his car and beaten with rocks while his passengers – inside the vehicle – suffered serious cuts from flying

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10 For an example of the focus on Harvey Murphy, see Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Report Re: Harvey Murphy. Communist Leader,” 26 December 1932.
13 Ibid.
glass and rock.\textsuperscript{14} It was clear to many that the situation was rapidly spiraling into chaos. Perhaps Frank Leary, President of the Blairmore Local of the M.W.U.C., put it best when he warned his members “not to get into trouble with scabs, [at least] not where people could see them.”\textsuperscript{15} Clearly, neither side was initially apologetic for these drastic actions.

The violent reaction to W.C.C. discrimination served not only to terrify members of the Home Local and their families, but also raised reaction from a somewhat unlikely quarter: Georges Vissac. In a letter to police, the General Manager advised the Force that “I was figuring on hiring between twenty and thirty more men at each mine, but since the return of Harvey Murphy in our district, both the old unions have assumed such an attitude that no new men can be added on without considerable agitation being raised. Under the circumstances, we have decided not to put any more men on.”\textsuperscript{16} He also made it clear that he did not intend to honour his promise to drop the charges his company had brought against sixty striking workers.

And so a stalemate set in. Despite the company breaking its promise to re-hire miners without discrimination and to rescind its legal charges against the striking workers, the M.W.U.C. Local did not take wildcat strike action against its employer. The West Canadian in turn slowly took back members of the M.W.U.C., but only when it was absolutely necessary to do so. In this sense the radical union was fortunate that the coming winter brought with it the “busy” season for the mines. And for their part, the R.C.M.P. lobbied the government to ensure that there was proper relief made available to the people of Blairmore, knowing that such material provision could be a decisive factor in preventing the situation in the coal town from

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., “Vissac to Jones,” 28 September 1932.
becoming even more violent and dangerous.\(^\text{17}\) When A.A. Mackenzie, the head of the provincial relief program, attended to the situation personally in early October, he may have inadvertently made the situation worse rather than better. Whereas the M.W.U.C. had argued that each family needed ten dollars per week to scrape by, Mackenzie accorded only twelve dollars per month, roughly a quarter of the amount requested.\(^\text{18}\)

And so a tough lesson in trust was learned by union supporters in Blairmore. Prior to the strike the West Canadian Collieries had had a terrible track record when it came to treating its employees fairly. After it, Georges Vissac and his management team all but destroyed any remaining goodwill. Strikers and their families must also have learned that they could not count on the police or the courts to enforce the provisions of their collective agreement, and that if they were in fact left destitute, unemployed, and hungry, they could expect the state to provide only the most basic of provisions.

**Taking A Stand**

By October one thing had become clear to many Blairmorites: they were largely on their own. And this was the point at which the brutality of September turned into a pragmatic plan for survival. The reality was that while seventy-one men had yet to be reemployed at the Greenhill mine, one hundred and eighty-seven had managed to have their names returned to the company payroll.\(^\text{19}\) And so it was decided that all M.W.U.C. members employed at the West Canadian Collieries would donate 5% of their already meagre take-home pay to the union, so it could


provide direct relief to still-unemployed friends and neighbours.\textsuperscript{20} This was followed by an offer of rapprochement between the radical and moderate unions. Frank Leary, President of the Blairmore Local of the M.W.U.C., indicated that the union would pay to replace any windows that might have been broken by his members or their supporters since the collective agreement was signed. He also extended an olive branch to those who had crossed the floor to join with the Home Local: any members of the Home Local were welcome “to come back to the Union and every one will be taken back without any questions asked.”\textsuperscript{21}

It was at this point that the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada in Blairmore made an active choice to set its own agenda rather than emotionally react to the actions of the Company. An important part of this change was pragmatic: families needed to be supported and the violence of the past few weeks was not something the union could morally endorse or continue. But with this newfound pragmatism also came a refocused and reinvigorated political agenda.

The first and most pressing challenge was that of preparing for the trial of union members and supporters for actions taken in support of the union during the strike. Sixty men and women faced charges, including Unlawful Assembly, Assault, and Watching and Besetting. If convicted, they could face significant jail time. When it became clear that the West Canadian Collieries intended to break its word and proceed with these charges, a rallying cry was sent out by the union: “Defend the Pass Miners!”\textsuperscript{22} In conjunction with the Blairmore branch of the Canadian Labour Defence League, the union paid for (and distributed) pamphlets which outlined the

\textsuperscript{20} It was clear that the small amount being offered by the province was inadequate to sustain families, and it was hoped that this additional sum from the union would help raise their standards of living. See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Report Re: Conditions in Crows Nest Pass,” 21 October 1932.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., “Report Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada – Crows Nest Pass,” 6 October 1932.
alleged crimes of the accused and urged the community to come together to support their legal
defence:

These victims, men and women, of the vicious Capitalist system, cry for the help of their
fellow workers. They asked for bread and were fed batons. They asked for the right to
live and were threatened with deportation. They said “we are not going to see ex-soldiers
discriminated against because they had the courage of their convictions.” Because of their
righteous stand they are today facing charges.... Don’t desert them in their hour of need!
The strikers fought a good fight, and won! These sixty are the casualties, and as the
victims of Class War, demand the assistance of all who have the interests of the working
class at heart!23

The change in tactics had the intended effect. While the R.C.M.P. reported that “the coming
court sittings at Macleod seem to be the chief subject of discussion and interest,” they also
reported for the first time in quite a while that conditions had become “quiet” at Blaimore.24

On 17 October 1932, the sixty accused were transported in two buses to the Court of
King’s Bench in Fort Macleod, about 100 kilometres to the east of Blaimore. This government-
sponsored convoy was followed closely by a large number of private vehicles as Blaimorites
made their way to Macleod to sit in on the proceedings. Although it is unclear whether they were
going for moral support or to physically represent their opposition to an unfair justice system,
their presence may have had a unintended consequence: intimidation. Of the sixty charged, all
were convicted. This had been expected. But the real surprise for many was the sentence handed
down by Mr. Justice Ford: only the much-maligned Harvey Murphy was given jail time. Every
other case was discharged with a suspended sentence.25

Although Ford’s rationale for leniency is not clear, what is evident is the effect it had on
many Blaimorites. According to H.M. Newson, Assistant Commissioner of the R.C.M.P.’s K
Division, the lack of jail time meant that “the Communist Party is now coming into the open and,

23 Ibid.
at most meetings, it is openly spoken about by the speakers [...] At a number of these meetings three cheers are given for the Communist Party of Canada and the Soviet Union, and the singing of revolutionary songs has been freely indulged in.”26 And so the M.W.U.C. and other Red organizations unapologetically began to reassert themselves.

In part, this represented itself in a series of very popular meetings at which the President of the M.W.U.C. local read letters from Blairmore miner Sam Patterson, who had been selected to tour the USSR on behalf of a group called the Friends of the Soviet Union. With letters arriving almost weekly, Patterson – according to an R.C.M.P. report – described the Soviet Union as “the ‘workers’ paradise,’ where everyone is employed and contented, contrasting this with conditions in Canada.”27 Recent scholarship has shown how powerfully such selective reports from the Soviet Union resonated among Canadians anxious to hear of a country that had supposedly resolved the era’s most pressing problems.28 Patterson’s words undeniably carried a lot of weight with his friends, neighbours and co-workers. They were led to believe Communism was producing real, tangible benefits for the working class.

The M.W.U.C. and C.P.C. also actively committed themselves to re-engaging with Blairmore’s youngest citizens. The success of this effort was in evidence when, while searching for a fugitive in future Mayor Bill Knight’s pool hall, a member of the R.C.M.P. stumbled upon “a class of young Communists congregating for instruction under Mrs. Annie Chukola” in the

27 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Report Re: Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, Crow’s Nest Pass,” 27 November 1932. It should be noted that despite the R.C.M.P. having the Post Master’s full cooperation, they do not seem to have been able to prevent these letters from arriving, suggesting that they were arriving by avenues other than the regular mail.
28 For example, see Allison Ward, “‘I listened as they built up their picture of that terrible land’: Self-Identity and Societal Observations in Travelers’ Accounts of the Soviet Union, 1929-1936” (M.A. Cognate Essay, Queen’s University, 2010).
basement of the establishment.\textsuperscript{29} It had been assumed by the force that the Young Communist
League had largely ceased to function after the strike ended, and the discovery of the meeting
came as a quite a shock for Acting Superintendent W.F.W. Hancock who referred the matter to
the Attorney General “...with a view to having Knight’s Pool Room License cancelled.”\textsuperscript{30}

Interestingly, however, as Knight’s establishment was only licensed for the main floor,
the government found it could not put him out of business unless the lessons were being offered
within the licensed portion of the premises. Furthermore, the lesson overheard by the officers
was not sufficiently provocative to warrant prosecution. So the meetings continued. Sergeant
Smith continued to report to his superiors on the teachings of Annie Chukola and Mary North as
they became known to him. Interestingly, the instructors avoided a hard-and-fast political
narrative. Instead, they challenged their pupils to re-think the society around them. For example,
on 15 December 1932, the children were “...instructed not to go to church, because the church
was only a tool of the Capitalists and the Government. [Mary North] made comparisons with
Russia, where nobody goes to church and everyone is happy.”\textsuperscript{31} Further, children were told that
if they did not agree with what they were being taught in Blairmore’s public schools that “they
should [leave] and walk home.”\textsuperscript{32} Again, nothing seditious or illegal was being taught in terms of
content, but these two dedicated Communists were nonetheless conveying their message to
students in a clear and effective manner.

With their educational and social programs once again in full swing, Blairmore Reds took
a calculated risk. Three hundred and sixty eight people – just under half of them women and

\textsuperscript{29} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Report Re:
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Report Re:
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
children – gathered in the streets of Blairmore and noisily paraded through town to protest the lack of government action in regard to relief. In doing so they also demonstrated their defiance of the government ban which specifically forbade parades in their community. Singing and chanting along the way, they eventually ended their march at the bandstand where they stood in freezing conditions to listen to D. Mills, John Crawford, W. Holley, Rock Sudworth and John Stokaluk speak about conditions in the community and the larger hunger march movement throughout the province. It was decided by popular vote to send a delegation from Blairmore to Edmonton in support of the hunger marchers, and to continue to push the issue locally.33 Again by popular vote, the meeting directed that all persons needing assistance should make themselves known to the R.C.M.P. detachment the next day. If assistance was not forthcoming, “further mass meetings and parades will be arranged, and a fighting front organized.”34

The parade was not only unexpected by the R.C.M.P., but immediately served to highlight just how hard it was for them to keep order in the community when confronted with large groups of law-disregarding citizens. In his report to his superiors, Inspector Duncan posited that “in view of the present conditions in the Pass, I deemed it advisable not to interfere with this parade and meeting.”35 With a detachment of two officers and no advance notice, there was little he could have done even had he wanted to stop the parade.

And while this show of strength was indeed a success for Blairmore’s radical community, it also served to enrage members of the Citizens’ League who had been denied permission to hold a parade three weeks earlier to celebrate Remembrance Day. In an angry letter to R.C.M.P.

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
leadership, Mr. H.F. Halliwell of the Board of Trade did not mince words: “I fail to see the reason [for] forbidding or refusing our own loyal organizations the privileges that apparently are permitted to those who make no hesitation in openly avowing their revolutionary ideals. An explanation would be appreciated...”  

And though a curt explanation was offered – the situation “must be dealt with as appears best to those responsible” – Halliwell’s indignant letter prompted an internal report that reveals just how precarious the R.C.M.P. believed their position to be in relation to enforcing these laws. According to Inspector Duncan,

> One of my chief difficulties throughout the trouble in this area have been that the “reds” have not laid themselves open to prosecution under existing laws, but their cock-sure and insolent attitude has naturally aggravated everybody, particularly men of Mr. Halliwell’s type. It has been very difficult to make these people realize the impossibility of prosecutions under these circumstances.

And so, as 1932 drew to a close, the lived experience at Blairmorites was markedly different than it had been just one year earlier. Individuals and their families had suffered through eight months of violence and deprivation as the Company and the Home Local had tried to stare down the radicalized Mine Workers’ Union of Canada. And even once the strike was over, the tension continued with violence, intimidation, deception and legal action permeating the lives of Blairmorites. By the end of the year red organizations were operating openly and unapologetically. Often they carefully stayed within the law. When they did not, they acted in such numbers that the authorities had almost no effective way to stop them. In effect, Blairmore had become one of the few safe havens for the Canadian Communist movement.

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., “K. Duncan to the Officer Commanding,” 14 December 1932.
Election

The exact reasoning for the sentences passed down by Mr. Justice Ford in the case of Harvey Murphy have been since lost to fire. It seems entirely likely the judge intended to remove Murphy from circulation, thereby placating powerful politicians, police officers and businessmen convinced the Communist was a threat to ordered society. He also ensured that Murphy’s prison sentence was long enough to deprive him from spending Christmas and New Year with his new wife, herself born and raised in Blairmore. And while Ford certainly succeeded in keeping Murphy incarcerated until 7 January 1933, the justice system also unintentionally created a chance for him to make an entrance upon his return. With the help of individuals like Bill Knight and Mary North, Murphy’s return to Blairmore became not the shamefaced retreat of a convicted man, but a night of drinking, dancing and rallying. As Sergeant Smith of the R.C.M.P. warned his superiors, “There is no trouble of any consequence anticipated until Murphy returns about the 7th of this month. According to the talk around town, there is supposed to be big trouble then. Some are calling it ‘the start of the Revolution in Canada.”

An examination of the flurry of actions occurring in the days and weeks after Murphy’s triumphant return suggest that Blairmorites had good reason to believe real change might be coming. In the past it had been the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada that had played the pragmatic role in local left politics while the C.P.C. (and particularly its functionaries like Harvey Murphy) focused on what might be referred to as the ideological end-game. But from the moment Murphy stepped off the C.P.R.’s evening train for his first of many stump speeches, it was clear that tactics had changed. In the days and weeks following his arrival home – and given that he had married into a Blairmore family, this was something that he increasingly emphasized.

40 Ibid., “Situation Generally – Crow’s Nest Pass,” 5 January 1933, emphasis added.
– a plan emerged not to overthrow the state and install a Soviet system in Canada, but to secure the reins of municipal power in Coleman, Blairmore and Bellevue so that residents could ensure “...the issuing of adequate relief.”

Attempting to secure influence via municipal elections was a strategy that the Communist Party had attempted before with limited success. Certainly never before had an entire council and school board been won for the C.P.C.’s cause. There had been limited success in Toronto’s municipal elections, and solid results from Winnipeg, where William Kolisnyk took his seat at council in 1926 and held it until 1935. Similar victories were seen in Burnaby, British Columbia and Windsor, Ontario.

And though this shift in tactics resonated with Blairmorites, interestingly neither the R.C.M.P. nor the outgoing Mayor or his colleagues from the Citizens’ League took the matter seriously. Police reports reveal that local officers remained focused on the potential effects local radicals might have on larger issues such as the unfolding Edmonton hunger strike or the emerging role of the Central Council of the Unemployed. They also worried about the possibility that Murphy would singlehandedly instigate another violent miners’ strike in Blairmore. A prime concern was that the parade ban would once again be violated, forcing a reaction from government agencies. Few suspected that when Harvey Murphy proclaimed that “...the time is coming that the Communists would instruct the flat footed police what to do...” that his prediction might actually come true – and without the staging of an actual revolution.

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
In a sense the C.P.C./M.W.U.C. foray was made official at a mass meeting held on 15 January 1933, just eight days after Murphy’s return. The meeting debated the merits of running a so-called “Miners’ Slate” of candidates, and ultimately “W. [Bill] Knight was the popular choice for [mayor].” Taking the platform, Knight made the first of many election promises many felt were so far-fetched that they could never be achieved: “Knight stated that when he is Mayor, he will deduct 10% from all wage earners in the Town of Blairmore...and with this money he will support the unemployed.” Candidates for town council and school board were selected at a later meeting.

In the days ahead of the 14 February municipal election, mayoral candidate Bill Knight kept a high profile, talking up his plans for what he called “a fair deal government.” The message was clear, concise and accessible: the elite had controlled town hall for long enough. If elected to power, he would raise taxes on those people and companies who could afford to pay, lower them for those who could not, and use the increase in tax revenues to help those who were destitute. In reality what he was proposing was a forced redistribution of wealth, but given the ever-present threat of Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada, he never put his plan in so many words.

When it became evident that the Miners’ Slate had a very real chance of winning the election, the town’s elite fought to delegitimize Knight and his team. During the final week of the election campaign, the Blairmore Enterprise did its best to boost Citizens’ Coalition candidates for office and detract from the increasingly obvious momentum building behind the miners. On 9 February 1933, four days before the vote, the Enterprise published an election issue

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47 Ibid.
which purported to present all the information necessary in order for the ratepayers of Blairmore to make an informed decision. It instructed readers that Mr. Ferguson, the Citizens’ Coalition candidate for Mayor “has wide experience at both Fernie and Blairmore, a man with the respect of respectable people, and deserving of support.”49 Bill Knight, on the other hand, was described only as “a carpenter.”50 Jokes about the would-be mayor and councillors were circulated in the paper – one suggesting that the working-class candidates were not worth half the yearly pay of the town’s dog catcher – while posters denouncing them as Communists appeared overnight throughout the town.51

But for many in the Citizens’ League this campaign did not go far enough. On the evening of 10 February 1933, Messrs. Bannan, Chappell and Oakes demanded to speak to the officer in charge of the R.C.M.P. detachment at Blairmore. Speaking to Sergeant Smith, they told the officer that they had “received a message from Mr. Gillis, Solicitor, who was then in Calgary, to the effect that there would be picketing and a parade of the unemployed in Blairmore on Election Day...”52 Smith, who immediately contacted his superior, Inspector Duncan in Lethbridge, sent off a chain of telegraphs that by the next morning had reached the Superintendent of R.C.M.P. K division and the Deputy Attorney General of the Province of Alberta. Interviews with local miners’ leaders and election candidates were quickly arranged the next morning, but it was evident from the genuine confusion among the radicals that in actuality

50 *Ibid.* What is interesting about this description is the way that the editor of the paper, W.J. Bartlett, has chosen to portray Bill Knight. By referring to him as a carpenter – and Knight was a mine carpenter at the West Canadian’s Greenhill Mine – Bartlett has removed from him the identity of “miner” which was so key in the solidification of the working class versus capital in the previous months. Equally telling is Bartlett’s refusal to identify Knight as the owner of the town’s pool hall, thereby attempting to remove any potential support from (or link with) the business community that was so actively supporting the Citizens’ Committee. Effectively what the *Enterprise* sought was the “othering” of Knight with respect to both his perceived working-class constituents and potential supporters drawn from other circles.
“there was no suggestion of a parade or demonstration of any kind.”53 The entire kerfuffle was likely a plan to cause alarm and incriminate local Communist supporters and their leaders.

And when involving the police failed, conservatives called on a higher power for help: God. It should come as no surprise that the sermon delivered from the Church of England pulpit before voting was one which called for unity behind King and country, but it was the sermon offered by Father Harrington at St. Anne’s Catholic Church which shocked and surprised many. The majority of the population in Blairmore identified as Catholic, as did the majority of the working class. All but one candidate for office associated with the workers’ slate for council and school board were Catholics. Until 12 February 1933 Father Harrington had been known to personally oppose Communism, but in his sermon that Sunday he made it clear that this was an opinion he shared with God. In an interview for this dissertation, the child of one of the Red candidates shared the following story with me on the condition of anonymity. According to the informant: “I will always remember sitting in my pew that day. And we sat way in the back, cos’ important people sat up front. Anyway, Father Harrington told us all it was a sin to vote for the Communists... And that if you were Red or voted for a Red you were going straight to hell, that God knows [how you voted]. And boy that was scary.”54

When polls opened on Monday 13 February and the ratepayers of Coleman, Blairmore and Bellevue started to cast their ballots, the election was simply too close to call. And despite all the back-and-forth between the candidates over ideology, the memory of that day in Blairmore came to be distilled in the form of one person, an eighty-year-old named Mrs. I. Rossi. As related by the Worker, Rossi, unable to speak a word of English, entered the polling station in

53 Ibid. Also see Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Re: Situation Generally, Crow’s Nest Pass;” 12 February 1933. The individuals questioned were Joe KrKosky, Bill Knight and Harvey Murphy.
54 Informant X interview, in author’s possession, emphasis added.
Blairmore with a lump of coal firmly in her grasp to signify her vote for the miners’ slate of Red candidates.\footnote{Worker, 3 June 1933.} As predicted, the election remained too close to call until hours after the polling stations closed, but by 2 a.m. the R.C.M.P. could report that the voting “was completed without incident” and that moderate administrations retained the reins of power in Coleman and Bellevue.\footnote{Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Re: Situation Generally, Crow’s Nest Pass,” 14 February 1933.} In Blairmore, it was a very different situation. Communists were elected to every available seat on council as well as the mayoralty.\footnote{In this period municipal elections were held each and every year. The mayor and half the councillors were elected to two-year terms on the odd years (1933, 1935, etc.) while the remaining councillors were elected for two-year terms in the even years. As the Mayor was a non-voting member of council, it was thus possible for the balance of power to change each and every year. See Appendix 3 for the detailed results and affiliations of elected members between 1933-1937.} The school board, too, was now firmly in Red control. And though the victory was far from decisive – there were 54 spoiled ballots and only 29 votes separating the least and most popular choices – a victory dance was attended by hundreds and addressed by the newly-minted Mayor of Blairmore, Bill Knight. Admission to the dance was by donation, with the moneys collected “to go to the defense of Tim Buck.”\footnote{Ibid.}

**Fit to Govern? Legitimizing Blairmore’s Radical Administration**

Knight and newly-elected councillors Joseph Krkosky, Joseph Aschacher and Albert Olson (as well as returning Red councillor Romano Peressini) took office at the peak of anti-Communist activity launched by the state. Communists across the nation were being arrested under Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada, handed stiff jail sentences, and in some cases deported. Punishments under the code were not reserved for high-profile Communist activists, but could be levied against anyone actively agitating for a significant change in the capitalist
As John Herd Thompson points out, Section 98 made it illegal to advocate “governmental, industrial, or economic change within Canada by use of force, violence or physical injury…” even if the accused did nothing to bring about such changes.60 It was under these auspices that local bosses, clergy and reactionaries called for the provincial government to declare Blairmore’s election invalid and appoint a provincial administrator for the town.61 While there were questions as to whether or not known Reds could legally govern a town council, there were also local inquiries as to the validity of the election. With the vote so close for all of the councillors, the Enterprise was left to speculate that “from scrutineers and others in a position to know, we learn that from the very outside more than five qualified votes, resident in the town, were missed.”62 The Anglican Reverend Parkington was reported to have been traveling around “making scarifying speeches about ‘life and property’ being in danger,” while Premier Brownlee was so displeased with the election results that it was suggested his government was planning to oust the new council “by claiming the finances of the town are unsatisfactory” and therefore warranting the appointment of a provincial administrator.63 The province automatically had the right to appoint an administrator under the Towns and Villages Act if the municipality was not

59 The far-reaching effects of Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada are investigated in, among other places, Kirk Neirgarth, “‘Fight for Life’: Dave Kashtan’s Memories of Depression-Era Communist Youth Work,” Labour / Le Travail 56 (Fall, 2005): 199-236. See, for example, footnote 34. Also see Denis Mulinaro, “‘A Species of Treason?’ Deportation and Nation Building in the Case of Tomo Cacic,” Canadian Historical Review 91 no. 1 (March 2010): 61-85.

60 John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager (eds.), Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 227. Though Section 98 had existed within the Criminal Code since 1919, it was not frequently used until 1931. John Manley argues that the crackdown on Communists and the increasing use of Section 98 can be attributed to the Communist Party of Canada’s success in organizing the unemployed over the spring and summer of 1931. See John Manley, “‘Audacity, Audacity, and still more Audacity’: Tim Buck, the Party, and the People,” Labour / Le Travail 49 (2002): 9-41. For more on the subsequent civil rights movements against the provisions of Section 98, see Dominique Clement, “‘It is Not the Beliefs but the Crime that Matters’: Post-War Civil Liberty Debates in Canada and Australia,” Labour History 86 (May 2004): 1-32.

61 “Red Town Council Cleans Out Mine Workers’ Enemies: Brownlee Threatens to Oust Workers’ Administration,” Worker, 4 March 1933. An example of an editorial opposing the decision to let the council function can be found in the Drumheller Mail, cited in “Blairmore Council Allowed to Function,” Blairmore Enterprise, 30 March 1933.


financially stable.\textsuperscript{64} It was against this backdrop of uncertainty regarding their right to govern that Knight and his council made their first dramatic decisions.

After their inaugural council meeting, the new Red administration issued what the press dubbed the “Knight Manifesto.” Occupying most of the front page of the 2 March 1933 \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, the Town of Blairmore took out a large advertisement to outline its new relief and taxation policies. With the bold headline “Blairmore Expects This Day Every Wage Earner to do His Duty,” the new mayor stated, “it is quite evident that the [federal and provincial] government cannot or will not make adequate provision for the unemployed, and until such time as their relief scheme functions in a better manner than at present, it is up to us.”\textsuperscript{65} Knight also indicated how the town would pay for the increased municipal support: a “voluntary” 5 percent contribution by every wage earner in the Town of Blairmore.\textsuperscript{66} It was announced that local miners under the auspices of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada had already agreed to contribute 5 percent of their pay, as had the local teachers and employees of F.M. Thompson’s store.\textsuperscript{67} Should 5 percent “donations” not be forthcoming, it was warned that the council would take such actions as might be required to finance the necessary relief.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{64}“The Blairmore Trouble,” \textit{Medicine Hat News}, 28 February 1933.
\textsuperscript{65}“Blairmore Expects This Day Every Wage Earner to do His Duty,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 2 March 1933.
\textsuperscript{66}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68}This was a relatively risk-free move on the part of the council, as the majority of the citizens had already agreed to contribute 5\% of their pay via the M.W.U.C.; the real opposition came from local merchants and independent businessmen. The real surprise was that F.M. Thompson’s store was on board as the family owning the store were strongly Masonic. This scholar can only posit that Mr. Thompson did not want to alienate his customers, and saw this move as a good way to ensure their loyalty.
“Blairmore Expects This Day Every Wage Earner to do His Duty,” Blairmore Enterprise, 2 March 1933.

This announcement marked the beginning of substantive change to the relief and taxation systems at Blairmore, and interestingly the council chose to relay the news under a banner similar to Horatio Nelson’s famous statement that “England expects that every man will do his duty.” The echoing of Horatio Nelson by a Red council is both ironic and representative of the administration’s need to avoid imprisonment under Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada by cocooning their radical proposals in language that itself was not revolutionary. Knight carefully and deliberately addressed the issue of the “Redness” of the new council: “after a great deal of deliberation, [it has been decided by council] that Redness is the state of the stomach. It is

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69 “England expects that every man will do his duty” was supposedly said by Admiral Horatio Nelson at the commencement of the Battle of Trafalgar. This was the decisive naval engagement of the Napoleonic Wars, and gave the British Navy control of the seas. For a detailed study, see Adam Nicholson, *Seize the Fire: Duty and the Battle of Trafalgar* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).
time that people’s opinions regarding this colour business were changed, and that we get together as before.”\textsuperscript{70} As one would expect from a populist appeal, “the people” were conceptualized as one.

Returning to Trevor Harrison’s important observations about power blocs (discussed in the introduction to this dissertation), the Knight Manifesto (and the consequent action by council to establish a system of “real relief”) established a power bloc that pitted the new council against the federal and provincial governments.\textsuperscript{71} The document sets the two administrations apart, defining the hated federal and provincial relief programs as the real threat to the well-being of Blairmore’s working classes, and inversely promoting the newly-elected Red administration as the “people’s” solution. This classification allowed the council to insist on radical change at a provincial and national level, because such demands were being made against the class interests seen to be threatening those of the workers. This strategy would be complemented by highly visible local action on the part of the council to try to relieve the externally-generated problems. By successfully defining the federal and provincial governments and their capitalist base as the main threat against the citizens of Blairmore, the council then by implication enjoyed the authority necessary to take action not only on the everyday issues facing Blaimorites but also to pursue a radical, anti-capitalist agenda.

Knight further addressed the other lingering stereotype that Reds were not good Christians by referring to “Christian” generosity in his appeal for the five percent contribution. He even referenced theology: “‘God made men after his own image’ and evidently meant them to be fed pretty much alike. We are of the opinion that He was right...”\textsuperscript{72} The council did not

\textsuperscript{70} “Blairmore Expects This Day Every Wage Earner to do His Duty,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 2 March 1933.
\textsuperscript{71} The phrase “real relief” refers to a system of relief that allows the recipients not only subsistence, but a dignified life.
\textsuperscript{72} “Blairmore Expects This Day Every Wage Earner to do His Duty,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 2 March 1933.
want to be known just as “Red,” but as a new administration that was going to get things done for the workers and unemployed. This denial of being Red, a move that allowed Knight to present himself as a populist, also helped him to avoid any legal complications that might have arisen under Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada.

The provincial government inadvertently helped the council differentiate itself from the previous administration. On 7 March 1933 the Mayor read a letter to council from the Department of Municipal Affairs, which had conducted an audit of the town’s finances. The audit concluded that there were thousands of dollars in tax inaccuracies traceable back to the town’s Secretary Treasurer, Mr. A. J. Kelly.73 The Secretary Treasurer was immediately suspended, and the ensuing two-month investigation resulted in Kelly “admit[ing] that the facts as presented by the Auditor were correct, [and] that there might be other shortages that he was not then prepared to discuss.”74 After charges had been laid, the Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs wrote directly to Mayor Knight, instructing him to dismiss Mr. Kelly immediately. This letter marked an important milestone for the new administration: not only did it remove Kelly in a non-partisan manner, but it also affirmed the provincial government’s willingness to work publicly with the Red council. When Mr. English, the Deputy Minister, traveled to Blairmore to meet with ratepayers and explain the findings of the audit, he described what was to become the provincial government’s policy towards the Town of Blairmore: “[Mr. English] stated that his department had no intention of appointing an administrator while the affairs of the town were being carried on in capable hands; but should such necessity arise, in the interest of ratepayers, action would surely be taken by his department…”75 The audit also provided an excellent chance

72 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 March 1933.
73 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 March 1933.
74 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 13 March 1933.
75 “Meeting of Electors,” Blairmore Enterprise, 16 March 1933.
to fill the position of Secretary Treasurer with someone who would be sympathetic to the new administration.

In cases in which the opportunity to dismiss staff appointed by previous administrations was not provided by the provincial government, the Red council took the initiative itself. After being sworn into office, council advised the Chief of Police, Fire Chief and the Town Electrician that as of 31 March 1933, their services would no longer be required.76 While all three individuals were closely linked to previous councils and were not known for their support of the workers’ movement, the official reason given for the dismissals was the “inefficiency” of the individuals in question.77 While these dismissals were initially questioned, public opinion changed when an inventory of the fire hall revealed that the former chief had taken the blankets, pillows, and even the stove from his office when vacating the premises.78

Having fired four of the most prominent men employed by the town, the Red members of council also sought to distinguish themselves from the only two non-Red councillors. Acting on rumours that Councillor E. Morgan had used a man on the town’s payroll to do yard work for him, the Mayor and Council demanded an investigation into the matter. A sworn declaration from the man, Mr. Ronald McDonald, stated “that while working for the Town of Blairmore I was employed to cut wood at the residence of E. Morgan… I received wages for this work from the Town of Blairmore, though the town received no benefit from that work. E. Morgan knew I was working for the Town at that time.”79 Though Councillor Morgan demanded an apology for

76 See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 February 1933. Also see “Town Officials Face Firing Squad,” Blairmore Enterprise, 23 February 1933.
77 “Town Officials Face Firing Squad,” Blairmore Enterprise, 23 February 1933.
78 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 17 April 1933. The council demanded, but did not receive, the resignation of Mr. Corbett, the representative of the Federal Department of Finance to Blairmore. See ibid.
79 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 August 1933.
such “slanderous” testimony, the matter was referred to the town solicitor and Morgan eventually offered his own apology for the situation.\textsuperscript{80}

Councillor W.L. Evans’s credibility was also questioned when it was revealed in an open session of council that he had written a bad cheque to the town for his 1932 taxes.\textsuperscript{81} Evans stated that “he was not notified that his cheque had been returned to the Town Secretary” and tried to blame the now-disgraced A.J. Kelly and his inaccurate accounting.\textsuperscript{82} What the public perceived, however, was that Evans had not paid his taxes and Kelly had covered it up by not reporting it to council while still Town Secretary.\textsuperscript{83} The councillor’s reputation was seriously hurt by the accusations of impropriety. Thus, just as the integrity of the town’s former Chief of Police, Electrician, Fire Chief and Secretary had been challenged, so too was the honesty of the only two anti-red councillors left on council.

The administration also moved to put an end to what it perceived to be the spread of misinformation in the local and provincial press.\textsuperscript{84} In March, council discussed the “continuing inaccuracies in the press,” and “it was agreed that the press be barred from meetings and provided with accurate meeting minutes.”\textsuperscript{85} Initially this resulted in demands for the freedom of the press from the \textit{Enterprise}, but the councillors and Mayor continued to make themselves available before and after meetings. The \textit{Enterprise} was not pleased with the situation. Nonetheless they adapted to it and continued to print stories about the council as before.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. It would appear that from Morgan’s statements in council over the year and his candidacy on the Red slate in 1934 that he may have started as a “labour” candidate, but reconciled himself with Knight and the other Red councillors before the next election. This is reinforced by statements in the \textit{Enterprise} that confirm that all of the Red candidates were elected in 1934, indicating that by that time Morgan had become a “Red.” The reasons for his change of alignment are unknown to this scholar.

\textsuperscript{81} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 3 July 1933.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{84} Coleman Journal, 16 March 1933.

\textsuperscript{85} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 March 1933.
When the election results were first announced, Knight and his new council had faced questions from politicians and local citizens alike as to whether a Red administration could govern under Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada. The *Worker* reported that “they are loudly complaining, and it is clear that if they had their way they would disenfranchise all militant workers and forbid them the vote.” By distancing themselves from any language that could result in legal trouble – “Redness is a state of the stomach” – council sought to legitimize the administration in the eyes of the public and senior levels of government. The scandals involving A.J. Kelly and Councillors Morgan and Evans were therefore not only important in discrediting the previous regime, but in demonstrating the council’s ability to function without hindrance from senior levels of government. Drastic measures such as the dismissal of the Fire Chief, Chief of Police and Town Electrician and their replacement with men loyal to the new administration not only brought a new perspective to town operations, but also ensured that the bureaucratic apparatus of the town was securely behind the new council. Despite opposition to policies put forward by Knight and his colleagues, positions that challenged the council’s legal ability to govern were ultimately unsustainable.

**Taxation, Relief and Advocacy**

The actions of council to legitimize their administration were coupled with a blatant attack on the upper classes in Blairmore. At the first regular council meeting after their election,

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87 “Blairmore Expects This Day Every Wage Earner to do His Duty,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 2 March 1933.
88 There was one person slated for dismissal who was spared. C.M. Larbalestier, the temporary Town Secretary appointed after the dismissal of A.J. Kelly, was also dismissed. But when news of his dismissal reached Edmonton a letter was sent to the council indicating that because the position was appointed with provincial consent it could not arbitrarily remove Larbalestier. Consequently, this employee continued to serve the Council in his position as Town Secretary for some time. See “Ban is Placed on Actions – Blairmore Town Council,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 20 July 1933.

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Knight removed any questions regarding his stance on capital and landlords. His very first action as Mayor was to relinquish the chair to propose that “any work given to tenants for the purpose of paying current rent be regarded as granted for the purpose of paying arrears of taxes owing by the landlord [to the Town of Blairmore].”\textsuperscript{89} This new policy was not simply an effort to collect unpaid taxes owing to the town treasury, but a pointed attempt to extract taxes from a particular group of people. There was not, nor would there be, an accompanying motion that forced miners or those on assistance to hand over their relief payments to pay arrears on property taxes. Knight had served notice that the tax burden was to be borne by the self-defined business and professional classes and those who made a living by providing services to the working-class community.

This requisition from the local landlords was the first of many initiatives that sought to place the local tax burden on the upper and commercial classes. Just one month into its mandate, council introduced Business Tax Bylaw \#9, which fundamentally changed the premise of municipal tax collection in Blairmore. Whereas in the past tax revenue had been collected from the working class and used to improve the town through public works projects such as new sidewalks, new roads, and so on, this piece of legislation reversed the emphasis, collecting taxes from local business in support of programs for the working class. Business taxes were increased by five percent while homeowners saw their municipal taxes reduced.\textsuperscript{90}

The proceeds of Bylaw \#9 were used to move against the hunger and poverty of the unemployed and the underemployed. Addressing the council on behalf of the local Single Unemployed Association, Mr. D. Mills and Mr. A. Morris requested that the council investigate

\textsuperscript{89} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 February 1933.
\textsuperscript{90} Local land owners are not to be confused with local landlords. Only if one used property for profit and did not live on the same property – thereby creating an important exemption for families who took in boarders to make ends meet – was one considered to be operating a business and required to pay the tax.
the rate of pay at which men were working for the town. A general discussion ensued, and it was
decided that the hourly pay for town work (performed by the unemployed) should “be raised
from 30 cents per hour to 50 cents per hour.”91 Though not indicating how this increase was to
be paid for in the long term, the town assumed the immediate costs and sent a telegram to the
federal and provincial governments advising them that the council had increased their liabilities
to the people of Blairmore.92 A.A. McKenzie, provincial Minister of Charity and Relief,
immediately responded with an angry letter, stating that “all efforts must be made to reduce
expenses as far as the married unemployed were concerned.”93 This answer was unacceptable to
council. It replied that the Minister’s demands were “impossible” and enclosed with their letter a
list of “all single and married unemployed so that they might receive financial help.”94
McKenzie had also insisted that all single relief was slated to cease 1 May 1933, but this did not
happen, as the budget for the single unemployed was later approved by the department. Despite
no further increases in relief reimbursement from the provincial or federal government, the Red
council continued finance relief at the rate of 50 cents per hour through the business tax.

The assumption that the rich should pay for relief was reinforced some weeks later by the
adoption of a bylaw that levied taxes on purebred dogs that lived in Blairmore. While
superficially about animal control, this bylaw effectively implied that if one could afford a
purebred dog during the depression, one could also afford to pay more towards the costs of
providing relief programs for the unemployed and underemployed of Blairmore.95 It also
potentially served as a retort to the Blairmore Enterprise editorial suggesting before the election

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91 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 13 April 1933.
92 Ibid.
93 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 24 April 1933.
94 Ibid.
95 See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 March 1933. It appears from council minutes that it was a
salaried employee who looked after animal control, and his rate of pay was not changed after the implementation of
this bylaw.
that all of the Red candidates were not worth half the pay of the town’s dogcatcher. Ben Swanky, a Communist Party of Canada organizer sent to Blairmore, recalled years later that:

They couldn’t figure out how to get at the mine owners, so the question came up ’what kind of dogs are there in town?’ They found out that it was the mine owners that had the pedigree dogs, and the miners that had the mongrels, so they put a tax on the pedigree dogs.  

Capital projects and relief on the scale undertaken by Knight were not cheap, requiring large investments on the part of the Town of Blairmore. Despite major changes in taxation policy, no programs could be undertaken if they were not paid for, regardless of the administration’s right to impose and collect taxes. It was therefore critical to ensure that the ratepayers actually paid their taxes. To this end, the council also re-evaluated the way that tax and utility bills were calculated and collected. The town council decided to lower the minimum rate for electricity to 50 cents per month; however, “those in arrears for over a month who do not pay by the 16th day of the next month will have their electricity cut off, and it will cost one dollar to have it reconnected.” Rather than try to enforce a price that was out of reach for most and face massive defaults on utility debts, the council lowered the price to a more reasonable level, believing that it was not an unwillingness to pay, but rather an inability to do so at the current prices, that had resulted in overdue accounts. The council also moved to collect what had been assumed for the past three years to be “uncollectable debt,” light and water arrears. The council provided for a ten percent discount on all arrears, should the amount outstanding exceed one dollar. The rate of collection increased dramatically, forcing even the Blairmore Enterprise to report that “collections for light and water are coming into the Town’s treasury fairly well,  

97 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 March 1933.  
98 Ibid.
despite the existing ‘hard times,’ largely due to the wise action of the council in offering [a] ten percent discount for prompt payment.”99

Tax incentives were also extended to the town’s business community. Bylaw 11 was introduced to provide an attractive reason for businesses to pay their taxes on time, thereby immediately making available funds for the town treasury. This bylaw confirmed the rate of taxation for business at 12.5 percent, and provided for a discount of 20 percent should local businesses pay their taxes in full on or before the first day of June in the year they were levied.100 This tax incentive proved to be too popular for the council to afford, and by December the Knight administration opted to replace the 20 percent discount for timely payment of taxes with a 15 percent penalty for late payment of taxes.101

The administration also reached out to small businesses competing with companies based elsewhere. It levied additional business licensing requirements on certain industries. Councillor Peressini raised the issue of laundries from Fernie and Lethbridge offering services in Blairmore at prices less than or similar to those of the local laundries. It was proposed that an extra business fee of $15.00 be applied to all non-Blairmore operations offering services in the town, and the motion was carried.102 Representing a marked departure from the national norm evident surrounding the Chinese Exclusion Act, Councillor Morgan later commented to the press that he “felt excellent service could be expected from local Chinese laundries, and that they should be protected.”103 This protection was later extended to other businesses. In a joint effort with the Town of Coleman, Blairmore moved to exclude transient barbers from cutting or shaving in

99 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 13 July 1933.
100 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 22 March 1933.
101 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 5 December 1933.
102 “Tax Rate Cut Two Mills,” Blairmore Enterprise, 20 April 1933.
103 Ibid.
either town without a license. In addition, the council moved to impose additional taxes on outside contractors “who accept contracts in the town.”

Local industry, through their mouthpiece the Blairmore Enterprise, did not accept these changes to the local tax regime silently. The favourable changes for business taxes paid on time failed to mollify the Enterprise, and it and several other companies refused to pay them. They hoped to contest the validity of Bylaw #9 in court. “When the Blairmore town council undertakes to collect a tax from the business concerns of Blairmore, which must be considered a tax spread over the year for the benefit of the unemployed,” the newspaper argued, “they are practically guaranteeing that the unemployed will remain unemployed for at least the year.” The imposition of a new tax regime also facilitated the formation of the Blairmore Business and Professional Man’s Association (B.B.P.M.A.) to promote the interests of the commercial and professional classes. The B.B.P.M.A. used the Enterprise to challenge the Knight town hall, declaring they would take “steps to test the legality of the Blairmore Council’s actions.” Some members of the association appealed their tax assessments only to have their appeals dismissed by council sitting as a court of revision. When the businesses complained that the process was unfair, the Mayor advised the town secretary to record that the individual businesses in question

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104 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 July 1935.
105 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 August 1935.
106 “Local and General Items, Blairmore Enterprise, 13 April 1933. Other businesses that refused to pay their taxes in hopes that the bylaw would be thrown out by the Alberta Courts were A.E. Ferguson (shopkeeper), S.G. Bannon (solicitor), J.E. Gillis (solicitor) and F.M. Thompson (shopkeeper). It is notable that F.M. Thompson’s store was one of the few establishments to “opt in” to the voluntary 5% contribution demanded by Knight and his council early in their tenure. Though the reason for this change in position is unknown, it is possible that when taxes were raised against business, Thompson believed a social contract between himself and the new administration had been broken, as it had increased taxation despite his voluntary contribution earlier in the year.
107 “Business Men Organize,” Blairmore Enterprise, 27 April 1933.
108 Ibid.
109 “Council Declines to Entertain Appeals Against Assessments,” Blairmore Enterprise, 4 May 1933. The businessmen who appealed their tax assessments were W.J. Bartlett (owner of the Blairmore Enterprise), A.E. Ferguson (shopkeeper), F.M. Thompson (shopkeeper), D.G. Bannan (solicitor), and J.E. Gillis (solicitor).
were “asking for relief.” If such corporate relief were to be granted, he argued, another increase in business taxes would have to be investigated.\textsuperscript{110}

The businesses that did not pay their taxes were issued writs of enforcement that were upheld in court. During the appeals process an important contrast developed between the self-styled businessmen and professionals and many members of the working class. The B.B.P.M.A. had expected public support in their fight against the Red council. That support did not materialize. While the association had called the new tax laws “unjustified and in reality illegal,” it took only a few weeks for a more conciliatory approach to appear.\textsuperscript{111} Their new line was enunciated in the \textit{Enterprise} on the 27 April:

\begin{quote}

Although Mayor Knight endeavours to have the unemployed of Blairmore believe that the business men of the town are determined to starve them, the unemployed know full well that this is not the case… Not a word has been said nor an idea entertained by any businessman to do any less for the unemployed than Mayor Knight and his council intend to do. They are not, in general, appealing against the general assessment, and are not opposed to paying a reasonable and necessary tax.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

The B.B.P.M.A.’s change of tone suggests that the association quickly realized that it did not have support for its cause within the general population. It also suggests the popularity of the council with residents. Businessmen in Blairmore, it seems, realized that they had to do business with the Reds.

This change in tactics by the \textit{Enterprise} and the business concerns of Blairmore also represents the defeat of the businessmen’s effort to dominate the local political agenda. By criticizing the actions of council as reprehensible, illegal, and unfair, the conservative elements of the town had attempted to define the townspeople as good, law-abiding citizens who were

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\textsuperscript{110} “Council Declines to Entertain Appeals Against Assessments,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 4 May 1933.
\textsuperscript{111} “Business Men Organize,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 27 April 1933.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
being hijacked by a radical council. Conversely the administration defined themselves and their actions as remedies for social injustice. The people of Blaimore had to decide which notion of citizenship matched their own perspectives, and when public opinion established itself firmly on the side of the Red administration, the B.B.P.M.A. was forced to redefine itself or face the possibility of being categorized as being outside of local society. The left, at least for now, had won the right to speak for “the people.”

There was one notable absence from the B.B.P.M.A.: the West Canadian Collieries. Critical of the Red movement in the past, the coal company held back because of economic considerations. In one report seeking potential cost-saving measures, author Raoul Green concluded “common sense dictates that cutting down any quantity of men at Greenhill is not worth trying at present. Idle men go on relief and I for one would assume that the company would have to pay for them indirectly by taxation.” The company may not have been pleased with the priorities of the new administration, but it had decided that antagonizing council was not worthwhile economically. The company turned elsewhere in an effort to reduce costs. Green had reported that parts of the timbering at the Blaimore mine required “immediate repairs” and suggested an innovative and cost-effective solution: “steel rails are every bit as suitable as I beams, since they cost nothing for purchase… there must still be quite a few rails at Lille.” Green was later sent to the abandoned town site to assess the availability of rails there, and found that “2000 ft. are well worth a try at re-claiming… they are angular #60 steel, and are well suited

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Green’s reference to indirect taxation refers to changes in the municipal tax policy discussed later in this chapter.

Timbering refers to the wood structures that prevent mineshafts from collapsing from the eight of the rock overhead. The steel rails would cost nothing because the West Canadian Collieries owned the both the railway and the townsit of Lille, which it had abandoned in 1912 but not sold. Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Accession Number 88.13.33 Kerr J+F, “Greenhill Mine Report,” 14 March 1933.
for mine timbers.” Instead of cutting staff, an expedition would be sent up the abandoned railway line to Lille to extract the remaining 2000 ft. of rail as a cost-saving measure.

The fundamental alteration of Blairmore’s taxation policy resulted in business interests paying more taxes for different reasons than had previously been the case. Despite their legal challenges, even businesses fundamentally opposed to the Knight administration – such as the West Canadian Collieries – were forced to acknowledge the council’s prerogative to impose and collect taxes. Although such new rules were unpopular with businessmen, they could not simply lay off individuals to pay for the increase. Doing so would only result in another increase in taxes to pay for the relief needed by the newly unemployed residents.

Having thus framed this change in taxation by identifying taxes with the need to provide increased relief to the unemployed and underemployed, the council actively cultivated a civic culture in which citizens could, and did, come to the council seeking help with their personal problems. The council extended its mandate beyond the traditional municipal niches of infrastructure and public utilities to embrace a populist agenda of advocacy and mediation for citizens on multiple levels while implementing a pragmatic system of relief.

The tone of the new administration’s policy towards the unemployed or underemployed was clearly enunciated just over a month into the council’s mandate with what we have called the “Knight Manifesto.” The minutes from the previous council indicate it had taken a hands-off approach, relegating the administration of relief to a sub-committee of council. When problems were encountered with the provincial and federal governments, individuals were left to fend for

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118 Likewise, the instillation of mechanical jigging tables was ruled out based on concerns from management that the savings were not worth the potential backlash to job cuts from the union and ultimately the town council. See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Accession Number 88.13.33 Kerr J+F, “Low Pitch Coal – No. 8 Level,” 1 November 1933.
themselves as they struggled for more or different kinds of relief. By contrast, Knight and his council demanded during their first meeting that the Alberta Relief Commissioner come to Blairmore to see for himself the suffering of the people and work with local politicians to find an answer to their problems.\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 February 1933.} Though the Relief Commissioner did not attend to the situation in Blairmore immediately, this marked the beginning of an aggressive campaign by the council to force a favourable response from senior governments.

This new approach towards other levels of government was not reflected in the form of lofty petitions or demands for new and unrealistic programs; most of the correspondence between the administration and the relief authorities involved detailed cases and sought specific retribution.\footnote{This contrasts with the image of council projected by the \textit{Enterprise}. The paper tended to focus more on the abstract actions of council (such as petitions it made to other groups) rather than on the concrete steps taken by the administration to address various local issues.} Given the nature of the primary industry in the town, the Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) was often the target of such correspondence. Mr. Camile Canet was the first to appeal to the “council for help getting justice from the WCB,” and was certainly not the last.\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 June 1933. For further examples, see Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 November 1933.} In what had previously been a process between the injured miner and the WCB, the town took an active role by writing to the board on Canet’s behalf and seeking rectification of his case. When the adjudication of the file took longer than the council deemed necessary, they took the matter further, petitioning the Government, the Minister and the MLA for “justice.”\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 November 1933.} The municipal authority’s campaigns extended beyond those seeking compensation from the WCB; they also included collecting money for those awarded settlements but who, for one reason or another, had not been paid.\footnote{This was the case for one Mr. Salva, who had been awarded a settlement but had not received payment. See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 November 1933.} These actions were simple but important for many locals, especially if English

\footnotetext[119]{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 February 1933.} \footnotetext[120]{This contrasts with the image of council projected by the \textit{Enterprise}. The paper tended to focus more on the abstract actions of council (such as petitions it made to other groups) rather than on the concrete steps taken by the administration to address various local issues.} \footnotetext[121]{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 June 1933. For further examples, see Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 November 1933.} \footnotetext[122]{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 November 1933.} \footnotetext[123]{This was the case for one Mr. Salva, who had been awarded a settlement but had not received payment. See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 November 1933.}
was not their first language. The council had the staff, resources, time and understanding of the issues to pursue cases for many who would otherwise never have pursued the ‘justice’ they deserved from the WCB.

The administration also facilitated dialogue among the citizens themselves. Mr. O. Kurri came before council on 7 August 1933 seeking legal advice. Kurri had been renting a house from one Mr. Kubic but was unable to pay his rent because he was unemployed. He had been threatened with eviction and did not know what to do. Council consulted its solicitor -- in its left populist framework, the solicitor was considered an employee who served the citizenry. It consequently advised Kurri “that the only way he could be evicted was on a judge’s order” and Kurri left the chamber.\(^{124}\) When Mr. Kubic came to council the next month, he said that he had decided to sell the house which Mr. Kurri was renting, and the new owners did not want a tenant.\(^ {125}\) Kubic did not want to evict Mr. Kurri, but did not know that there was any other choice. The council agreed to find a new home for the tenant.\(^ {126}\) Such efforts at mediation would later extend to fences, porches and other squabbles among neighbours. Such things were often dealt with immediately and never referred to committee.

The council chambers further served as a *de facto* court of appeal in cases involving provincial and federal relief. For many challenging relief settlements awarded to them by the other levels of government, the appeals process took too long and they could not provide for themselves in the interim. The Knight council made a point of listening to their problems and providing what short term relief it could manage. The aim was to keep the men out of relief camps, or “slave camps,” as they were popularly called.\(^ {127}\) Mr. Stella, for example, approached

\(^{124}\) Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 August 1933.

\(^{125}\) Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 18 September 1933.

\(^{126}\) Ibid.

\(^{127}\) Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 5 March 1934.
council on 19 June 1933, seeking assistance in dealing with the provincial government’s relief program.\textsuperscript{128} After hearing about his situation, the council agreed that he was indeed justified in seeking further aid from the provincial authorities and granted him the sack of flour he requested to sustain him and his family in the short term.\textsuperscript{129} Similar actions were taken on 3 July 1933, when immediate help was granted to Mrs. Mishalski and Mr. F.O. Peters who were not receiving sufficient relief from the province.\textsuperscript{130} These are just three of many cases in which emergency aid was granted. In almost all cases the stipulation for the emergency relief was that the recipient put in an eight-hour day at the town’s Department of Public Works.

While working for the town’s Department of Public Works, both permanent employees and relief recipients were expected to record their hours on the newly-instituted “Workman’s Time Sheet.” This new form was identical for employees and relief recipients alike, with the payee filling out the date, a description of the work, and the number of hours worked. The only place where the type of labour was indicated – i.e., relief labour, public works department labour, etc. – was at the bottom of the card, to be filled out by the town secretary along with the cheque number. Such a change in paperwork – reproduced in appendix four – exemplified the idea that no one person’s labour was more valuable than that of another person. It suggested that the town valued the labour of all equally and did not wish to stigmatize relief work.

The council’s new approach to the delivery of relief was fundamentally different from that of other councils. It was certainly a departure from the norm expected by the Bennett government in Ottawa.\textsuperscript{131} While previous councils would investigate a claim before issuing any relief – leaving the potential recipient without any help until the review was complete – the new

\textsuperscript{128} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 June 1933.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 3 July 1933.
\textsuperscript{131} For a general discussion of the Bennett administration, see Thompson and Seager, 222-276.
administration granted relief immediately in the interests of the well-being of the person in question. This humanitarian sense of responsibility for the day-to-day welfare of citizens was also evident with the council’s handling of such issues as W.C.B. claims, with the town using its resources to try to force action where possible on protracted or seemingly inhumane cases. The council was willing to take action where required, whether within their jurisdiction or not, to rectify issues negatively affecting the population of Blairmore. Its minutes demonstrate that the administration did not offer the same solution or relief to every applicant. Each individual’s situation and needs were addressed individually. Early on, the Knight town hall established a program of relief based not on the pragmatic allocation of resources but the pursuit of its own kind of social justice.

For this council relief was not only about the allocation of money, but also about the opportunity to support oneself with dignity. Oral histories clearly indicate that many working people needed to hunt, fish, and garden to supplement their diets. Beatrice Peressini remembers that as a child her father (Councillor Romano Peressini) not only worked in the mine, but that “we had half a block… and we grew vegetables, and that gave us any vegetable you wanted, and even some of the vegetables went on in the winter time...”\(^{132}\) Being able to grow one’s own food was important in an economy where many were starving or barely making ends meet. When Councillor Peressini proposed the town make available all unused public property “for the purpose of growing gardens,” he could draw upon his own experiences.\(^{133}\) The rent per annum per lot was to be one dollar, with the provision that the rent could be cancelled by the town should the lot be sold.\(^ {134}\) This motion was later amended to read that “lots be rented for free to

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\(^{132}\) Beatrice Peressini Interview, in author’s possession.  
\(^{133}\) Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 March 1933.  
\(^{134}\) Ibid.
the first applicant for the year 1933, understanding that they are to be properly cultivated.”\textsuperscript{135} It was through these provisions that many of the town’s empty lots were converted to vegetable gardens to feed the unemployed and underemployed.\textsuperscript{136} The program was later extended to include chicken runs.\textsuperscript{137} Although council had made provisions to “cancel the lease in the event of a sale,” the town did not sell any of the properties being used as gardens despite receiving offers on at least one of them.\textsuperscript{138}

The sale of property owned by the municipality was carefully considered when an offer was made before agreeing or declining the tender. Whereas previous councils had sold lots based on the price offered for the lot in comparison to its market value, the Knight administration put the social value of the property first and foremost. An offer of $100 from C. Sartoris for a house owned by the town and in relatively poor repair was received by council, and though the offer was considered to represent a better-than-fair-market value, council did not let Sartoris buy the property.\textsuperscript{139} Instead the council chose to find out how much it would cost to repair the house so that the unemployed or underemployed might be able to live there. The house, renovated, was then used for this purpose.\textsuperscript{140} Two years later the council refused offers to purchase property from men on relief. It reasoned that if such men could afford to buy land, they did not need relief.\textsuperscript{141} The Red administration made it clear that the use or sale of town-owned property should be for the good of the residents – and not based on an economic formula which only considered the market value of the property.

\textsuperscript{135} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 3 April 1933.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 3 July 1933.
\textsuperscript{138} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 3 April 1933.
\textsuperscript{139} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 June 1933.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Mr. L. Mark, a relief recipient, applied to purchase a town property but his offer was rejected because he was still receiving relief from town coffers. See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 July 1933.
Council had not lost sight of the local abundance of coal and agreed that it was foolish to overlook this natural resource. It proposed opening a seam of coal for the benefit of the local unemployed because the town usually experienced its first snowfall in October and the cold weather often lasted to April. The *Enterprise* criticized the plans as being a direct attack on the West Canadian Collieries and another grab by the greedy unemployed. In the end it was not a lack of determination by the council or a barrage of outrage from the *Enterprise* that stopped the project, but the realization that the sheer amount of red tape involved in opening and operating the mine would outweigh its economic benefit. It was simply cheaper to purchase the coal from the West Canadian Collieries and distribute it to those on relief.

When a meeting was finally arranged at Blairmore with F.J. Buck from the Alberta Department of Charity and Relief, it was apparent that the municipal and provincial governments had very different ideas about the way that relief programs should function. Council assembled half an hour before the meeting was to take place and unanimously endorsed a resolution which demanded “that the relief scale be advanced by 35%” along with the introduction of olive oil, butter, jam and eggs to the list of commodities provided by the province. The resolution also called for an increase in the allowance for milk and shoe repairs, as well as an immediate issuing of clothing for the poor. Buck listened to the call for more help for those on relief, but he indicated that he “thought 35% was too much… he would put it before the Relief Commission,

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142 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes (Special Meeting), 23 October 1933.
143 In part, the Blairmore *Enterprise* stated: “The Blairmore town council now proposes to operate a mine for the benefit of the unemployed, who are demanding twelve dollars a month for adults, six dollars for dependants; $12.00 per month for single young men and women; free light, water, fuel, and rent; free medical, optical and dental service; $6.00 for adults and $4.00 for dependants for winter clothing; exemption from taxation; free milk for babies [and] free mulch for milk cows owned by them, and state-wide non-contributory insurance. They would operate a cooperative store…” See “Local and General Items,” Blairmore *Enterprise*, 5 October 1933. The political aspect of the Unemployed Association will be discussed in Chapter Seven.
144 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 23 October 1933.
145 Ibid.
but did not think it would be granted.”\footnote{146} He also questioned the need for an increased clothing allowance, stating that in some places “parents admitted that certain articles of clothing asked for were not essential.”\footnote{147}

The issue of hourly wages provided for relief work was also addressed. The Mayor indicated that “20 cents a day, especially if asked to shovel snow” was inadequate, considering both the work performed and the amount of money needed to support a family.\footnote{148} When Buck stated that “some of them were quite willing to work” for this amount, the council insisted that the allowance was insufficient. The council and Buck could not agree on the amount of time to be worked either, with the council indicating to Buck that they felt the philosophy behind the relief system was degrading. As the provincially-structured program stood, relief applicants were required to work off the value of the goods they received. For example, a man receiving five dollars worth of groceries was expected to work ten hours at fifty cents per hour. While many important civic projects had been carried out under the auspices of this program, the council felt it was degrading for those who had to perform the work.\footnote{149} Buck replied only that “he did not know of any town where work could not be done to improve the place.”\footnote{150} Nor could the council and Buck agree on the issue of support for single unemployed men. The council wanted financial support and Buck said that the only support for single individuals was in the relief camps.\footnote{151} Knight even went so far as to demand a change to the wording of the relief forms, informing Buck that the citizens of Blairmore took exception to the form itself.\footnote{152} The council advised

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\footnote{146}{Ibid.}
\footnote{147}{Ibid.}
\footnote{148}{Ibid.}
\footnote{149}{As noted above, the Town of Blairmore did what it could to alleviate the stigma attached to doing work for relief payments – for example, by redesigning their time sheets to allow for the secretary to discretely indicate the reason for payment.}
\footnote{150}{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 23 October 1933.}
\footnote{151}{Ibid.}
\footnote{152}{Ibid.}
Buck that many were unwilling to sign the standardized provincial forms because they contained a clause indicating that the recipient must re-pay or work off provincial benefits. They felt they might be obligated to enter the government’s relief camps at the province’s discretion. The meeting between council and Buck fulfilled the longstanding demand by council that an official of the department visit Blairmore to see the needs of the community first hand. It yielded little in terms of progress.

Advocacy on behalf of residents was not always high-profile or political in nature. The council often addressed issues that were of everyday importance. For example, the quality of local dairy products dominated complaints in the spring and summer of 1933, and as a result the town asked for, and received, a review of the local dairy from the Minister of Agriculture. Likewise, when complaints about the quality of local radio signals surfaced, the council had Gaston Bazille, the Town Electrician, investigate the situation. Bazille “advised that there was a lot of radio interference in the town” and the council instructed the secretary to get in touch with the government radio inspector so that the situation might be rectified. When three men, Mr. Harich, Mr. Grena and Mr. Antusak were sentenced in Fort MacLeod federal court to be deported for violations of Section 98, the council demanded that the town secretary take the matter up with the Minister of Immigration, hoping the situation could be rectified. Though the council was not able to get the deportations overturned, the level of advocacy – writing

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153 Ibid. It was reported to council one week later that “the unemployed were willing to sign the new application form and would work out relief in the town.” It is unclear if the “new application” refers to an amended document (and was therefore the result of the preceding week’s meeting with Buck) or if this was a reference to the same form that the Red council had discussed with Buck on 23 October 1933. Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 30 October 1933.
154 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 3 July 1933. The dairy was outside the town limits so there was no way for the town to regulate it. Asking the Minister of Agriculture for his intervention was the only option the town had to attempt to improve the quality of the products.
155 Ibid.
156 Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 August 1933.
letters, circulating petitions, issuing press releases – represented a stark contrast with the stance of the previous council.\(^{157}\)

Intervention and demands for action often extended beyond municipal boundaries. While Mayor Knight avoided saying anything that could be construed as anti-Canadian, anti-British or “revolutionary,” the council endorsed several petitions and resolutions brought forward by the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada and other radical bodies demanding change in the way the nation was governed. Perhaps the most important and controversial change demanded by council was its call for the dissolution of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.\(^{158}\) While both the left and the right in Blairmore cited the same reasons for either keeping or disbanding the force – its role in the 1932 strike – what was key for the council was that it had found a way to express its desire for national change in a way that could not legally be considered treasonous.\(^{159}\) The administration also demanded the repeal of Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada, gave moral support to radical striking workers at Stratford, Ontario, called for the return of tobacco to provincial jails, and protested the arrest of picketing labourers in Calgary.\(^{160}\) These petitions had little chance of success, but were vehicles for council to express its political beliefs to a larger audience.\(^{161}\) The petitions were carefully worded to avoid problems with the federal authorities and had no cost attached to them, making them a relatively safe way of expressing the council’s

\(^{157}\) Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 16 September 1933.

\(^{158}\) As the R.C.M.P. files consulted for this dissertation reveal, the force was monitoring individuals and areas suspected of being radical. For more on this phenomenon in a larger context, see Michael Lonardo, “Under a Watchful Eye: A Case Study of Police Surveillance During the 1930s,” *Labour/Le Travail* (1995): 11-41.

\(^{159}\) See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes for 30 October 1933 and 15 May 1933 respectively.

\(^{160}\) See N.A., “Local and General Items,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 30 October 1933 and “Local and General Items,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 15 May 1933, respectively. The petitions regarding tobacco and imprisoned workers were as follows: “[W]e see no reason for the ban on tobacco, when in federal penitentiaries it is allowed. It is bad enough to imprison a man without adding torture;” and “Whereas 14 Calgary workers are arrested on a charge of unlawful assembly arising out of the Calgary unemployed picketing, and whereas this section of the Criminal Code #87 is a direct blow to the rights of picketing and allowing for the ‘frame-ups’ as in this case, we the Town Council of the Town of Blairmore urge the Provincial Government to drop charges and petition the Federal Government to abolish this anti-labour section of the Criminal Code.” Both from Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 15 May 1933.

\(^{161}\) Council’s decision to distribute the meeting minutes to the *Lethbridge Herald*, the *Calgary Herald* and the *Calgary Albertan* as well as the local newspapers demonstrates its desire to influence groups outside of the Pass.
opinions. In addition, they were usually controversial enough to give the council free publicity both in the home market and sometimes in provincial and national papers as well. The administration was also not afraid to invest public funds in projects that were overtly politically motivated. When Harvey Murphy suggested that the council should send a delegate to the National Unemployed Congress in Ottawa, Councillor Albert Olson was selected and sent to the conference with a budget of $200.\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 August 1933. The provincial government did not take any steps on this issue. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.}

The conference addressed one of the central issues for Blairmorites at the time — unemployment — but as it had already been discounted by senior levels of government it seemed questionable to some as an appropriate object of public money. The \textit{Enterprise} trumpeted that “the Town Act clearly stipulates for what purposes taxes may be assessed, and the purpose to which this $200 has been applied is not covered by the Act.” It further argued that the council had “overstep[ed] its rights, and it is surprising to the bulk of reasonable thinking ratepayers that the Department [of Municipal Affairs] has not before now taken steps to stop this mal-administration.”\footnote{N.A., “Local and General Items,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 17 August 1933. Though this expenditure was particularly irritating to individuals like editor Bartlett who stood so firmly against the changes in taxation, it should be noted that Councillor Olson did not spend the entire sum, refunding the town $40.55 that went unspent due to what he called “certain economies” he undertook during the trip such as refusing to “ride the cushions.” See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 18 September 1933.} Although its budget was tight, the council always found money to repay deficits accrued by labour organizations holding local events. The Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, for example, ran over budget for both their May Day and Labour Day events. Although the Union had other sources of funding, they sought and received money from the Red council to cover their cost overruns.\footnote{See references to the May Day picnic in Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, July 1, 1933 and reference to the Labour Day picnic in Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 2 October 1933.} This served to further enrage members of the B.B.P.M.A. who perceived their increase in taxes going towards the subsidization of Red events. The \textit{Enterprise}
reported "a picnic and sports day, staged by the Red element of the Crowsnest Pass in Blairmore on Labour Day reports quite a deficit, which they expect the ratepayers of Blairmore to make good. It is time the provincial authorities stepped in to put a stop to this mal-administration of local affairs.” Despite repeated demands in the Enterprise, such provincial intervention was not forthcoming. 165

The charges of “mal-administration” extended beyond the expenditures of council, with the paper taking particular exception to the form and location of some town council meetings. 166 When Councillor Evans returned from relief meetings in Edmonton, he chaired a meeting of ratepayers in the Union Hall rather than the town hall. 167 Charging that this meeting was to take place at Red “headquarters,” the editor demanded, “what next from our clever Mayor?” 168 Questions were raised regarding who was attending council meetings. Records show that the council was receiving large delegations of unemployed in their small chambers, filling the room to capacity and resulting in some ratepayers having to stand. Pragmatically, these crowds were best facilitated by entering through the attached fire hall rather than the smaller main entrance. This caused the Enterprise to denounce council because not only were ratepayers unable to enter the council chambers through the front door, but “the limited space therein [was] occupied by non-ratepayers, or others who have little or no interest there.” 169 The argument made by the Enterprise was that the un-propertied, non-taxpaying Blairmorite should not have a seat if an actual ratepayer was left standing. The paper was careful to avoid criticizing the system of relief itself. It targeted instead the way the program was administered locally: “Blairmore is the only

165 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 14 September 1933.
166 Ibid.
167 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 12 October 1933. The change in venue was made to accommodate a larger than usual number of expected attendees.
168 Ibid.
169 “Local and General News,” Blairmore Enterprise, 30 November 1933. Non-ratepayers refer to those who did not pay property or business tax, but still had the right to vote. The Enterprise suggested that because they did not pay taxes, they had no vested interest in the Town and therefore no business in council chambers.
town in the province that is saddled with unnecessary relief, and the authorities in Edmonton and Ottawa are becoming aware of this fact at a slightly late date.”\textsuperscript{170} This criticism of municipal spending directly affected the \textit{Enterprise} when the council stopped purchasing services from the paper on the basis that they “cost too much.”\textsuperscript{171} It was enough, evidently, to prompt the indignant editor to start writing editorials under his own name.

\textbf{Religion}

Having decried the taxation and relief policies of the Red administration, the \textit{Enterprise} also conducted a campaign of fear aimed at making ratepayers question what the council would do, given the chance. Religion was the battlefield of choice. In response to an open letter in the \textit{Calgary Herald} from the Anglican Rev. Parkington, Robert Horne tried to distance the Red movement from “the increase in atheism in the Crowsnest Pass” and challenged the Reverend to an open debate on the causes of atheism.\textsuperscript{172} This challenge spilled over into the local press, and the \textit{Enterprise} happily fanned the flames of religious antagonism. This included sarcastic statements such as “the public are pleased to note from Mayor Knight’s manifesto that on one point at least he agrees God was right,” as well as more serious articles demanding that all those who believed in God stay far away from any known Reds.\textsuperscript{173} In response to the question “is it all right for a Catholic to be Red?” the \textit{Western Catholic} published a reply from the clergy which stated: “Is it all right? No, its [sic] all wrong.” The article went on to argue that “the Reds are the apostles of Russia in this country. They are the apostles of destruction. They would destroy order

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid. Despite being repeatedly told by senior levels of government that it was spending too much on relief, the council kept spending on relief programs, financing such outlays through tax initiatives and other sources of revenue.

\textsuperscript{171} “Local and General Items,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 9 November 1933.


\textsuperscript{173} “Local and General Items,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 9 March 1933.
and peace amongst us; they would set up here Russia’s form of government, the cruellest and most enslaving government yet devised by man. The Reds would destroy every last vestige of religion and banish God from the heart and mind of man.”

When water and electricity were cut off to the United Church at the request of its Minister and an executive member from the Church’s Board of Directors because the congregation was repairing its building, the Enterprise reported that the council had done so because of its hatred for religion. Despite having to print a retraction, the editor lost no opportunity to associate the council with the desire to remove the churches from the social fabric of the community. Even after the retraction the editor continued his warnings from the previous week, stating that “this is not getting away from the fact that if the council is to accede to the demands of [Harvey] Murphy and the Workers’ Unity League, they would be opposed to churches and avail [themselves] of any opportunity to condemn or cripple them. Churches and societies are instruments for much good in our community, while the Unity League is a direct opposition.” The editor made it clear that despite any good works done by the council, it was ultimately something to be feared.

The question, then, is why would Blairmorites elect (and re-elect) a council that was perceived to be anti-religious if it was in fact (as the Enterprise so eloquently put it) made up of apostles of destruction? In order to answer this question we must look at the positions the various churches took in relation to Communism in Blairmore. The lone religious institution

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174 This item was reprinted in the Enterprise under the title: “What About Being Red?,” Blairmore Enterprise, 30 March 1933.
175 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 9 November 1933.
176 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 16 November 1933.
177 Ibid. Also see Robert Horne, “The Situation in the Crowsnest Pass, Calgary Herald, 3 March 1933.
178 In all the research conducted for this dissertation, there is no evidence whatsoever that Knight or any other Red in a position of authority tried to restrict the ability of any religious organization to conduct its affairs as it pleased. Though activists such as Mary North did suggest that religion was only a tool of the capitalist classes, the reality was that membership in the Red movement did not prevent activists from independently pursuing their religious beliefs.
refusing to take a side between the Reds and the moderates in town was the United Church of Canada. It continued to minister to all who wanted to attend and made no attempt to sway political opinion one way or the other.\textsuperscript{179} The Anglican Church of Canada (then also known as the Church of England) took a firm stance against Communism, but as it was a small congregation consisting mainly of businessmen and other well-to-do members of the community there is no evidence that this stance either split the church or caused any kind of backlash against it. The Roman Catholic congregation – the largest by far in Blairmore – told a much different story.

As we have seen in the preceding pages, Father Harrington of St. Anne’s Catholic Church was not one to mince words. Perhaps Molly Morency put it best when she remembered that “I am a Catholic, and the conflict between the church and Communism was really strong in here... especially with our priest.”\textsuperscript{180} So why, then, did so many of his congregants either openly subscribe to Red doctrine or support the Red council? Oral testimony collected in Blairmore suggests three different but equally compelling reasons. The first, expressed by Alvina Paulus, suggests that even known Communists went to church to please their family members. Paulus’s father, a well-known supporter of both the M.W.U.C. and the Red Council attended church to please his parents. As Alvina succinctly put it, “We went to Sunday school, but we weren’t religious.”\textsuperscript{181}

Paulus’s sentiment was shared by Bruno Glacia, who remembered going to Sunday school “off and on.”\textsuperscript{182} His parents, unlike those of Alvina, were actively skeptical. According to

\textsuperscript{179} This is not to suggest, however, that they were not active in the community, even serving at one point as a go-between during the strike.
\textsuperscript{180} Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0105, “Molly Morency Interview.”
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0088, “Alvina Paulus Interview.”
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0006, “Bruno Glacia Interview.”
Bruno, “My Dad said, ‘all you have to do is say a prayer when you go to bed.’ And he said ‘that’s all you have to do... [because] ‘the people that go to church are the biggest hypocrites. They go to church and pray and everything, you know, their noses up in the air, [but] they are the biggest crooks in town! Yup!’” 183 It is clear that for Glacia, his relationship with God – and that of his Father and Mother – did not require St. Anne’s Catholic Church except on high religious occasions such as Easter and Christmas.

Possible reasons for such a distrust of religious authority can be found in the testimony of Belle Kovach and Mr. And Mrs. Milo Mercial. 184 Much like Glacia, Kovach remembers her Father telling her that in the old country “…the priests had everything and they had nothing. And anything they had they’d give to the priest [while] his own family was starving. So they didn’t believe in going to church.” 185 The same was true of Milo Marcial’s experience growing up in Blairmore. His parents made it clear that the Catholic Church was “…in control in Italy, eh? The Catholic Church was really strong over there. And you know the majority of Italians that came [to Blairmore] didn’t start going to church. It’s like they were free, or something.” 186 To this Mrs. Marcial added, “I was surprised! I think it was sort of the way it was in Quebec, you know. Because the priest... told everybody what to do.” 187

So, for some, the words of Father Harrington carried little currency because they went to church only because family or loved ones expected it of them. For others, the excesses of the Catholic Church caused them to forge new and direct relationships with God. Some stopped going altogether when they arrived in Blairmore. All three of these scenarios, however, were

183 Ibid.
184 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0038, “Milo Marcial interview.”
185 Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0063, “Belle Kovach interview.”
186 Ibid., Accession Number 2012.019.0038, “Milo Marcial interview,” emphasis added.
187 Ibid.
defined outside Blairmore. Other Blairmorites traced their distance from the church to a more local cause – Father Harrington himself.

“I used to go to church until [Father Harrington] walloped me one with a yardstick” Frank Sikina remembered in 2008; his crime, he recalled, was that of not using the kneelers during prayer. 188 Similarly Yolanda Gregory recalls being scared to go to church because of the punishment meted out by Harrington – “if he slapped you, that was okay.” 189 And though these may seem like small transgressions at a time when corporal punishment was not only common but socially acceptable, this exchange with Janet Macura demonstrates just how formative such acts could be in terms of shaping how some Blairmorites perceived the Catholic Church and its ability to command respect and authority.

I used to go, like the church was right across from the school, you know where the school was. Where those apartments are now? So at 4 o’clock we used to go to catechism. And I used to go with Theresa Catino and Molly [Morency] and all my friends, they were all Catholics and I was Catholic too! And I even got my first communion! And I even got my first communion! But then, I still remember this too, I’m always saying that. One day we had to learn our, in catechism, we had to learn our prayers. And I don’t know why this day I didn’t learn it. And Father Harrington got me to stand up and repeat it and I didn’t know it. And he came and he plunked me on the head with, just with a pencil! And you know in front of my friends it just hurt my feelings! And you know I never went from then on. Just quit. And then when we were getting married, you know everyone knows who’s getting married and etc., etc. When Fred came in and we were getting married. Father Harrington came to me and asked me if I would get married in the Catholic Church. And I said no, we’re getting married in the United.

Q: Did you tell him why?
A: Well, it was the truth... But I didn’t tell him [it was] because he hurt my feelings. 190

And on this subject of marriage the Catholic Church was particularly strict. Ange Wilson self-identified as Catholic all her life, until her engagement when she chose to get married in the

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188 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0033, “Frank Sikina Interview.”
189 Crowsnest Museum and Archive Accession Number 2007.004.0001, “Yolanda Gregory Interview.”
190 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0085, “Janet Macura Interview.”

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Presbyterian Church where her husband’s family worshipped. Her testimony is particularly compelling:

I don’t know why the heck I married in the Presbyterian Church, I didn’t go to [their church but was] married by a Presbyterian minister. And my mom didn’t say anything about it and I didn’t think it was wrong. I thought that if you were married it didn’t matter who the heck married you, you were married, eh? But I had a letter from the Catholic Priest that was down there at the time. And he told me that my children would be bastards and that God would not recognize them. And oh my gosh, this letter! I couldn’t believe that anybody could write a letter like he did. And boy that soured me right up. I didn’t go back to church. How could a man or a priest say that? Maybe it was wrong in his eyes, but I was quite happy! We lived a happy life and I don’t care what, and I got two good children, and they’re not bastards as far as I’m concerned. Gee, that really, really hurt me, I’ll tell ya. And if I’d published that letter… it would have been a riot. Specially in a little town. And the [Presbyterian] minister’s name was Clark… and the letter started out “who the hell do you think Reverend Clark is?”... And I never went back to Church after that! 191

Consequently, though both the Blairmore Enterprise and the Catholic and Anglican ministries tried to forward an anti-Communist agenda, it found little traction in real terms with Blairmorites. The reality was that churches could not force their congregation to fall in line with the political beliefs they hurled forth from the pulpit. The congregants who were most receptive to their message had already been won over to the cause during the strike of 1932 (or before) and the remainder, for the reasons discussed above, did not feel that the Church – or Father Harrington himself – had the moral authority to tell them how their town should be governed. It should be noted, however, that none of the churches refused communion to known Reds when they attended church. In fact, this was one of the most salient memories for the child of a Red councillor mentioned earlier in this chapter who wished to remain anonymous. Attending church the week after her father had been elected, nobody knew if he would be allowed to take communion. She recalls being nervous and sweaty-palmed as her family stood and made their

way to the altar rail in case he was turned away. But the same Father Harrington who had condemned Communists to Hell only one week earlier administered bread and wine to the entire family without comment. “And all I remember,” she said, “...is thinking, ‘thanks be to Jesus.’”

More than Taxation and Relief

Having drastically changed the way taxes were collected, distributed and used while concurrently implementing a program of relief that was more responsive to the needs of the unemployed and underemployed, the council began to broaden its agenda to include important public and public health considerations. When the Reds took office in 1933, the raison d’être for the Town of Blairmore had been to provide the physical infrastructure necessary to attract economic investment to the town and facilitate its growth. The coming of the Red regime meant the expansion of municipal authority into areas of life that had hitherto been unregulated or left to the open market.

Many on council, chief among them Romano Peressini, worried that with so many people having time on their hands due to the current economic conditions, the possibility for continued unrest was always lurking just beneath the surface. To combat this, the town looked at ways it could invest in social infrastructure. One of the most popular suggestions was that the town should take over ownership of the privately-held ice arena. Built in the 1920s, the indoor arena had been financed by selling shares in the Arena Corporation to locals and investors, with the profits to be distributed among the same. However, with the local economy going from bad to worse over the preceding decade, the arena never paid any dividends and was itself in need of a number of critical repairs. It was reported – in the Blairmore Enterprise, normally no friend of the Reds – that “the suggestion has been made – and it’s a good one – that the town should take
over the arena and have the same placed in proper repair for the winter season. The arena could become one of the town’s most valuable assets, as well as a very necessary utility.” 192 This suggestion was considered in concert with another sporting facility that the mayor felt necessary: a swimming pool. 193

Though the town did not have the capital necessary to buy the arena outright, it did arrange to lease the building and in so doing made it available to residents at rates which were set on a sliding scale according to income and need. 194 A pool, too, was built, but reflecting the economic realities of Blairmore at this time it was a simple, outdoor affair. Another key investment was made in the Blairmore Public Library, with the council funding the library to the point that memberships for the working class were provided for free. 195

Though residents did not have the money to attend local sporting events, the council did believe it could afford “twenty-five cents per month for the collection of garbage,” effectively initiating the garbage collection system that serves the town to this day. 196 Previously residents had taken care of their own refuse, burning or otherwise disposing of it. This controversial bylaw marked the first time since the council took power in 1933 that additional taxes had been levied against the working class to pay for a municipal service. Many ratepayers felt that given the current economic depression it was simply not feasible to pay an additional $6.00 per year for a service they could take care of by themselves. The most controversial elements of the program,

192 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 6 September 1934. This support for the arena is representative of the Enterprise’s previous argument for investment in assets that would prove a “selling point” for the town. From their boosterish point of view, a series of social programs feeding and providing for the unemployed and underemployed was nothing to brag about, but assets that could attract new business or interest in the town were worth supporting.

193 The mayor stated that the town was in need of a swimming pool and council agreed to obtain estimates for the same. See Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 24 August 1934.

194 This was considered to be a win-win solution, because while it was under lease, relief man-hours could legally be used to complete the repairs necessary to bring the building back to code and thus open it for public use once again. The arena was ultimately purchased by the Town some years later, marking the beginning of the town’s Department of Recreation.

195 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 23 May 1934.

196 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 21 June 1934.
however, pertained to its administration. The council called for tenders from would-be garbage collectors, and ultimately chose Mr. F. Link and Mr. F. Goddard, paying them $80.75 per month.\textsuperscript{197} Controversy erupted not only over the amount of money paid to the garbage collectors, but also because the pair hired a single man to help with the work, despite the application of several married men for the same position.\textsuperscript{198} Complaints were received by council from Mr. Wislet of the Unemployed Association that the work should have gone to a man who was unemployed with a family, but the administration declined to get involved.\textsuperscript{199}

The issue of garbage collection continued to be a thorn in the side of the council even after initial problems had been worked out. Having collected the garbage at a rate of $80.75 for the summer months, Link and Goddard returned to council in October declaring that it was not possible to collect the garbage for the amount of money the town was paying them. Under the threat of a suspension of collection services, the town agreed to increase the amount of total expenditure to $130.00 per month, effectively subsidizing the operation by 197 households.\textsuperscript{200} The already-unpopular service was also criticized for the impracticality of the recommended garbage cans. It was reported that “a number of people viewing the receptacle [on display in the window of A. Morrency’s tin shop] are of the opinion that it is far too large, and that less than a dozen of its size would be sufficient for the whole of the town for a week.”\textsuperscript{201} Pointing out that the recommended garbage can was council-approved for household use, the Enterprise went on to state that “if any householder has a weekly accumulation sufficient to fill the can proposed by

\textsuperscript{197} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 10 July 1934. For rate of pay, see Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 September 1934. This was the total sum paid by the town. Each of the two garbage collectors and their expenses needed to be paid from this amount.
\textsuperscript{198} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 10 July 1934.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{200} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 1 October 1934. It was stated earlier that the sum of $80.75 was equal to the money collected by the town for garbage services; therefore, the garbage collection program was breaking even. When the pay was increased to $130.00, the difference is $49.25, which, when divided by the 25 cents paid per household represents an increase of 197 households.
\textsuperscript{201} “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 31 May 1934.
council, there is surely something wrong somewhere.” 202 Though trash collection continued at Blairmore from this point forward, the program was criticized as unnecessary, expensive, and impractical at the time of its implementation.

In 1935 the council concerned itself fully with what might today be referred to as “public health.” It decided to inspect all cows within their jurisdiction. 203 Having found eight families living within the town limits with more than one cow, Mayor Knight “suggested that all cows be Tuberculosis tested and registered.” 204 Council insisted that vaccination and registration of all cattle be completed within a one-month period, including “outside dairies selling milk in town.” 205 Similarly, when a complaint was made that the sausage factory had no functioning cesspool, the Chief of Police was dispatched to assess the situation and recommend further action as necessary. 206

Residents’ health was also invoked when council sought to regulate the town’s sex trade. For years an establishment known as “the Brick House” or “Hill Sixty” was located between the townsites of Blairmore and Frank, and by all accounts did a brisk business. Far from operating under the radar, the brothel, as Ross MacDonald remembers, was well-known in the area. Even as a boy he had known what was going on there. “That whorehouse operated until ’48, maybe ’49 as a proper whorehouse... I think most of [the ladies] were imported from Lethbridge. They would come by train with suitcases and moved in for two or three months, and then of course

202 Ibid.
203 While action was requested in relation to a specific dairy in 1933, there is no record of complaints being made against animals in town.
204 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 August 1934.
205 Ibid. The council’s demands for the regulation of outside dairies could not be enforced in any way, as not only were the owners of such dairies outside the jurisdiction of the town council, but so was the ability to make laws concerning public health. The provincial government did not respond to Blairmore’s demands.
206 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 31 March 1934.
they would move on.” 207 In contrast with other Depression-era towns, Blairmore did not stigmatize its prostitutes. Laddie Poriz remembers that the Town of Blairmore paid for and maintained a footbridge that connected the Brick House over the river to the townsite proper while Ross MacDonald recalls selling fish for twenty-five cents each to the women employed there. 208 It was in this vein that the council demanded “that the Chief of Police notify the two landladies that they and all the girls on the premises must have a photo of themselves, to which is attached a certificate certifying they have been medically examined at least once every week.” 209 Though professing the action was in the interest of public health, the Enterprise asked, “why such interest on the part of the town council in Hill Sixty? The town grading apparatus is trying to make the approaches easier.” 210

Going to Hill Sixty wasn’t always about finding sex. Once again, Ross MacDonald’s testimony is instructive. As he remembers, “that was also a time when the bars closed from 5:30, I think it was, until 6:30 so the men could go home and eat supper... and when the bars closed quite a few chaps would hire a taxi and go down the whorehouse...not so much for sex, but to keep drinking beer.” 211

But while prostitution was something that the Knight town hall could accept and regulate, the consumption of alcohol proved to be a more controversial indulgence. Despite no public complaints being registered with the municipality, the town council moved to stop the

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207 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0100, “Ross MacDonald Interview.”
209 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 31 May 1934.
210 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 23 August 1934. For more on prostitution in the West and what was considered “normal” for this period in time, see Lesley Erikson, Westward Bound: Sex, Violence, the Law, and the Making of Settler Society (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011).
211 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0100, “Ross MacDonald Interview.”
intoxication of those on relief. Circulating a complete list of men on government assistance to
every drinking establishment and hotel in the Crowsnest Pass, the administration sought to stop
those receiving public funds from drinking them away.\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 2 July 1935.} It is apparent the town hall’s request
that bartenders refuse service to those on assistance was not implemented, for two weeks later
the town secretary was “instructed to write to the Alberta Liquor Commission regarding people
on relief being supplied with beer in the Greenhill Hotel Bar.”\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 July 1935.} Such controversies are explored
by Craig Heron, who argues that an attempt to stop relief recipients from drinking was an affront
to “the customs and rituals [that] developed around the consumption of booze.”\footnote{Craig Heron, “The Boys and Their Booze: Masculinities and Public Drinking in Working-Class Hamilton, 1890-
1946,” \textit{Canadian Historical Review} (86), 427.} In the working
classes, these traditions were rooted in the prohibition of the preceding decade, during which
drinking “symbolized a collective defiance of bourgeois efforts to control them.”\footnote{Ibid. Prohibition and the temperance movement never took hold in the Crowsnest Pass, with Blairmore at the
centre of a large and profitable rum-running operation. The message of abstinence (coupled with Christianity)
championed by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Movement was perceived as a threat to the autonomy of
working class men, and never seriously developed in Blairmore. The strength of this social attachment can be seen
later in the 1930s when the town’s unionized bartenders went on strike for higher wages; despite being asked to stay
away from non-union beer parlours, the strike was unsuccessful because miners and other workers were simply
unwilling to abstain from the social aspects of drinking. For a larger discussion of the temperance movement, see
Cheryl Krasnick (ed.), \textit{Drink in Canada: Historical Essays} (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993).}

The legislative item which had the greatest effect on the day-to-day lives of the citizens
of Blairmore was the Red council’s foray into the area of socialized medicine. Previous to its
election, the provision of healthcare in the Town of Blairmore was not a public concern. The
 provision of healthcare, for the most part, came down to a transaction between an individual and
the local physician. And while many residents had some form of medical insurance or coverage
for themselves through the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, the majority of Blairmorites found themselves without coverage. The result was a situation similar to the norm across the rest of the country: healthcare was available to those who could afford it.

Believing this to be an injustice, the Red council, wherever possible, tried to subsidize the indigent. Even more dramatically, Knight and his colleagues opted to take a proactive position by hiring the town’s first public health nurse. The town’s newest employee – Nurse Lillian Willows – was not content simply to stand back and let the sick come to her. She is well-remembered as a constant figure in the schoolhouses, union halls and other high-traffic areas of the town. But she is perhaps best remembered for her bi-annual inspection of the town’s residential dwellings. Recalling his encounters with Willows as a child, John Gibos remembered that

they had a public health nurse in Blairmore that they didn’t have in the other towns. And the health nurse visited every house. And she would visit every bedroom and whatever you had – pantries – there was no fridge. But I remember her comin’ to our house and she had eagle eyes. She didn’t miss anything. And she saw a mattress that was tattered a little bit and the next day there was a mattress delivered. And the Town of Blairmore paid for that.  

And although the undertakings of Lillian Willows initially ruffled some feathers, particularly among those who considered their homes to be off limits to the government (or the services of a public health nurse to be beneath them), for most she was a popular addition to the roster of resident-centered municipal undertakings implemented by council to refocus the role of the local government on social, rather than economic, infrastructure.  

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217 Upon her appointment, the Enterprise predictably voiced their doubts, informing readers “Miss Lillian Willows has been appointed special town and school nurse – we don’t know what for!” See “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 9 May, 1935.
In fact the program was so successful that by the end of 1934 Mayor Knight sent an invitation to his counterpart in Coleman, proposing that they work together to purchase and run a regional hospital on a non-profit basis for the benefit of the workers. When it was reported that Coleman was “quite satisfied with the hospital accommodations furnished them… and not very seriously interested in Mayor Knight’s proposal,” the mayor sought support from the Blairmore School District. After the board decided to back the proposal in the amount of $2500, howls of protest arose from the Enterprise that not only had a municipal hospital “never been endorsed by ratepayers,” but also that the school board had committed funds “collected or collectable for school purposes only.”

Despite this financial commitment by the school board, the council could not come up with the money necessary for the project (estimated at approximately $7000), without liquidating assets or going into debt. With the Manager of the Royal Bank of Canada rumoured to be upset with the taxes he was paying on his two purebred Alsatians, Knight and his colleagues must have understood the irony when they started negotiations with the only party potentially willing to give them such a large loan in the middle of the Depression: the West Canadian Collieries. Noting that the town “would have to guarantee any loan received from the West

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218 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 8 March 1934.
219 Ibid.
220 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 23 May 1934 and “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 8 March 1934.
221 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 22 November 1934.
222 Conventional banks were unwilling to give new loans to individuals or municipal governments at this time, as many were forfeiting their payments; Fernie, for example, went bankrupt and was forced into trusteeship. The problem was not limited to a specific province or region, but was a national issue. This unwillingness to loan money except to the most qualified borrowers and the ruthlessly deflationary tactics employed by the charter banks led Prime Minister Bennett to call the Macmillan Commission (Royal Commission on Banking and Currency) which recommended the establishment the Bank of Canada to stabilize the economy. For more on the situation at Fernie, see Wayne Norton, “Trusteeship: A Public Administration at Fernie, 1935-1946” in A World Apart: The Crowsnest Communities of Alberta and British Columbia (Kamloops: Plateau Press, 2002), 131-146. For a recent investigation of the banking industry during the Depression, see Richard S. Grossman, “The Shoe That Didn’t Drop: Explaining Banking Stability During the Great Depression,” Journal of Economic History 54 (September, 1994) no. 3: 654-683. For more on the emergence of the Bank of Canada as a reaction to the Great Depression, see George S. Watts, The
Canadian Collieries” against its saleable assets, it was decided by council to pursue this option.\textsuperscript{223} The only question left was the legality of the move to secure new debt to finance the hospital, with Councillor Olson suggesting that the town retain the services of a local solicitor “regarding the necessity of first holding an election to ascertain the wishes of the ratepayers.”\textsuperscript{224}

Having established that under section 382 of the Towns and Villages Act a vote was indeed required, the council arranged to secure “a loan of $7000 for [the] hospital purchase from the West C[anadian] C[ollieries],” confirming “that the hospital scheme be pushed forward.”\textsuperscript{225} Motions that the hospital bylaw be “placed before the proprietary electors, authorizing the council to issue debentures to the amount of $7000 to purchase and renovate the building used as a hospital at present” were approved by council on 1 April, 17 June and 20 August 1935, yet the citizens of Blairmore were never given the opportunity to vote on the issue.\textsuperscript{226} For a number of reasons to be discussed in Chapter Seven many members of council were unsure about whether the bylaw would receive adequate public support.

Conclusion

The election of a Red council and school board at Blairmore in 1933 was not simply a knee-jerk reaction to the poverty of the Great Depression or an inevitable result of the strike of 1932. Although these events changed the community of Blairmore in important ways, equally critical was the intense friction between residents and the company in the days and weeks following the cessation of strike action late that year. By consistently violating what many
considered to be their basic rights to respect and sustenance, the company set the stage for the people of Blairmore to challenge the ways that power was held and distributed in this Rocky Mountain town. Its council confronted massive challenges in determining how best to build – and maintain – a very small “welfare state.” Though many ideologues of the left might disagree, to this scholar the election of Bill Knight and his colleagues represented nothing less than a local revolution.

Once elected, the newly-minted council lost little time in transforming the *raison d’être* of Blairmore’s municipal apparatus. Previously it had existed to build the physical infrastructure necessary to accommodate the town’s largest employers while also facilitating new economic investment and growth. The new council reversed this equation. It collected and spent municipal funds in support of programs and infrastructure designed to benefit the residents themselves and in doing so created a municipal welfare state unlike any other in Canada. This is what real change could – and did – look like during the Depression.

Yet the Knight town hall did not exist purely to enact social change in Blairmore. It had a more controversial and outwardly-focused political agenda as well. The next and final chapter will engage with this more overtly political side of the years of Red Blairmore. Specifically, Chapter Six will investigate the political actions of the Red council in relation to both the Canadian state and the Communist International, as it asks the question: why did either organization permit the Blairmore experiment to proceed?
Chapter Seven: The Fame and Fall of Blairmore’s Reds

As with any municipal government, the administration of Bill Knight at Blairmore faced a predictable series of issues when it took office on matters pertaining to public works, licensing, and municipal utilities. But it was how it chose to tackle such challenges that set the Red council apart from many others in Canadian history. Indeed, Knight and his colleagues re-imagined what municipal government might be, and by redefining the rationale for collecting taxes they meaningfully improved the everyday lives of their constituents. Yet although many programs specifically targeted local issues, the council did not back away from larger and more controversial questions. It is for its activism with regard to them that the council is best remembered.¹

Chapter Seven examines the outward political agenda of Blairmore’s now infamous Mayor, council and school board. It demonstrates not only that Canada’s “little Moscow” had connections with the wider Communist movement, but that it actively sought to interact with – and influence – the world around it. This exploration will proceed by first examining the actions of the council itself, showing that it undertook not only an ambitious local agenda but also unhesitatingly engaged with the larger regional, national and international issues it felt relevant to local conditions. We will then move on to examine the actions at Blairmore through the eyes of the Communist Party of Canada, demonstrating that while the Red administration and the C.P.C. were in public agreement about most everything, behind the scenes there were dynamic disagreements and power struggles between the Mayor and local radicals on the one hand and

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¹ The town council and school board during the period 1933-1936 was often referred to in the press as the “Knight Administration” or the “Red town hall.”
the C.P.C. and card-carrying Party members on the other. The question of legality will also be addressed, with newly-available R.C.M.P. documents outlining why, despite active prosecution elsewhere in the country, the Red element was permitted not only to act openly, but to retain control over the local levers of power at Blairmore for three consecutive terms in office.

**A Radical Council. A Radical Agenda**

In Chapter Six we saw the ways in which Mayor Knight, his council and school board were able to effect real and substantial change in Blairmore. Such local activism represented, however, only half of their agenda. Accompanying motions to create community gardens, a system of garbage collection and even a proposed system of public healthcare were petitions regarding war and fascism, unemployment and the treatment of workers at the hands of the R.C.M.P. Public meetings were held locally to discuss important topics, but so too were national meetings attended by municipally-funded delegates from Blairmore. An investigation of the types of action undertaken by the Red administration reveals a great deal about its political priorities.

If there was one tool that Knight and his colleagues used well, it was the mass meeting. Banned as a party for much of the time that Knight held office, the Communists and their sympathizers sought to harness the power of public opinion. Red meetings could in theory be broken up by the R.C.M.P., and those attending them charged with unlawful assembly. This is where holding municipal power made a real and tangible difference for Blairmore’s radicals. Though it was illegal for the Communist Party to hold “mass meetings” or “demonstrations,” neither the Government of Alberta nor the Government of Canada had the power to stop the

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2 This is not to suggest that many local radicals did not see themselves as Communists; rather that, while supporting the Party in a general way, they were not inclined to be controlled in the way that many other card-carrying members were.

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Town of Blairmore from holding open council meetings or meetings for ratepayers (nor could they prevent those living within the municipal boundaries from attending them). It is not an understatement to say that never before – or since – has a council in the Crowsnest Pass so enthusiastically held quite so many public meetings.

A reading of the town council’s meeting minutes reveals that councillors debated and passed a host of motions regarding the regional, national and international situation in Canada. What these minutes do not reveal is the sheer number of men, women and children who turned up to hear the debate and then, through a show of hands, either approve or deny council the authority to act on the issue in question. A good example came early in the administration’s first mandate. Calgary’s Central Council of the Unemployed had attempted a general strike in that city, resulting in the arrest, trial and conviction of fourteen men; all were sentenced to hard time in the Lethbridge jail. After the trial, the Communist Party solicited (and received) a letter of protest from the Blairmore council “demanding the release of the men imprisoned as a result of the Calgary strike.”

A glance at the council minutes would lead one to believe that the matter was brought before council, and after some discussion amongst councillors a motion was put forward regarding the plight of the radical strikers. Such was not the case. R.C.M.P. documents now reveal that Mayor Knight called a special meeting of ratepayers to discuss the matter. All told, two hundred residents turned out to hear well-known Communist and Secretary of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada John Stokaluk speak about “...the Calgary strike and the trial of the 14 men, how they had been held in jail without bail and how they had been found guilty as

3 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 19 June, 1933.
members of an Unlawful Assembly and sentenced to 1 [year’s] imprisonment.”³⁴ Having allowed Stokaluk to put the C.P.C.’s case before the assembled listeners, Mayor Knight took to the platform “and asked for a show of hands of those in favour of endorsing the resolution. A large number of hands were shown in the air.”³⁵ Four days later council held its monthly meeting and officially endorsed the petition provided to them by the Communist Party of Canada.

While protesting the treatment fellow Albertans received at the hands of the police might be construed as fraternal rather than revolutionary – particularly given the treatment of Blairmorites during the strike of 1932 – there could be no mistake about the world-transforming intentions of other petitions brought before the public for consideration. Over the next three years council would endorse petitions (via this public meeting model) demanding radical literature be made legal; the implementation of the C.P.C.’s “Act on Social and Unemployment Insurance”; in support of striking miners at Flin Flon, MB and Noranda, QC; and protesting against the actions of the R.C.M.P. at both of these locations.⁶ The “people,” through council, also demanded the immediate release of Tim Buck and his co-accused from Kingston Penitentiary and an end to war and fascism (via a letter to the Minister of Justice and the People’s Court in Berlin).⁷ The most notorious protest, however, came after a meeting called to discuss the invasion of Ethiopia by fascist Italy. Council resolved to send the following – to Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie – by expensive overnight cable – with copies to the New York Times, Lethbridge Herald, Edmonton Journal, Toronto Star and Pravda (Moscow), on behalf of

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³⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 15 May 1933; Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 18 September 1933; Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 5 March 1934; Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes 21 June 1934; Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes 7 August 1934.
⁷ Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 August 1934; Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes 15 October 1934.
the people of Blairmore: “Mayor and Council convey best wishes for success over Mussolini, the oppressor of the Italian people and war-monger. We pray for your victory which will help to free the Italian people and the world. Blairmore salutes you. [signed] Mayor William Knight.”  

Residents, through their council, were becoming increasingly engaged in the politics of the world around them.

Holding public meetings and endorsing resolutions to be sent to various people, organizations or governments was one thing, but the people of Blairmore demonstrated time and time again that they were not afraid to put their money where their mouth was. Early on in its years in office, the Red council sponsored groups of workers financially so that they could go to Calgary or Edmonton to interview government officials as to the state of relief or public works as it related to Blairmore. More controversial was the outright subsidization of Blairmorites who were known Communists or sympathizers to attend conferences or conventions affiliated with the Communist Party of Canada. Knight’s council first tested the waters in this regard by sending Julia Johnson, Albert Morris and Steven Magdal – all card-carrying members of the Party – to attend the Convention of the Calgary Unemployed as representatives of the Town of Blairmore. And while the expenses relating to this trip were minimal, it foreshadowed larger

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8 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 4 November 1935. Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia, justified by the Italian government as necessary to defend the territorial integrity of their colony Italian Somaliland, was decried by the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of Canada as nothing more but the spread of fascism to Africa. The same sentiment was expressed by Knight and council in their telegram. The Bennett government initially would not condemn the Italians at the League of Nations for the invasion. This policy only changed at the last minute, when during the final days of the federal election campaign that would cost Bennett government, the prime minister changed course and authorized Canada’s representative at the League of Nations to vote in favour of aggressive sanctions. This about-face came about after it was revealed that both the United Kingdom and France would be supportive of sanctions. For a Canadian perspective, see John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager (eds.), *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 308-310.

9 For example, see Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 8 October 1933. In this case the council paid for local men to travel to Edmonton to enquire about various problems then facing the town including relief and treatment of imprisoned men.

and more expensive junkets to come. Only a few weeks later Councillor Albert “Ollie” Olsen was selected by a mass meeting to represent the Town of Blairmore at the Council of the National Unemployed meetings in Ottawa on 5-7 September 1933. Olsen, the only card-carrying member of the C.P.C. on town council, received $200 of municipal money to complete this undertaking on behalf of the town. When Olsen returned, he inaugurated two traditions which would play an important role in local life in the years to come. Dressed in “a bright red shirt,” Olsen immediately addressed a large crowd of his friends and neighbors at the bandstand adjacent to the C.P.R. station, sharing with them what he had learned as their representative at the conference. He was also in a position to announce that despite having been granted two hundred dollars by council to attend the conference, he was able to return $40.56 to the town treasury, having resisted the temptation to “ride the cushions” to and from Ottawa. Similar taxpayer-funded trips would be taken by the Mayor and councillors to other events, including the counter-conference the Communist Party helped organize in juxtaposition to the Imperial Conference and the Canadian Congress against War and Fascism.

While it is clear council was not afraid to demand radical change on a regional, national and international scale, it also took action to celebrate and promote Communism at home and in everyday life. Working in tandem with town council, the Blairmore School Board shocked some residents when it decided to make the anniversary of the Russian Revolution a public holiday for all school children and board staff. The town followed suit for all public employees. On 7 November 1934, games and festivities were provided to the children, along with free candy and

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12 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 7 August 1933.
14 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 18 October 1933.
food, and a day off work for many of their fathers (since the Greenhill mine did not work that
day, because the collective agreement treated municipal holidays as statutory holidays). The
speakers included Sam Patterson, Norman Packer, George Gassoff, Mary North and Harvey
Murphy. A message of support was sent to Soviet Russia and to the Communist Party of
Canada.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the cold weather, Blairmore offered those in attendance a warm celebration of
the Revolution.

This move not only caused the predictable backlash from the \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, but
was also featured in many other newspapers, and even in \textit{Maclean’s Magazine}. The \textit{Regina
Leader-Post} declared it “unprecedented in the educational life of this whole continent [that] a
duly constituted Canadian school board has granted the children a holiday on the anniversary of
the Russian Revolution. ‘Hail Lenin’ the board says in effect…”\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{Fernie Free Press}
wondered “if it isn’t time for [Blairmore] to be transported lock, stock and barrel to Russia where
most of its citizens seem to belong.”\textsuperscript{17} The situation was further enflamed by the board’s refusal
to declare a holiday on Armistice Day to mark the royal wedding of the Duke of Kent to Princess
Marina.\textsuperscript{18} “To put it mildly,” \textit{Maclean’s} editorialized, these “civic acts were rather startling, but
it is not speaking too strongly to say that the action of the school board was an affront to the
sensibilities of all thinking Canadians.”\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Specifically, Sam Patterson spoke on the current conditions in the Soviet Union while criticizing the anti-Red
stance taken by many religious groups. Norman Packer spoke about the positive role the Y.C.L. was playing in
Blairmore, while Mary North spoke on behalf of the Women’s Auxiliary and George Gassoff brought fraternal
greetings from the Canadian Labour Defence League. Sergeant Cawsey reports that Harvey Murphy “took up the
better part of the meeting. His address covered Russia first, and then he went into a long condemnation of the
members of the union and their families [for] not supporting the T.L.C. in particular, as he stated that this branch is
the seed bed of Communism.” See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession
\item \textsuperscript{16} “A ‘Red’ School Board,” \textit{Regina Leader Post}, 22 November, 1934.
\item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{Fernie Free Press}, 6 December, 1934.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Florence Elder Miles, “Is This A Soviet?” \textit{Maclean’s Magazine}, 15 April, 1935.
\item \textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
The holiday brought not only howls of protest from the press, but petitions to the Premier and Minister of Education. The Women’s Conservative Association of Calgary passed a resolution to be forwarded to the provincial government:

Whereas we have heard with amazement that school children at Blairmore were given a holiday in commemoration of the 17th anniversary of the Red revolution in Russia

And whereas official observances of the national holidays of any foreign powers is [sic] unprecedented and unadvisable

And whereas the Russian Government has encouraged blasphemous atheism, looseness of marital and family ties, and ruthless disregard for human life

And whereas the schools in Blairmore are maintained in part by Government grants to which all taxpayers in the province contribute,

This Association strongly protests against the granting of this holiday as calculated to poison the minds of children against Canadian institutions, and respectfully but firmly insists that such holidays not be permitted in the future.20

The petition was acknowledged by the Hon. Perrin Baker, Minister of Education for the Province of Alberta, who stated that although the action taken at Blairmore had offended many in the province, it had not been illegal. Baker advised the Women’s Conservative Association of Calgary that his office had written to the Blairmore school board informing them of the inappropriate and offensive nature of the holiday. He also admitted “a school board has the authority to declare any day a holiday, subject to the limitations prescribed in the School Act, [and] it was never contemplated that this prerogative would be used by a public body to commemorate officially a foreign revolution…”21 The Minister indicated that his government “expected the action would not again be repeated.” Local MLA George Cruikshank introduced amendments to the School Act designed to keep control of education firmly in the hands of British subjects. One of them read in part, that “the expression elector shall not include any

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid. Section 145 (3) of the School Act of 1931, Chapter 32 of the Statutes of Alberta states that “it shall be at the direction of the Board to permit other holidays, but not to exceed one such day in any month, and one exceeding one day at a time,” cited in Miles, 22.
person who is not a British subject.” Perhaps the most reasonable commentary came from the editorial earlier cited in the Regina Leader Post, whose author insightfully commented that “it is possible that there will be indignant stamping of feet across Canada. There may be ‘demands’ about it… [but] if Blairmore, Alberta has a ‘Red’ school board, we are not sure that anything can be done about it to make it another colour. Certain types of effort might change it, but it is doubtful if anything suggestive of force would.”

The crucial arena for judging the appropriateness of the holiday was Blairmore itself. According to Sergeant J.W. Cawsey the decision to cancel Armistice Day and celebrate the 17th anniversary of the Russian Revolution meant his own family was affected by the Reds. In his report to superiors he noted that “the mere fact of a holiday granted made the children think over past events. In my own case, my youngest daughter wanted to know what this holiday was for, and I have been told that other parents were asked the same question. This is bound to have a bad effect on the younger children.”

When Sergeant Cawsey’s daughter came to reflect on past events, there was one in particular that might well have stood out in her mind. Since coming to power in 1933 Mayor Knight and his council made repeated requests that the provincial government undertake repairs to Victoria Avenue, which was not only the principal thoroughfare through Blairmore, but also a part of Provincial Highway 3. When repairs were not forthcoming, council harnessed the labour

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22 “Bill Designed to Keep Control of School Affairs,” in Alberta Scrapbook Hansard (Edmonton: King’s Printers, 1935), 152. On 21 March, 1935 George Cruikshank, MLA, introduced changes to the Towns and Villages Act that would also make it illegal to declare civic holidays in honour of Communists. Not coincidentally, this was the same day “Tim Buck Day” was declared by Blairmore City Hall. See Government of Alberta, Alberta Scrapbook Hansard (Edmonton: King’s Printer, 1935). The Alberta Hansard Scrapbook was produced by the Legislative Library between the first and fifteenth legislatures (1906-1964) and was a collection of newspaper articles published relating to the government. It was intended to provide the public reaction to political decisions, whereas regular Harsand only recorded words spoken in the Assembly.


of the local unemployed. It paid them fifty cents per hour for making improvements to the existing sidewalks and then to the road itself.\textsuperscript{25} The road was widened and streetlights installed. A new sprinkler system watered the flowers and trees that had been planted down the middle of the street.\textsuperscript{26} Breaking with its criticism of municipal spending, the \textit{Enterprise} called the work “entirely necessary.” It noted “a determined effort to improve the streets of the town can be seen in various directions… sidewalks of shale and plank are also being installed, and the work is considerably relieving the unemployment situation.”\textsuperscript{27} While this support for improvements represented a departure from the larger anti-Knight position of the paper, it was in line with Editor Bartlett’s demands that the council stop spending money on direct relief and use it instead for town improvements that might attract further monetary investment. For the conservative Bartlett, the upgrades represented progress, unlike money spent on the unemployed.

This unqualified editorial support abruptly ended when it became clear that the council had made these upgrades neither to facilitate commerce nor to attract new residents or investment to the Town of Blairmore. On 17 August 1934 well-known Communist and Secretary of the Canadian Labour Defence League A. E. Smith stepped from the evening train into the crisp mountain air which characterizes late-summer evenings in Blairmore. Met by Mayor Knight and between 350 and 400 residents,

Smith was escorted by Knight, Murphy and others to the intersection of Victoria [Avenue] where a ceremony was held changing the name of Victoria [Avenue] to Tim Buck Boulevard. The young Pioneers were on each side of the street holding the end of a red ribbon, which Smith cut and [in so doing] officially changed the name of the street.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 August 1934. Also see Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 17 July 1934.
\textsuperscript{27} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 14 June 1934; Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 23 May 1934.
He was at this point presented with a bouquet of flowers, and the gathering then adjourned to the bandstand.\textsuperscript{28}

Before leaving for the bandstand, Smith broke a bottle of ginger ale and pronounced Tim Buck Boulevard open to traffic.\textsuperscript{29}

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\end{center}

Source: Crowsnest Museum and Archives.

Once the road had been rededicated, Smith addressed the crowd, providing details of Tim Buck’s incarceration and of C.L.D.L.’s campaign for his release. Smith then shared details “of his own case” with those assembled.\textsuperscript{30} The meeting ended with three cheers for Tim Buck, the Communist Party and the C.L.D.L., having received Tim Buck’s personal greetings to Mayor Knight and all the Blairmore Comrades.

For the first time that night, two large neon signs lit the night sky at either end of the newly-dedicated Boulevard, announcing its name to all who passed by. \textit{Maclean’s} reported that:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{29} Florence Elder Miles, “Is This A Soviet?” \textit{Maclean’s Magazine}, 15 April, 1935.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{quote}
Whereas Victoria Avenue boasted only five ordinary streetlights, the boulevard is a blaze of glory at night, being illuminated by a row of about eighty arc-lights of high candle power. A new project is underway at present to erect at either end of the boulevard a large neon sign bearing the name “Tim Buck,” and announcing to all and sundry that here is no mean city but one which proudly boasts the communist leader as patron saint.\footnote{Ibid.}

Having established this monument to Tim Buck, the mayor instructed the secretary to draw up a bylaw that “imposed parallel parking and [another] bylaw concerning driving to danger the public [sic], fine for first offence under the parking bylaw $1.00, and for driving to danger the public $10.00.”\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 August 1934.} Driving on the sidewalks with either a bicycle or automobile was also banned.\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 21 June 1934.} The council showed it was serious about the enforcement of these bylaws by reading them a first, second and third time and passing them only four days later.\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 24 August 1934.}

The Boulevard was not meant for everyone to enjoy. When the sprinkler system and streetlight improvements were announced, the West Canadian Collieries asked that the amenities be extended the length of the road to include the Westside residences occupied by the mine managers and other mine officials. In the discussion that followed, town council decided that “improvements be made only to the east side of the C.P.R. spurline… West Canadian Collieries’ request to improvements to the Westside not granted.”\footnote{Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 20 August 1934.} If the editorial staff at the \textit{Enterprise} were to be believed, this was no great loss for the W.C.C. The \textit{Enterprise} refused to print an article about the new boulevard, but did comment in the “Local and General Items” section that “the Town of Coleman is not throwing away money on monuments to the likes of Tim Buck.”\footnote{“Local and General Items,” \textit{Blairmore Enterprise}, 13 September 1934.} The newspaper even went to the trouble of creating a fake news story criticizing the new parking bylaws from thirteen years in the future, reporting that “‘John Oakes,’ a married man, was fined
$25 and costs for parking his car one hour and ten minutes beneath the pansy trees in Tim Buck’s Boulevard.”37

Source: Crowsnest Museum and Archives

As it turns out, A.E. Smith was the first of many notable Communist Party functionaries to be received in Blairmore over the coming year. In September Malcolm Bruce, editor of the Worker arrived, and after holding several private meetings his presence was requested at the town council meeting by the Mayor and councillors. At that meeting they conferred an honour on Bruce that had never before been bestowed on anyone by the Red administration: “Bruce was handed freedom of the town and also was made ‘Honorary Mayor of Blairmore.’”38 The council then adjourned, and a parade of 150 people escorted Bruce from the town hall to the Columbus Hall, where a further 600 residents waited to hear the activist speak. After introductions and a “rousing” rendition of the Internationale, Bruce spoke about his time in Kingston Pen (specifically dwelling upon the horrid everyday conditions and his time in “the hole”). Moving on from the situation in Kingston,

37 Ibid.
His address consisted of nice remarks of Blairmore, and what it meant to belong to a Communist town, controlled by Communists, who were working solely for the worker, and he sincerely hoped that before long the whole of Canada would take a leaf from the workers of Blairmore and place their affairs in the hands of the worker.\(^{39}\)

Like so many mass meetings before, this meeting closed with a call from the residents for a resolution to be sent to the Minister of Justice by the town council “calling for the immediate release of Tim Buck.” Mayor Knight, chairing the event, noted the motion passed 800 to zero.\(^{40}\)

One might be forgiven for wondering what Tim Buck, still imprisoned almost three thousand kilometers away, thought about what was happening in Blairmore. And upon his release the Town of Blairmore promptly extended to him the opportunity to see firsthand their experiment in living otherwise.\(^{41}\) It took about ten weeks to work out the details. Tim Buck arrived in Blairmore on 21 March 1935 to great fanfare. Earlier that day the council had officially declared 21 March to be “Tim Buck Day,” once again granting all school children and civic employees the day off.\(^{42}\) When Buck’s train arrived that evening he was met by a very enthusiastic crowd at the C.P.R. station who escorted him from the train to the Columbus Hall in a dramatic torchlight procession. Upon arriving at the hall, which could comfortably seat 1,000, the R.C.M.P. agent reported that “on my arrival I had great difficulty just finding a place to stand.”\(^{43}\)

According to the R.C.M.P. members present in the room, Buck was first greeted by the Mayor on behalf of the town and council, and then received fraternal greetings from all of the

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Official estimates put the crowd at 750 persons.

\(^{41}\) This included extending financial help in relation to travel costs.

\(^{42}\) “Civic Holiday for Buck,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 21 March 1935.

different Red-affiliated organizations operating in the Pass. Beatrice Peressini, daughter of Councillor Romano Peressini, recalls that she was called up from the crowd “and I gave Tim Buck a beautiful bouquet of flowers,” following which “the usual workers’ songs [were] lustily sung and applauded.”

Once behind the lectern, Buck spoke for two and a half hours, sharing first-hand his experiences with the Canadian judicial system and commiserating with those who had suffered legal persecution at the hands of the R.C.M.P. for their roles in the 1932 strike. He moved on to discuss the larger political situation in Canada. Though he mentioned various members of government and the police by name, “at no time did he condemn [them]” and “he was always most respectful.” The proposed coal code for Canada, however, “was torn to pieces, and the points affecting the workers clearly pointed out, this of course from the workers’ standpoint.” He closed his talk by posing the question: Why have I come to Blairmore? “He stated he was at Blairmore because this is the only town in Canada with a full Communist town council and school board, as well as police force. He congratulated workers on their efforts, besides thanking them for naming the main street after him.” And in his final remarks he caught members of the R.C.M.P. off guard by announcing that Harvey Murphy would contest the constituency of Rocky Mountain (of which Blairmore was a part) in the coming provincial election. A collection was taken and a remarkable $165 was contributed.

44 The report specifically notes the Y.C.L., the M.W.U.C., the Young Pioneers, the C.L.D.L. and the Italian, Slovak, Finnish and Polish branches of the C.P.C.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
The mass meeting over, Buck spent the following day meeting with smaller groups and glad-handing everyday people he came across in the street. Perhaps not surprisingly, Buck took care to meet with miners and their families one-on-one. When asked if his stepfather had a chance to meet Buck, Fred Painter replied “You bet’cha he did! He not only met him, but he [Buck] sat in this kitchen!”49 But it is also clear that Buck was not afraid to step outside of his traditional constituencies. Molly Morency, whose father owned the Oldsmobile dealership and whose extended family were the proprietors of Morency Plumbing and Heating, also had the opportunity to meet Buck in person. When asked about the visit, she answered: “I remember him coming! [...] It was a really big thing! Oh yah, I mean they were in the thick of it. He was, he was a celebrity when he came. Definitely so!”50 Even the Blairmore Enterprise could not bring itself to print a negative editorial of the man who in the past had epitomized all that Editor William Bartlett considered to be wrong with the world: “many expressed themselves as surprised to find that Buck was not as radical in his speech as they expected he would be… his talk throughout was very interesting and won him a host of new friends.”51

An “Organization Apart”

From the outside looking in, Blairmore must have appeared to be a Communist oasis in the otherwise economically troubled and politically repressive Canadian West. As we have seen over the preceding pages, Mayor Knight and his colleagues made no secret about their support for the Communist Party of Canada, and in turn a virtual Who’s Who of Party brass – including the leader himself – spoke to massive crowds of attentive listeners in Blairmore’s various halls and outdoor venues. Thus, many concluded – as did C.F. Steel of the Toronto Daily Star – that

49 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0106, “Fred Painter Interview.”
50 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, Blairmore-Frank Oral History Project Fonds, Accession Number 2012.019.0105, “Molly Morency Interview.”
51 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 28 March 1935.
Blairmore was a town where Communism worked, and consequently was a blueprint the Communist Party of Canada could hold up for the rest of the country. There was a considerable element of illusion in such assessments.

The blunt reality is that the Reds in Blairmore did not play by rules laid down by the Communist Party of Canada. When the dust settled and the 1933 vote had been certified, Ollie Olsen was the only member of council to also be a member of the Party. As we saw with the expulsion of John Stokaluk in 1930, the Party maintained strict control of its members. Had Party members been elected to office the C.P.C. would have exercised – or attempted to exercise – a considerable amount of control over the new administration. But the Party had not predicted an election victory for the Miners’ Slate. Its failure to do so put it between a proverbial rock and hard place in the years to come. On the one hand the beleaguered Party could not very well publicly disown or disavow the only town council that was publicly supportive of its cause. Blairmore, after all, created a massive amount of good publicity for the C.P.C. At the same time it did not control this new Red entity. It could only watch as the council embraced parts of the Party’s program and transformed or completely disregarded others. Hypothetically, the Party could have stepped in and made its thoughts known when the council made decisions that were not congruent with the Party line. But given their defeat at Coleman and elsewhere during and since the strike of 1932 – “The P[olit]B[uro] particularly warns against a repetition with even worse consequences in Blairmore of the mistakes and collapse of Coleman,” reads one internal document – the Communists decided that, at least publicly, the new Red administration at Blairmore was to remain an ally.

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The most visible example of C.P.C./Red Council differences is the fact that Blairmore Reds were visible at all. That Mayor Knight and his colleagues used mass meetings as a way to get around legal restrictions may have been good policy locally, but it ran contrary to explicit instructions issued by the C.P.C. on the occasion of their being declared illegal in Ontario (and later the rest of the country). Internal Party documents show that while the administration at Blairmore sought larger and larger crowds, the C.P.C. itself had issued instructions that “...all meetings be held in private houses” and that these meetings were in all cases to be in “groups with [a] maximum of ten members.” Furthermore, leading members of the illegal Party were encouraged not to attend such meetings at all. And what about the parades that Blairmore Reds were so fond of? The Party dismissed them out of hand, warning members that “Comrades are not to walk in large groups, not to congregate in restaurants [and] to wear hats...”

The difference between meetings associated with council and those affiliated with the C.P.C. could not have been clearer. While Knight and his colleagues were enjoying the limelight, the R.C.M.P. noted that the rank and file of the C.P.C. were complying with Party directives and meeting in private. They were also complaining rather loudly about the increasing influence of Knight and the council over the public. And despite these frequent, secretive and well-attended meetings, the R.C.M.P. did not hold out much hope for their continued success. “I am advised by my informants,” Sergeant J.A. Cawsey wrote “that these meetings are not going to be a success [in the long term] as already discussions have been heard regarding ‘getting no kick out of them,’ meaning that a general meeting where the odd argument takes place is more interesting to the

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
rank and file...”\(^{58}\) In order to combat this growing disinterest in Party organizations in favour of those organized by the Red council, Harvey Murphy was observed to “not be giving so many talks,” but rather to be found “constantly in beerrooms [sic], taking part in house parties and dances...,” apparently in order to engage with Blairmorites one-on-one.\(^{59}\)

Although these differences could conceivably be written off as so much legal camouflage given the position of both the council and the Party in relation to the Criminal Code, the divergence of the two on such important policy issues as unemployment is something which cannot be so easily dismissed or justified. Identified as a priority by the Party as early as the District 8 convention of October, 1929, the C.P.C. had a very tightly-defined vision of what unemployed associations should look like and the roles they were to play both in the Party and in the community.\(^{60}\) The basis of the Communist plan was that the unemployed should be organized into neighborhood councils, representing various locations.\(^{61}\) Once they were formed, the Party believed that “the unemployed workers must be constantly drawn into the working out of their demands and into the active participation in the every-day struggle.”\(^{62}\) In the Communist vision, “…there will be spontaneous movements of the unemployed to seize food and shelter...the Party must support such actions if they have a mass character and are directed against the food warehouses and buildings belonging to the government and the big food companies, at the same time trying to direct this movement into the general struggle.”\(^{63}\) Plainly stated, the unemployed

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{62}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) Ibid.
represented a large mass of hungry, destitute people that, if properly motivated and mobilized, could be the force necessary to make the coming revolution a success.\textsuperscript{64}

The Communist Party of Canada was also very specific as to the local demands the unemployed were to make. According to the C.P.C., “this is a very important phase of unemployment work. The more concrete and realistic the demands the more likely they will be supported by the unemployed.”\textsuperscript{65} It identified the following points as critical to the struggle

1. Unemployment relief.
2. The immediate cessation of evictions for non-payment of rent, foreclosures, tax-sales and utility shut-offs.
3. An end to the practice of refusing relief to the destitute.
4. An end to non-nutritious food being served at soup kitchens and overcrowding in sleeping quarters occupied by the unemployed.
5. The end of forced labour as a condition of relief (work camps).
6. An end to mass lay-offs, age cuts, and part-time employment.
7. No more mistreatment of the unemployed.
8. Special consideration for children, such as free milk and hot lunch programs in schools.
9. Special consideration for youth, such as educational opportunities and gymnasiums for physical fitness.\textsuperscript{66}

Taken together, these demands were unacceptable to the federal and provincial governments and simply too expensive for most municipalities to consider.

Before the council had come to power in Blairstown, the C.P.C.’s District Eight leadership – which in theory presided over Blairstown – had already taken heat for their inability to organize the unemployed along the lines outlined above. According to Party documents, not only had the district organization “...failed to come forward as the leader and organizer of the struggle for unemployed relief,” but their failure to do so “...deprived [them] of one of the main avenues for

\textsuperscript{64} So important was the campaign amongst the unemployed that one year later a Party resolution identified it as “...the central struggle of the P[arty] and ... of decisive importance in the fight against social-fascism.” See LAC, CI, Reel K-285, File 143 “Resolution on Nine Months’ Plan of Work,” 6 March 1933.


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
building up its ranks...” So, when a friendly council took power in Blairmore, it was expected that it would undertake to promote the C.P.C.’s goals in relation to the unemployed. And as we have seen, in relation to the nine points outlined above, they did. Relief was made readily available to those who needed it, and the town put an end to all evictions (with the exception of mortgage foreclosures beyond their legal jurisdiction) while supplying the unemployed with reliable electricity and water. By paying the highest hourly rate for relief work anywhere in the country, the council made it possible for those on municipal assistance to purchase the food they needed from local stores and stay out of government relief camps. By 1934 council had managed to reverse the post-strike layoffs at the West Canadian and by 1935 the town boasted a workers’ gymnasium maintained at the town’s expense.

The only real deviation from the points listed above came in relation to housing. Legally the town was obliged to give relief to unemployed men with families or underemployed men with dependants; if relief was granted directly to the single unemployed in variance with the Department of Charity and Relief’s guidelines, the provincial government would not make its portion of the funds available. Consequently Blairmore’s unemployed were advised that, where possible, they were to continue to live with their families as it would be the best way to secure additional funding for them. When this was impossible, Knight was able to secure in-kind gifts of food and clothing from the Workers’ International Relief.

Ironically, it seemed that the new program of relief at Blairmore ended up being too successful for Harvey Murphy and the Communist Party. Whether they had not contemplated the possibility of a council making good on most of their demands or not is unknown, but tension

between Mayor Knight and Murphy quickly became evident to almost everybody. Incredibly, Inspector Duncan of the R.C.M.P. was able to report the following in a confidential letter to the Attorney General of Alberta:

Mayor Knight was under the influence of alcohol on Sunday last... and as a result of the liquor became very confidential. He stated that on May the 1st Murphy was to be at Blairmore for the meeting, which was to take the form of a demonstration. Knight also stated that he and Murphy did not agree on certain points, the main one being [the town’s program of relief]. Murphy is not in favour of this system of relief, stating as his reason a hungry man will fight quicker than a fed one. Knight is a booster...

Indeed, the R.C.M.P. speculated that by adequately providing for those who were unemployed, the council had inadvertently taken the wind out of the sails of several red-affiliated organizations. “The Blairmore town council is a Red town council,” R.C.M.P. Sergeant J. W. Cawsey reported, “and all members are members of different Red organizations in the Pass. This has put the unemployed in a position where they can’t very well complain on the rate of pay.”

According to the RCMP, this clearly was an aggravating factor in the relationship between council and Party. The relationship between their two figureheads in the community continued to rapidly decline. Things got so bad that R.C.M.P. were able to report that “on Sunday the 14 [May 1933], Knight and his wife and two friends went to Fernie by car for a drive. I am informed on good authority that this trip was planned purposely by Knight so that he would be out of town and away from Murphy on this date.”

For his part, Harvey Murphy began to speak out about his differences with local organizers. “Murphy flayed the single unemployed severely as not being organized properly, in fact he stated the organization in the Crowsnest Pass ‘was rotten and the worst he’d ever

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seen.” He went on to advocate the disbanding of the Workers’ International Relief (W.I.R.), complaining that if he had his way “he would let the single men fight or starve.” And as it turns out, Murphy got his way on at least one point. Having lobbied hard, at the end of July the W.I.R. – which had been backstopping Knight’s relief of the single unemployed – was disbanded in the Crowsnest Pass, leaving the Red council solely responsible for the extra cost of providing for the single unemployed.

It was speculated by police agents that Murphy wanted to force the single unemployed into the government’s relief camps. “It was not that he wanted them to go for the sake of going,” Murphy is reported to have told members of the unemployed council, “but he wanted them to go there so as to be ready for camp strikes when [the] same are ordered.” Yet, though Murphy won the battle to shut down the W.I.R. at Blairmore, he did not win the war. The Knight council simply appropriated funds from elsewhere in their budget to make up the difference. Not one man left Blairmore as Murphy had allegedly hoped to agitate in the government’s work camps, leaving Murphy to publicly decry (in the police agent’s words) the unemployed as “weak kneed” and “useless.” This split between council and Party did not last long. After it became clear that the Knight town hall intended to fully fund its unemployed program, Murphy was called away from the Pass and upon his return just before Christmas, it was observed that “...[Murphy] can and will heal this breach as he cannot afford to have any splits in the Party.”

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73 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
For those questioning Knight’s motives in making stable and predictable relief available to the unemployed, it is important to consider the situation in Blairmore in relation to the bigger picture. Before the strike of 1932 there had been minimal unemployment in Blairmore. The vast majority of the men who lived there were employed by the West Canadian, and through their union they had elected to share work equally amongst each other (and all work a little less) rather than see their friends and neighbours laid off. Thus, it was not until after the strike had concluded and individuals were not rehired that unemployment in Blairmore was conspicuous as a problem. Moreover, unemployment in Blairmore was hardly a condition that was experienced anonymously, except in the case of drifters not known to the community. Legally, the town of Blairmore was not required to give them relief, and on several occasions, even during the Red years, it declined to do so.

While differences dividing the Red council and the C.P.C. existed in strategy and policy, so too did they develop over money. Indeed, as Party functionaries A.E. Cross, Malcolm Bruce and Tim Buck congratulated Blairmore on its progressive agenda and partook in relatively lavish ceremonies of welcome involving flowers, food and gifts, behind the scenes one could hear Party grumbles that Blairmore was not pulling its weight financially. Whereas in the months immediately following the strike of 1932 Blairmorites gave heavily to organizations like the Workers’ International Relief which had provided them with critical support during their time of need, monies slowed down as council took over and eventually were reported to have almost completely dried up.78

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Just two months before Tim Buck jubilantly took the stage and declared the experiment in Blairmore to be a success, the District 8 organizer was reporting to the national organization that in regards to the Crowsnest Pass

Something is wrong here. [The Pass] Use[d] to be the main source of revenue a year ago. At present time we receive practically no support from this quarter. Cannot even get letters from the LDC [Labor Defence] during the past six weeks.... This district seems to have developed as an organization apart, and apparently all finances raised [are] used in the locality. 79

The report suggests that the supposedly “monolithic party” was something quite different than it appeared to be.

The Letter of the Law and the Spirit of Politics

For many looking at this unusual council, one question came to mind: how, when suspected Communists across the country were being charged, convicted and in some cases deported, could this experiment in radical politics ever have taken place? As we have seen through much of this dissertation, the go-to answer to this question is that local Communists escaped prosecution by describing themselves as “Red” rather than being adherents of the Communist Party itself. This was certainly the case during the strike of 1932. The “Red” designation was evident in the Knight Manifesto issued just after the council took office in 1933 and again was front and centre in a Toronto Star article that went to press in 1935. “Just how Red is Blairmore?” reporter C.F. Steel asked Mayor Knight. And Knight’s response, almost down to the letter, followed the same pattern as it had in the past: “Red is a state of the stomach.” He added “I am not a member of the Communist Party. There is not a real Communist on either the council or the school board. We are in sympathy with the Communist Party – that is true...” 80

Undoubtedly, the “Red” presentation of Blairmore’s council did assuage some fears, yet it

79 Ibid.
should be remembered that many leftists of the day were prosecuted and deported without finding relief in any such euphemizing strategy. After all, if it were possible to simply excuse oneself as “Red,” men and women from across the country who had faced legal persecution under Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada would have similarly excused themselves and moved on with their lives. The reason must be deeper, and likely located more closely to the specifics of the Crowsnest Pass itself.

While no arrests or prosecutions were made in Blairmore relating to radical behaviour during the council’s tenure in office, there had been mass arrests during the strike of 1932. From the start of strike action the force had trouble trying to make charges stick. When agitators like Mrs. F. Bowes stood in front of hundreds of strikers to make declarations like “Canada as well as other capitalist countries [are] spending millions of dollars per annum in armaments in preparation for war. When you receive these weapons, use your head first,” it was clear to all that she was implying that the weapons might be used for revolution. Yet because she had not specifically connected the dots for her audience, the R.C.M.P. was forced to admit that the comments were “objectionable, but not sufficient on which to take any action.” For those working with R.C.M.P. strike records, the phrase “nothing was said that could be prosecuted” becomes almost the mantra of the strike itself.

When there was sufficient evidence to press charges, convictions were achieved not under Section 98 but under the vagrancy section of the Criminal Code. And while the R.C.M.P.’s commanding officer did not doubt that convictions on more serious charges were theoretically obtainable, internal memos show that the force’s leadership believed the drawbacks of making

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82 Ibid.
the arrests would far outweigh the benefits. Superintendent H.M. Newson advised the Attorney General that it was “...inadvisable for [the R.C.M.P.] to endeavour to arrest some of the ring leaders out of a crowd of some 300 or 400 and thereby start something that might lead to bloodshed and would not have been justified under the circumstances.”

Later reports echo this sentiment. When the West Canadian asked that strikers who “booed” at company property be arrested and charged with vagrancy, the commanding officer once again responded, “I do not consider that it would be good police [work] to make wholesale arrests, as requested, and I have instructed Sergeant Jones that this is not to be done.”

Interestingly, when charges were finally laid, it was only at the behest of the West Canadian Collieries, and then only after a demonstrably gross violation of their legal rights.

A very real chance to rid Blairmore of its Red administration came when the new council set its budget and taxation rate. Indeed, it was rumoured that Premier Brownlee was so displeased with the election results that his government was planning to oust the new council “by claiming the finances of the town are unsatisfactory,” therefore warranting the imposition of a provincial administrator.

(The province automatically had the right to appoint an administrator under the Towns and Villages Act if a given municipality were not financially stable.) And as it turns out the Brownlee administration did take the first necessary steps to make this happen, ordering an audit of the town’s finances. But as we saw in the previous chapter, this audit

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85 This policy of restraint was undoubtedly informed by the RCMP’s experiences in Bienfait, Saskatchewan where an aggressive hands-on approach had backfired and resulted in the death of three striking radicals. For a complete discussion, see Steven Endicott, Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners’ Struggle of ’31 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
revealed inaccuracies and fraud in previous administrations (leading to the resignation, arrest and prosecution of former town Secretary A.J. Kelly) and in so doing unintentionally reinforced the social legitimacy of the new council rather than discrediting it.

And, awkwardly enough for those inclined to use a financial pretext to end the Blairmore experiment, the town reported a surplus for the years 1933, 1934 and (initially) 1935. For example, in the 1933 fiscal year the town’s audit revealed that spending had increased by 300%, but that the combination of targeted cuts, business taxes, luxury taxes and the increased collection of water and electricity payments more than covered the increase in expenses, even allowing the town to put a tidy sum away into a savings account for future use. It was also noted in the auditor’s report that the per capita debt had dropped from $1.26 to $0.40 cents, “representing a decrease in the proportion of debenture debt to net debenture asset of 25% to 8%.”88 In fact the numbers were so good that the meeting of ratepayers passed a motion of congratulations to the council for a job well done.89

So with an outside auditing firm signing off on the financial health of the Town of Blairmore, another avenue through which the Reds could be removed from power was simultaneously closed. Those who disliked the Reds and wanted them removed did not give up. The R.C.M.P. worked diligently behind the scenes to collect as much intelligence on the organization in Blairmore as possible. Indeed, a network of informants – including a truck driver employed by the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, several miners, the Canadian Pacific’s Station Master, an employee at the telephone switchboard, the postmaster and later an insurance

88 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes (Annual Meeting of Ratepayers), 2 February 1934.
89 Ibid.
broker – had been established to spy on local radicals.\(^{90}\) Here was an impressive surveillance network for one small mountain town. Yet despite these inroads into the community, police were forced to admit “information [is actually] getting harder to obtain at all times, and more secretive meetings of the executive are being held, at which all important matters are settled before being brought to meetings.”\(^{91}\) And what of the R.C.M.P.’s informants? “Efforts are also being made [by radicals] to endeavour to find out who the informants of this office are, and instructions have been issued by Murphy to put every effort forward to this end. A check was made... but none of those suspected have any connection with this office.”\(^{92}\)

With little information forthcoming from traditional sources, R.C.M.P. Sergeant J.W. Cawsey reported to his superiors that he was engaging in activity which was certainly immoral – if not actually illegal – in order to secure what information he could. When called to the union office by the secretary of the Bellevue local of the M.W.U.C., John Dougdale, Cawsey reported that

...Secretary Dougdale was called out of the office for a time, leaving [me] in the office alone. Whilst there I noticed a letter, which Dougdale had attempted to place out of my sight. On his departure I had an opportunity of reading this letter. It was addressed to Ralph Wootton, who was referred to as “Comrade” ... While at this office I also had the opportunity of glancing over another letter... but I could not get any remarks on the situation as Dougdale returned to the office.\(^{93}\)

\(^{90}\) Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Mine Workers’ Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” 31 August 1932; Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, Mine Workers’ Union of Canada Crows Nest Pass,” 10 October 1932; Janet Macura interview; Ange Wilson interview. The truck driver and the Station Master were able to provide the R.C.M.P. with advance notice of travel for important individuals while the telephone operator was able to listen and provide details about suspected sympathizers and upcoming events. The insurance broker was perhaps their most interesting informant, as he was able to gain access to suspects’ homes on the pretext of an inspection for insurance reasons, and while in the homes take note of literature or other objects of interest to the police.


\(^{92}\) Ibid.

There were evidently very real limits to RCMP surveillance tactics. Nonetheless the R.C.M.P. was actually ready and willing to take concrete measures against Blairmore’s radicals. When it came to the attention of the R.C.M.P.’s H.M. Newson “that the office of the Blairmore local of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada has a quantity of Communist literature,” he wrote to the Attorney General of the Province of Alberta (a portfolio held by Premier Brownlee) and suggested that “a raid of these premises might bring results.” The letter reviewed the policy of the force generally – “in the past these measures have only been taken for the purpose of securing evidence against the leaders of the Communist Party” – and argued that if raids were to occur in Blairmore it would be necessary for them to be on “an extensive scale.” Newson then raised the possibility of a raid conducted at the request of the provincial government: “Should the Attorney General wish such a raid or series of raids to be made, we should comply.” In the end, the Government was not willing to pay the political price, and the idea of raids in Blairmore was shelved indefinitely.

When political will had been lacking in the past, the R.C.M.P. had been able to count on mine operators to press charges independently at the appropriate time. And while this understanding persisted in Coleman – the General Manager of the International Coal and Coke Company there made it clear that should Communists be elected to council in that town he would happily “close down his coke ovens [and] close up his mine before dealing with the Mine

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “The Attorney General of Alberta to H.M. Newson,” 15 October 1933. This is not to suggest that the R.C.M.P. completely disavowed the idea of raids in the future. A report dated 18 January 1934 shows that when the C.P.C. and other Red-affiliated organizations had outgrown their offices, they endeavoured to rent new premises more in line with their needs. Sergeant Cawsey suggested that “...after moving is completed that a raid be carried out at that place... as I am advised that all correspondence will be kept at that point...” The idea was quickly quashed by provincial authorities. See Crowsnest Museum and Archives, C.S.I.S. and R.C.M.P. Fonds, Accession Number 2012.18.0003, “Conditions Generally – Crows Nest Pass,” 18 January 1934.
Workers’ Union of Canada” – the situation at Blairmore evolved somewhat differently.\(^9\) It had been rumoured during the strike that the reason Georges Vissac and the West Canadian were able to hold out for such a long period of time was because the C.P.R. had guaranteed contracts to that company once strike action concluded. And while such orders from the railway were indeed forthcoming, most contracts were given to the International Coal and Coke Company in Coleman because the W.C.C. was considered to be increasingly unstable because of its workforce. With its collective agreement expiring in March of 1934, the company did something that only a year earlier would have been unimaginable: it informed the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada it was willing to re-sign the existing agreement (despite recent wage concessions of 4% in nearby Corbin) while concurrently agreeing to immediately re-employ all miners who had not found work after the strike.\(^9\) The West Canadian Collieries “posted notices that any former employees of the company, who are holding mining papers, are requested to register at the office so that they can be re-employed again... all former employees will be reengaged, no matter what jobs they held, before very long.”\(^1\)

This move caught the RCMP off guard. In a report to his superiors Cawsey complained that “…the real Reds of the Blairmore district [are] at present highly elated at the prospect of being reemployed…”\(^1\) And while it was initially believed that the actions of the company were simply “a move on the part of Mr. Vissac to do away with a strike in March,” it became clear after reemployment had been achieved and the contract signed that Mr. Vissac was “…extremely...

anxious to avoid any trouble."102 With the company’s newfound unwillingness to confront the radical elements in its workforce, the R.C.M.P. lost the independent agent who could have continued to help make life very difficult for local Reds -- despite the provincial government’s reluctance to do so.

Thus there was a trilogy of reasons explaining why Communist activity was permitted to flourish in Blairmore. The accepted rationale that the Reds did not leave themselves open to prosecution holds water, with no less than Inspector K. Duncan of the R.C.M.P. admitting that “one of my chief difficulties in this area has been that ‘Reds’ have not laid themselves open to prosecution under existing laws, but their cock-sure and insolent attitude has naturally aggravated everybody of [the Citizen’s League] type.”103 Although charges were hypothetically conceivable if laid on private grounds, the force had lost the West Canadian Collieries as a potential partner to force their hand and press charges. But most importantly, these documents show that although prosecution was possible on charges stemming from Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada, the political will did not exist to carry them out. While it is not known exactly why Premier Brownlee decided against raids and prosecution, he was an increasingly embattled politician en route to his historic rout in the 1935 provincial election. It seems likely he was not in a position to mount an aggressive campaign against thereds – especially not one that might cost him his progressive base.

A Rather Undignified Fall from Power

With a popular legislative agenda, membership in (but not control by) the larger Red movement and the police being held at bay for political reasons, the end of the Knight Administration was neither predicted nor did it play out along the lines one might have expected from such a controversial town council. The first real whiff of scandal came when, without any warning, charges of extortion and theft were laid against the Red-appointee and Chief of Police Joseph Fitzpatrick. A local prostitute, Leona Mae Cudmore, alias Leona LeDrake, was also charged in Court of Kings Bench with one count of extortion.

Though council immediately moved to suspend Fitzpatrick “for the reason that he had been arrested and released on bail,” the Chief of Police had been a close political ally of the Knight administration and the charges reflected poorly on the mayor and members of council. It was alleged that Fitzpatrick and Cudmore had teamed up in an effort to blackmail one of her long-time “acquaintances,” who was in the habit of loan-sharking money to Cudmore and her clients. The story became more complicated when it became known that Cudmore did not have to leave Hill 60 to spend the borrowed cash, as her establishment was alleged to be not only a brothel, but an illegal gaming house as well.

The prosecution argued that when the individual in question, Mr. Sam Kubilski, visited Cudmore in her home on 25 May 1935 the Chief of Police also arrived “telling him what a terrible offence [loan sharking] was.” In an effort to keep the matter quiet, Kubilski gave the pair two cheques amounting to $1150. Kubilski thereupon went to the R.C.M.P., and Fitzpatrick

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105 Ibid.
106 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 17 June 1935.
108 “Two Years Less a Day for Fitzpatrick,” Blairmore Enterprise, 5 December 1935.
and Cudmore tried to cash the cheques as far away as Cranbrook, British Columbia. After being placed under arrest and asked about the whereabouts of the cheques “Mae Cudmore pulled them out of her stocking and gave them to the officer.” The pair were found guilty and Mr. Justice Ives sentenced Fitzpatrick to two years less a day of hard labour at the jail in Lethbridge for his role in the affair. The sentencing of Miss Cudmore was put off until the following week, during which time she committed suicide by driving her vehicle in front of an oncoming Canadian Pacific passenger train.

Matters were further complicated by the actions of Knight who refused to come out against Fitzpatrick – a personal friend – until the trial was over. Rumours circulated throughout town that the Mayor had been seen close to the brothel on the day of the crime (and on several other occasions), and the connection was only cemented in the minds of many when he refused to endorse a motion before council banning sporting houses within town limits. While his position could be reasonably understood in the context of his owning the local billiards hall, the political optics were anything but good.

Knight also found himself at the centre of his own scandal. When the mayor expressed an interest in purchasing a piece of property owned by the municipality, council gave him an option on the parcel for a period of six months. Unlike private citizens, Knight was not required to put down a cash deposit, and the option was not subject to a better offer. The mayor even asked a town employee to erect a fence around the property for him. When a formal complaint was laid before council “questioning the legality of the town giving the mayor an option” on the

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109 Ibid.
110 Death Certificate in author’s possession.
111 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 November 1935.
112 Ibid.
property, the matter was discussed and then left to the town solicitor for legal advice.\textsuperscript{113} What made the issue particularly insulting for many was that earlier in the year the mayor had successfully challenged his 1935 municipal tax assessment, the complaint “being that the taxes were too high.”\textsuperscript{114} Although the final reassessment was made by the Alberta Assessment Commission, the reduction in the value of Knight’s property and the consequent lowering of municipal taxes were not popular with the residents of Blairmore.\textsuperscript{115}

And if this were not enough, a routine change in auditors – nominally in a bid to save money – was perhaps the death knell for the Knight administration. After taking over the position of Auditor in the fall of 1935, the firm of Larkham Collins reported to council “that the financial statement issued for 1934 did not agree with the town records… [and] in fact they had not done so since 1926.”\textsuperscript{116} Though the mayor suggested “all differences could be written off as the Kelly falsifications, a definitive figure for the Kelly shortages never having been arrived at,” the council disagreed and authorized Collins to “check the cash receipts and rolls for 1933-1934 and make a report to council.”\textsuperscript{117} When Larkham Collins again appeared before council to recommend a fuller investigation, Knight took exception to the idea, stating “that this would appear to be throwing good money after bad, as arrears found to have been dropped from the roll… would in all probability be uncollectable.”\textsuperscript{118} Again the council differed in opinion from the mayor, and authorized the audit at the cost of up to $600.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{113} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 9 January 1936.
\textsuperscript{114} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 28 June 1935.
\textsuperscript{115} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 16 September 1935.
\textsuperscript{116} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 18 October 1935.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 24 October 1935.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
When the Auditor released the town’s financial statement two weeks ahead of the civic elections as required by law, uproar ensued. In 1934, the town had realized a surplus of $18,000, but the auditor’s statement revealed that in 1935 “after absorbing a profit on your light and water utilities of $10,168.38, your total net loss on [all town] operations was $9,376.11.”120 This loss marked the first time that the provincial government could plausibly intervene in local affairs, appointing an administrator because of financial instability.121 The auditing firm went even further, confirming the accusations of the Enterprise and the concerns of the town secretary by publicly stating that

Certain expenditures made in the year 1935 in my opinion are contrary to the Town and Village Act and, in accordance with Section 93 (2), I report them hereunder:

1. J. Fitzpatrick advance on wages $300, of which $125.00 has been repaid.
2. Rent for hall for Tim Buck and Reverend East, $60.00.
3. Mayor W. Knight, traveling expenses to attend Congress against War and Fascism in Toronto, $225.00.122

This was made worse with the disclosure that Knight had actually spent $335.00 on his trip to the Conference against War and Fascism in Toronto. He had overspent his budget by $110.00, and had asked that the difference be made up from the town treasury.123

When it came time for the annual pre-election meeting of ratepayers one week after the release of the town’s financial statement, there was such an interest in the event that the meeting had to be transferred from the Community Hall to the school gymnasium as the original accommodations “were not large enough to fit all the interested ratepayers.”124 When the meeting finally got underway Mayor Knight attempted to defend his record, declaring his

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120 “Auditor Draws Attention of Ratepayers to the Unlawful Practice,” Blairmore Enterprise, 24 January 1935.
123 Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes, 6 January 1935. The council turned down Knight’s request.
124 “Local and General Items,” Blairmore Enterprise, 7 February 1935.
determination to “smash” certain councillors who had turned against his leadership and move forward with a new agenda. 125 Facing a hostile crowd, it was reported that “Mayor Knight was pulled from the platform, but climbed back [up] to finish his speech.” 126 The mayor received a series of questions about the replacement of the town auditor, his involvement with the Communist Party of Canada, and his trip to Toronto. It was also revealed that earlier in his term “the [M]ayor was determined that J. Fitzpatrick not be discharged for drunkenness and neglect of duty… [and] it was only when the criminal charge of extortion had been laid that the Police Committee succeeded in dismissing the ex-chief.” 127

Though Knight’s former colleagues had publicly turned against him, doing so would not save them their jobs. 128 The Red candidates for the 1936 election had been previously agreed upon, but the entire group was forced to withdraw from consideration after the town’s financial statement was made public. The councillors who had hoped to run on the Red ticket were left without a campaign organization. 129 With the Red faction embroiled in internal fighting and the union refusing to endorse any candidate, ordinary citizens came together to nominate a compromise slate of candidates. 130 The proposed candidates, H. Zak, W.L. Evans, and E. Wormersley represented both the business and mining interests of the town, and being unopposed by the Reds were “quite unexpectedly” acclaimed to their offices. 131 The same was

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125 Taxpayer, “Correspondence,” Blairmore Enterprise, 7 February 1936. It should be noted that neither in the paper nor in the council meeting minutes are these councilors named, or the issue in question addressed.
126 “Hot Ratepayers Meeting,” McLeod Gazette, 7 February 1936.
127 Taxpayer, “Correspondence,” Blairmore Enterprise, 7 February 1936.
128 Ibid. While reports of the meeting indicate that there was a division amongst the councillors that was a week old, there is no other indication as to the specifics of the problem. The reports from the town meeting suggest that it was over the town’s finances. There are no specifics as to which councillors came out against Knight.
129 Ibid.
130 “Acclamations at Blairmore,” Blairmore Enterprise, 7 February 1936.
131 Ibid.
true of the School Board, with S.G. Bannan, Solicitor and J. KrKosky Jr., miner, being acclaimed.

Despite this electoral blow, the staggered system of voting meant that Bill Knight and the holdover councillors still held an absolute majority at council and on the school board. Consequently, they could come together to force their agenda in the hopes that after the cloud of scandal blew over they would stand a chance of running successfully for re-election. And despite being rebuked publicly, Knight did not give up easily on the idea of Red government. Acting as though there had been no rejection of his leadership, he used the first council meeting with the new councillors to call for the dismissal of Gaston Bazille, Town Electrician, and his replacement with another, more sympathetic Red. The new council, however, had other ideas about who should resign, defeating Knight’s motion and replacing it with their own: that Mayor Knight resign immediately.\(^\text{132}\) Though Knight refused the council’s request, one thing was now clear: the days of the Knight administration in Blairmore were numbered.

**The Popular Front**

For much of its time in office Blairmore’s radical council – and for that matter Knight and his supporters – had succeeded in setting the local agenda, and in doing so forced the Communist Party of Canada and its affiliated organizations to react to what was happening on the ground rather than proactively setting the political agenda. As we have seen, the strength of the local Red movement allowed them to engage with the salient parts of the Communist Party’s platform while actively reimagining and reworking other policies they judged less suitable. For all the poor reputation that Class Against Class has acquired among many historians, the policy,

\(^{132}\) “Attempt to Can the Mayor,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 21 February 1936.
when translated into the Blairmore experience, allowed maximum flexibility to the local standard-bearers of “the class.”

Conversely, the coming of the Popular Front in 1935 entailed, contrary to its reputation for allowing for more freedom among leftists, a real tightening up of the Party line as it was carried out on the local level. And in Blairmore, it gave the local Reds a convenient way of distancing themselves from the suddenly unpopular Knight administration. It represented a convenient out for those Reds and radicals who wished to move on from the events of 1935-36.

As a policy shift, the move from Class Against Class to the Popular Front was a transition of monumental proportions for the Communist Party. Reaching out to all progressive citizens – including supporters of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, labour candidates and even the “middle class and the intelligentsia” – the Party sought as early as 1933 and certainly by 1934 to build a broad alliance within which they would have influence rather than continue to split the left (as had happened in places like Germany, allowing the Nazis to rise to power).\(^\text{133}\) In practical terms this meant that in Blairmore organizations like the local of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada and the Home Local were expected to let bygones be bygones and once again merge into a single, cohesive union. Despite what the Party wanted, this was easier said than done.\(^\text{134}\)

After months of mounting pressure from the Party to start implementing the Popular Front line, Harvey Murphy informed the Home Local that it had “a time limit of two weeks” to join with the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada or the latter would demand a closed shop during

\(^{133}\text{LAC, CI, Reel K-288, File 169, “Memorandum on the extension of the United Front in Canada,” 7 July 1935.}\)

\(^{134}\text{For more on this in a wider context, see Stephen Endicott, Raising the Workers’ Flag: The Workers’ Unity League of Canada, 1930-1936 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).}\)
the coming contract negotiations. Predictably the Home Local – not under pressure from anyone to join in a united front – declined and Harvey Murphy was left holding the bag. Internal party documents indicate not only that the failed attempt to merge the two organizations was a ‘learning experience,’ but also, according to one unnamed Party member, that Murphy had lost touch with reality. “We knew all the time it was a foolish move, but since it was proposed by leading comrades, we were willing to accept it... H[arvey] M[urphy] is a real good speaker and strike leader and a good fighter, but had it not been for our following H[arvey] M[urphy] there would be no Home Locals in Blairmore or Coleman [in the first place].” Indeed, it was not until the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada voluntarily dissolved itself as a national organization that the Blairmore local came together with the home local under the umbrella of the much-maligned United Mine Workers of America. So why did change take so long to come to Blairmore?

While to some degree this can be blamed on a clash of personalities between the Mayor and individuals like the ever-present Harvey Murphy, it can also be attributed to human nature. Once elected to council, Red councillors enjoyed their position as councillors – and until mid-1935 they also enjoyed an unprecedented level of public support. Consequently none of them really wanted to retire to make room for United Front candidates. And as we saw earlier in this chapter, the Party was in no way able to force council (or anyone else in Blairmore) to undertake changes they did not support. Consequently it is conceivable that had it not been for the series of scandals that rocked the Knight town hall, another entirely Red slate of candidates would have been elected in 1937, 1938 and potentially for many years thereafter.

136 Ibid.
The scandals did, however, force a change in council chambers. Whether by design or not, the makeup of the new council was in line with the Popular Front line of the C.P.C. As mentioned above, Knight and his remaining colleagues on council could have forced a continuation of their previous agenda, but with Knight discredited and the United Front’s conciliatory tone soothing the sensibilities of a shocked community, the remaining radicals on council chose to distance themselves from Knight and work in tandem with their new colleagues. It only took a few months for many of the proudest hallmarks of the Third Period in Blairmore to disappear. The large neon signs announcing Tim Buck Boulevard that had been so proudly lit only two years earlier were unceremoniously disassembled and put in storage, only to emerge several decades later when they were saved from scrap by Progressive Conservative MLA and Minister of the Environment Fred Bradley. The Internationale was no longer sung at town-sponsored events, and starting in 1936 public holidays no longer reflected anything but the standard calendar. Gone too were the mass meetings that had come to characterize the dynamic years of Red dominance. So too were larger plans like a publicly funded municipal hospital. Once living in a centre for progressive policy and thinking outside the box, the citizens of Blairmore would have to wait three decades before the Canada Health Act was passed and they finally received access to the public healthcare Mayor Knight had sought to bring in a generation earlier. Those with a soft-spot for Knight and his colleagues may console themselves with one curious legacy from their Red years: each spring a variety of trees, shrubs and bushes planted along the former Tim Buck Boulevard bloom bright red, a reminder to all of the promise communism once offered to this community.

137 The last real Red meeting was to drum up support for the Mac-Pap battalion being sent to fight in the Spanish Civil War. The two men who volunteered at that meeting were both killed in action.
Perhaps not surprisingly Bill Knight did not re-offer his name when elections were held in 1937, and though a number of unapologetic Reds would be elected to office in the years to come (not the least of which was Knight’s replacement Enoch Williams), never again would Blairmore town council or school board purport to be Communist in its leanings. And though for many he left office on a distinctly sour note, I believe it is only fitting to let the words of Bill Knight bring things to a close. In that *Toronto Star* article, the interviewer asked Mayor Knight just how Red he was. His reply seems to foreshadow much of what was to come:

“Red is a state of the stomach. Back in 1929 there were no Reds. Things were prosperous – everybody was well fed. It is different to-day. You talk about Communists – the Communists in Canada were made by Bennett. We have Reds to-day but we won’t have any here in 1940 if they leave us alone, if we can carry out our plan.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter has proven the old adage “you can’t judge a book by its cover” to once again be true. From the perspective of the outside world Communism was alive and well in Blairmore, with the local council and community embracing Communism and seemingly daring the state to keep them from doing so. Even prominent party functionaries like Malcolm Bruce and Party leader Tim Buck personally visited and paid homage to this Rocky Mountain town. Yet as this chapter has also demonstrated the public perception of harmony between local and national leaderships does not represent the rocky and sometimes acrimonious relationship that existed between the two. The reality was that while radicals in Blairmore sought to live as Communists

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138 This assessment differs from the position recently taken by Stephen Endicott that “the Workers’ Town Council continued in power for the next two decades.” In this scholar’s understanding of the situation, the council can only be called Red from 1933-1936 when it existed primarily to further the radical goals of its Red leadership. In the years after there may well have been Communists sitting on council, but the administration itself was no longer a focus for Communist or Red undertakings. See Endicott, *Raising the Workers’ Flag*, 125.

in ways that were meaningful to them, these did not always line up with the values or policies of their national and international counterparts.

We have also engaged with the question, “Why was Blairmore’s Red experiment allowed to happen at all?” RCMP reports revealed that although the enduring argument that local radicals were “Red” rather than Communists did in fact hold some legal weight, there were other considerations contributing toward the seeming amnesty under which Blairmore radicals operated. Perhaps if Reds at Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal or the Lakehead had been allowed to operate with a leeway similar to that displayed at Blairmore, Canadian social history, and our society today, might have more fully reflected their egalitarian values.

It has also become apparent that despite the controversial political decisions made by council, there are some things that are an albatross in politics no matter what the party. For William Knight and three of his councillors it was not policy changes at the Communist International nor the wishes of the Communist Party of Canada, but the perception of personal greed, scandal, intrigue and public misrepresentation, that spelled the end of their political careers. Just as we are left to question what would have happened if Reds had reached critical mass elsewhere in the country, so too are we left to wonder what Blairmore would have been like had scandal not put an end to the mayoralty of Bill Knight.
Conclusion

When Bill Knight passed away on 20 September 1954 he was remembered publicly as a husband, father, grandfather, former Mayor and a survivor of two world wars. His funeral was by all accounts a simple affair, with a church service followed by a procession of hundreds from the church to the union graveyard. This was a day when politics took a backseat to the memory of a friend and neighbour who had defied the odds and died of old age, not black lung, poverty or war.¹

Reflecting on Knight and the radical years at Blairmore two decades later, former Blairmore Mayor Billy Grace recalled that “there was a lot who might have been militant and associated with Tim Buck, but I don’t give a damn what anyone says, they were good people, good Christian people.”² Similar sentiments were expressed by Cyrus Fabro, who when asked about the Red years at Blairmore declared Knight to be “a pretty good mayor. If he thought a thing was right, he’d do it. He didn’t care about whom objected to it…. Maybe he wasn’t always right, but he didn’t pussyfoot around!”³ Even the man who Knight tried to unceremoniously evict from his job in a last-ditch attempt to move forward with a renewed Red agenda in February of 1936, Gaston Bazille, looked back at Blairmore’s Communist experiment without regret. “If anybody believes in democracy I do,” Bazille told the Canadian Broadcasting

³ Cyrus Fabro, Interviewed by Joan Vare, Crowsnest Pass Historical Society Archives, no accession number. Interview is in VHS format, and is located in the lower drawers of the TV stand on the main floor of the Crowsnest Museum.
Corporation, “though it might be a different kind of democracy than some people would think about.”

And while many of Knight’s former colleagues and boosters reconciled themselves with their town’s brief Red experiment, we only need to look as far as the altered photograph provided to me by Beatrice Peressini – discussed in the opening pages of this study – to appreciate that the Cold War has had an important and distancing effect on the way that the Red years here are remembered and commemorated. And Ms. Peressini was certainly not alone in her belief that these were years that could – and maybe should – be hidden from the pages of history. Anne Spatuk, former President of the Crowsnest Pass Historical Association and retired teacher, recalls that “you didn’t tell people you were from Blairmore. There was a kind of inbuilt reaction to Blairmore, a connotation with ‘Redism’ and Communism and all the aspects of it…” When it came time to write the definitive history of the Crowsnest Pass, the experiences under Knight were nowhere to be found in first edition of *Crowsnest and Its People*. Tony Pitera fumed “it’s not in that history book… ‘fraid they didn’t want the young people to know about that history [of] Communism.”

If there is one universal truth, it is that Blairmorites have an opinion one way or another about their town’s experiment with radical democracy. And with public opinion so strong on the subject, it seems fitting to take a step back and question both the movement’s strengths and weaknesses. For all its shortcomings, it is now apparent that the Red years here were more than simply a flash in the pan or a knee-jerk reaction to the poverty of the Great Depression. I believe

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this dissertation has shown that Blairmore’s unique brand of Communism was in many ways an organic movement, informed by the experiences of Blairmorites over the preceding decades. I also believe that the relatively calm and peaceful local society which emerged after the election of 1933 speaks to just how compelling the Reds’ message of peace, justice and democracy must have been to the residents of this Rocky Mountain town. A real sense of pride and optimism about the future was palpable on the streets of this community, around its kitchen tables and in its beer halls. And so too was there an understanding that while the Reds were engaged in an attempt to live otherwise, their actual record of materially helping their friends and neighbours survive the depression was second to none. If you had visited this community in 1931 you would have found a town laid waste by the Great Depression. By 1935 poverty and hopelessness had been largely routed. These were real and concrete achievements.

Yet Knight and his colleagues were not perfect, as their spectacular fall from favour demonstrated. In a country still profoundly shaped by the Cold War, the council’s relationship with the Party Centre in Toronto (and with Moscow itself) are in many quarters largely frowned upon. At best the Red administration is often considered to be either the agent, or the dupe, of a foreign power. In a valley that returned a member of the ultra-right wing Wildrose Party of Alberta to the Legislature in the last provincial election, some details of the Red years – such as ‘spending on social programs rose 300% during their first term in office’ – set off alarm bells for many. But in a municipality that has a habit of electing political dynasties, the reality is that politicians often overstay their welcome. Knight overstayed his.

When I first undertook this research, I did so because it was interesting to me. But now that I am at the other end of the process, I unexpectedly faced one of the toughest questions of my academic career, and from an unexpected person to boot. I was recently talking with my
younger sister about all of the things I had found out, proven and disproven when she interrupted me to ask: ‘O.K. but why does any of this matter in real life?’ My confidence was temporarily shaken.

The reality is, though, both for the Crowsnest Pass and for my own generation, the messages here do matter. The past fifteen years have seen remarkable growth across the province of Alberta and the Canadian West generally. Oil, gas, agriculture and tourism have transformed the face of many communities to the point where they are hardly recognizable. The Pass is one of the few places not to share in this prosperity. The community has been caught between its mining past and an uncertain future, with municipal politicians unwilling or unable to provide the leadership necessary to move this community forward while passively accepting change from outside only when and where absolutely necessary. What happened to the spirit that was so evident here in 1933? The message I would share with Blairmorites and residents of the Crowsnest Pass is that for a time this valley was the centre of radical change in Alberta and Western Canada. There is a proud Crowsnest tradition of thinking outside the box, and unless Blairmorites and other residents of the Pass are content to continue to living in what is a shell of their former communities, it is time to harness the agency that is so evident in this dissertation and use it to move forward.

It is the sense of agency that emanates from Blairmore that is also critical for my generation. Though it might not be immediately evident in the hallowed halls and ivory towers of Queen’s University, the reality is our society is rife with strife and uncertainty. Many of the promises our parents’ generation made to us are now null and void, and with social movements like Occupy Wall Street, Wikileaks and Idle No More, it is clear for those who choose to see it that the status quo cannot be upheld indefinitely. For those facing this uncertainty, I would
suggest that the sense of optimism and the can-do attitude that we have seen throughout the pages of this dissertation provide a model for us to follow as we move forward to a progressive future.

I would like to close by returning to the question “why does this research matter?” I have had the opportunity over the past two months of spending more time at home in Alberta than I have since moving to Kingston in 2007 to start my doctoral program. And during my time at home I have had the pleasure of really getting to know my two-year-old niece Violet. For someone who lives a relatively quiet life enlivened at best by Kitteh, my sometimes moody and slightly overweight cat, having a two-year-old around while trying to concentrate on my academic work was at first (I have to admit) an irritation. But over the days and weeks I have come to recognize in Violet something that I have long-admired about Blairmorites during this period: a sense of unrestrained optimism. And it is a message of agency I hope Violet and my readers will take away with them. If you turn on the TV and see a world that is not the kind of place you want to live in, change it. Refuse to take “no” for an answer. Think outside the box. Dare to be the person who reminds us that when we take care of the most vulnerable members of our society, we are actually taking care of society itself. I reserve the last words of my dissertation for Violet: no matter what your political stripe, take with you the message of hope and agency embedded in these pages. With these two things, you have the power to change the world around you, but only if you have the strength of character to stand up for what you believe to be right.
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Dogtherom, Erma.
Fabro, Cyrus.
Favero, Erma.
Fortunaso, Joe.
Galacia, Bruno.
Gentile, Bruno.
Giacommuzzi, Guido.
Giacommuzzi, Helen.
Gibos, John.
Gibos, Helen.
Gierulski, Alex.
Gregory, Yolanda.
Harry, Mike.
Korman, Tillie. In author’s possession.
Kostyniuk, John.
Krkosky, John.
Kovach, Belle.
Kropinak, Helen. In author’s possession.
Lant, Julia.
MacDonald, Ross.
Macura, Janet.
Marcial, Milo.
McIntyre, Gordon.
Mole, Irene.
Morrency, Molly.
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Appendix One: Census Data

1901 Census Data

Number of Houses: 55

Number of Families: 56

Population: 257

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<tr>
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</table>

Total: 1137

1911 Census Data Continued:
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Percentage of the Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>293</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other British</td>
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<tr>
<td>French</td>
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<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austro-Hungarian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgarian and Rumanian</td>
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<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
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<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>&gt;1%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</table>
1921 Census Data

Number of Houses: Not Indicated
Number of Families: Not Indicated
Population: 1552

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<th>Men</th>
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<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
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<th>Percentage of Total Population</th>
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<td>Christians</td>
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<td>Disciples of Christ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mormons</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Roman Catholics</td>
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<td>Salvation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
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<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Sects</td>
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<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0%</td>
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1921 Census Data Continued:
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<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
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<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other British</td>
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<tr>
<td>French</td>
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<td>Austrian</td>
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<td>&gt;1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
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<td>7%</td>
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<td>&gt;1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<td>Hebrew</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
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<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other European</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese and Japanese</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Two: Maps

Map of Lille

Source: Government of Alberta
Map of Blairmore:

Block numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, 19 and 20 (the six westernmost blocks on this map) were considered the Westside or New Townsite, while the blocks to the East of this were considered to be the East Side, or old townsite. The West Canadian ran its spur line between the C.P.R. Mainline and the tipple roughly where the north-south road allowance is indicated on this map.

Source: Crowsnest Museum Map Collection.
Map of Coleman:

In Coleman, the neighbourhoods were divided according to ethnicity. Carbondale, was primarily British; West Coleman was known as Slavtown, and was made of Slavic ethnicities; the area indicated as “Coleman” on this map was in actuality two neighbourhoods, Scotchman’s Hill and the British Block; Graftontown was primarily British; East Coleman, known as Bush Town, was primarily Polish and Ukrainian. Also important but not specifically indicated on this map is Dago Town, which was primarily Italian and located in the seven blocks immediately to the south west of Coleman Plan no. 280L and north of the land allowance for the International Coal and Coke Company. Poverty Lane is also omitted from this map. At the time of printing it may not have been considered to be part of the town. Primarily German, it was located immediately to the south of Carbondale (on the south side of the Crowsnest River).

Source: Crowsnest Museum Map Collection.
Appendix 3

Blairmore Town Council 1933:
Joseph Aschacher (1933-1935) *
W.L. Evans (1932-1934)
William Knight (Mayor), (1933-1935) *
Joseph KrKosky (1933-1935) *
Evan Morgan (1932-1934)
Albert Olson (1933-1935) *
Romano Peressini (1932-1934) *

Blairmore Town Council 1934:
Joseph Aschacher (1933-1935) *
William Knight (1933-1935) *
Joseph KrKosky (1933-1935) *
Evan Morgan (1934-1936) *
Albert Olson (1933-1935) *
Jonathan Packer (1934-1936) *
Angelo Pagnucco (1934-1936) *

Blairmore Town Council 1935 (all new councillors elected by acclamation):
Joseph Aschacher (1935-1937) *
William Knight (1935-1937) *
Joseph KrKosky (1935-1937) *
Evan Morgan (1934-1936) *
Albert Olson (1935-1937) *
Jonathan Packer (1934-1936) *
Angelo Pagnucco (1934-1936) *

**Blairmore Town Council 1936 (all new councillors elected by acclamation):**

Joseph Aschacher (1935-1937) *
W.L. Evans (1936-1938)
William Knight (1935-1937) *
Joseph KrKosky (1935-1937) *
Albert Olson (1935-1937) *
E. Womersley (1936-1938)
Henry Zak (1936-1938)

Source for all election statistics: Blairmore Town Council Meeting Minutes.
* denotes Red councillor.
Appendix 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period from</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Description of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Works</td>
<td>Waterworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hours</td>
<td>hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Crowsnest Museum and Archives
May 17, 2009

Kyle R. Franz
PhD Candidate
Department of History
Queen’s University

GREB Ref # GHIS-028-09
Title: “Red Citizenship: Coal, Community and Communism in Blairmore, Alberta, 1928 - 1939”

Dear Kyle Franz:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “Red Citizenship: Coal, Community and Communism in Blairmore, Alberta, 1928 - 1939” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details at: www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/addforms.htm#Adverse). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that any adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/addforms.htm#Change. These changes must be sent to Linda Frid at the Office of Research Services or FRIDL@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Ms. Frid will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

Copy: Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Ian McKay