RECLAIMING GHOSTS

Descendants of the ghost town of Mountain Park rally to save their coal-mining heritage, but few in Canmore care about black-dusted phantoms of the distant past

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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As we crawl outside our tent, the golden glow of an autumn sunrise makes its way over towering coal slags and toward a distant hillside on the site of Mountain Park, a ghost town since 1950.

The dissipating shadow of Mount Harris from the east unveils past and present mysteries in this incredible valley of natural wonder: a place where nature slowly overtakes the last ruins of this isolated Rocky Mountain ghost town, and where crisp northerly winds blow gently from the direction of a pioneer cemetery, answering dawn's first light with eerie sighs.

"What are those? Do you see them?" I ask my wife, Darlis, pointing to blue speckles shimmering along the hill's eastern bank. With our

FACING PAGE: The pioneer cemetery at Mountain Park, restored by the town's descendants, is all that remains of the once vibrant coal mining community. ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Handmade signs carved by descendants sprinkle a hillside; the remains of a dam near the townsite are slowly being taken over by the alpine elements; a newly painted cemetery cross struggles against a mass of encroaching brush; a hopper bin is one of the few mining remains left at Mountain Park.

beat up Chevy, we zigzag up an old mining trail toward the crest of the hill, where a vibrant multinational community of 1,200 people thrived around a coal mine considered the jewel in Alberta's historic Coal Branch, a vast industrial region cradling the eastern border of Jasper National Park. At the time, Mountain Park, with an elevation of 1,890 metres, was the highest year-round inhabited community in the British Commonwealth. The barely navigable trail leads us to meticulously arranged rows of handmade, sky-blue signs, their simple tree shapes much like the shapes formed from Christmas cookie cutters. There is a sign marking the place of the hospital, another for the morgue and others for the town's library, school, theatre, restaurants and several family residences. We can only gasp and speak in hushed tones. "Somebody, people, from somewhere, must have really loved this place," I whisper to Darlis.

But serenity vacates when I recall another hillside view a week earlier near my home in Canmore: newly built mansions competing against a spectacular mountain skyline. Canmore, an hour's drive west of Calgary and once a spartan coal-mining town of 2,000, is now a booming, opulent Rocky Mountain tourist resort of almost 11,000. When the financially struggling mine closed in 1979, all structures except the lamp house and a few mine entrances were demolished within a year, a result of provincial government safety and reclamation policies. But now, on freshly bulldozed fields, rusting mining remnants poke forlornly out of the topsoil. There is no wanting to pause, to feel tranquil. I want to shout.

And I am not alone. For years, a small minority of Canmorites, mostly artists, environmentalists and coal miners' descendants, have mourned for the town's pioneer past, angry at the total capitulation of heritage values to the ambitions of a bold new tourism industry.

"It was a travesty. Many in old Canmore thought they'd lost their community," says Michael Vincent, a Canmore heritage artist and former town councilor. "They gave up, without meaning to. They felt overwhelmed by all the changes, all the new people, especially during the Olympics."

And while most of Mountain Park's buildings were leveled by 1955, residents refuse to let their memories fade. The pioneer cemetery, final resting place for more than 150 Coal Branchers, is now a focal point for countless pilgrimages, and a source of understanding for visitors eager to learn how pioneer community spirit inspired descendants to preserve their memories. Since 1994, former residents have constructed historical signage, erected monuments, restored the cemetery and raised about $40,000 to publish an 800-page book called Mountain Park Memories.

"We said, 'If we don't do it, it will never be done, because there will be none of us left'," says Joan Talbot-Wegert. She and co-author Mary (Lee) Salzsauler, both 63 and raised in Mountain Park, spent almost four years writing the book, chronicling the life of the town from 1909 to 1950, when growing demand for diesel ultimately spelled the community's death. Last year, 360 copies were released to descendants and families. Salzsauler is also custodian of the cemetery. Over the past decade, she has trekked up to Mountain Park several times each summer to paint grave markers, erect signs and clear away buck brush. The cemetery, facing west toward Mount Cheviot, will one day be Salzsauler's final resting place, as it is for her father and two cousins. "I will always remember the full moon, with us kids dressed for winter and sliding down the hill on toboggans, shovels or cardboard. We

would slide a half mile past a row of houses and into the mine yard," recalls Salzsauler passionately. "It was as clear as could be, like you could reach up and touch the stars."

Canmore also has a pioneer cemetery, behind a new hotel and sandwiched between two busy roads leading to upscale housing developments. There is no memorial to honour these coal-mining descendants. "A majority of people now here don't even know there was a mine," says Louis Kamenka, a 45-year-old local geologist and third-generation Canmorite whose family's coal mining roots date back to 1910, including a period at Georgetown, a ghost town lost in alpine bush three kilometres west of Canmore. In an ironic career footnote, Kamenka participated in a Geological Survey of Canada recommendation in 1980 to save Mountain Park's cemetery from relocation. He now works as an environmental consultant for Canmore's Three Sisters Resorts, which is developing a 2,200-acre commercial and residential project on and near the old mine site. More than 45 per cent of company property covers lands mined in the past. From 1992 to 1999, the company committed more than $150,000 toward annual miners' picnics, artifact restoration, and historical awareness programs. Three Sisters' officials freely admit the initiatives were driven by commercial considerations, but emphasize neither the town nor any organized old-timer's group have ever picked up the ball to preserve Canmore's coal-mining past. Town officials concede there is no formal budget or policy for heritage protection, but Glenn Pitman, chief administrative officer, confirms $60,000 was contributed three years ago to erect mining showcases at two intersections leading into town. But now, Three Sisters' programs are in jeopardy, as the company struggles to stay afloat after Germany's Dresdner Bank pulled the plug on a $40-million financing deal in 1998. With creditors banging on Three Sisters' doors daily, heritage preservation is not a current priority. "We haven't had time to go into that. We've been putting out too many other bush fires," says Thomas Atkinson, vice president of planning. However, Peter Rollason, volunteer president of the tiny Centennial Museum Society of Canmore, says he's hopeful a local committee, created this year by town and museum officials, will find ways to acquire and preserve fast-disappearing heritage buildings. "I think history is important to everybody," says Rollason. "What it is going to do for the future, I don't know. At least you know where you came from." While I was standing on that Canmore hillside, children on mountain bikes raced toward the remains of a tipple foundation. They stopped, kicked at the cement, shrugged and quickly left —cycling into the shadow of a busy backhoe. Maybe coal miners met there between shifts, sharing cigarettes and stories. That wasn't my time but the memories are warm and very real.

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ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Mining artifacts still litter the ground around Canmore's old mine site; Three Sisters Resorts has restored a mine entrance beside a newly built parkway; the lamp house just above a mine entrance is one of Canmore Mines' last standing structures; since 1992, Three Sisters has committed more than $150,000 to preserve remaining mine structures on its property, including this mine entrance.
RIGHT: The remains of a coal car in a nearby forest on mine property.