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# Only Bills Are Left

*They are the four residents  
of once-booming Granite City*

*Story and Pictures*

By R. H. NICHOLS

**F**OUR men live today in what old-timers claim was B.C.'s third-largest mining town, Granite City. Whatever its status, this ghost town served a district that in its hey-day was unique. Besides placer mining, it was North America's foremost producer of platinum, and diamonds of fine quality were discovered there.

Situated at the junction of Granite Creek and the Tulameen River, 12 miles northwest of Princeton, Granite City in 1940 finally accepted its fate as just another of B.C.'s many ghost towns.

In four of the few remaining buildings of the once-rowdy, wide-open

mining camp, live four elderly men; two who drifted in from the north a few years ago; and two who have prospected the local creeks and mountains for more than 40 years.

## **NOW BILLS' FLAT**

The name, Granite City, has disappeared even from the minds of the valley residents and the four inhabitants of the camp have re-named it "Bills' Flat on Granite Creek," for all of them are named Bill; Bill Churchill, Bill Beacon, Bill Dixon, and Bill Frew.

While these four remaining citizens don't always agree among themselves, they all enjoy the freedom from any dictation in dress or how they should spend their time.

There isn't worry about money either, mostly because they don't have much. Bill Churchill does a little prospecting, enough to keep the pot boiling, and Bill Frew receives a small army pension which combined with a little "sniping" along the creek enables him to eat his three meals a day and buy tobacco.

#### **NO MONEY WORRIES**

Dixon and Beacon receive the old-age pension, so are in effect retired and independent. With no rent or fuel problems, and only themselves to worry about, life flows along on an even keel.

Modern conveniences, even if available, probably would be disdainfully rejected. No radios, television, electricity, or even a phonograph has invaded the cabins in the overgrown, silent streets. Water is obtained with a bucket from Granite Creek a few hundred yards away.

A minimum of furniture in the old log buildings serve the present dwellers in their undemanding existence. A small cookstove, a rusty heater for the winter, a couple of benches picked up from another deserted shack, a homemade table and an ancient bed, provide the essentials; warmth, food, and sleep.

A few old papers and magazines serve the dual purpose of reading and lighting fires, an axe and saw provides exercise and fuel, and a gold pan and shovel is handy when a sudden urge for a little prospecting strikes them. In a corner leans a dust-covered pack board and perhaps a blackened tea pail that is a nostalgic reminder of many a trip over the mountains on ancient trails.

Shopping is done in the once-thriving town of Coalmont, which is only a mile away. Coalmont today has only a post-office, hotel, school, and general store.

There is seldom any mail for the "Bills' Flat" residents, but it does make an excuse for a daily stroll. Then too, they might run into 80-year-old Singing Jimmy who divides his time between Coalmont and Tulameen five miles away. Jimmy, spry and good-natured, amuses himself and the occasional outlander by exhibiting his gifts of ventriloquism, ballad singing, and spinning yarns.

#### **SHY PEOPLE**

After spending two days trying to get a few pictures and a chance to chat with the various Bills of Granite Creek, I finally gave up as they mysteriously disappeared before I could catch sight of them. That is, with the exception of Bill Frew who was look-

ing after his three grandchildren for a few days while their mother was in Vancouver. And from this veteran of the Black Watch, Royal Highland Regiment, I learned something about the history of Granite Creek.

Granite City came into being in the middle 1880's after gold was discovered on the creek. These turned out to be the richest placer deposits in the Princeton Mine area. It wasn't long before three to four thousand miners were scattered upstream along the creek and its tributaries. And Granite City with its gambling houses, saloons, and girls was a magnet that drew the miners like moths to a light.

Besides gold, platinum had also been discovered, but was ignored by the early miners in the mad scramble for gold, but from 1887 to 1891 Granite Creek became the largest producer of platinum in North America. Officially, 8000 ounces were taken out, but like gold, large quantities were not recorded, and 20,000 ounces is probably nearer the correct figure.

Diamonds of fine quality were also found in the chromite rock, but no method of that day was able to separate them from the rock without breaking the stones.

Stage-coaches ran down the old Canyon House Road from Merritt, and also from Penticton to Princeton and over the narrow mountain trail to Granite Creek.

The gold mining soon levelled off from "rush status" to a few hundred workers including the Chinese, and then to small sniping operations.

In 1933-34, 264 feet of drifts were run into an old channel of the creek, and the 2107 feet of exposed bedrock yielded 172 ounces of gold and 17 ounces of platinum.

The coal mines at Blakeburn above Granite City on the North Fork of Granite, kept the struggling town alive until about 1940 and then, with the mines closed, it was entirely abandoned.

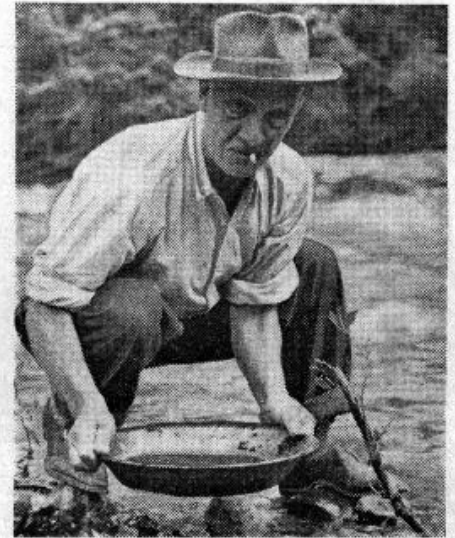
#### **PEACEFUL SPOT**

As dusk settles down in the little river flat with its few squat log buildings, one may sit on a bench of the high canyon wall. At your back are the graves of many of the Granite Creek miners who died in the search for elusive riches, and below, one by one, yellow lights spring feebly to life in four of the old buildings.

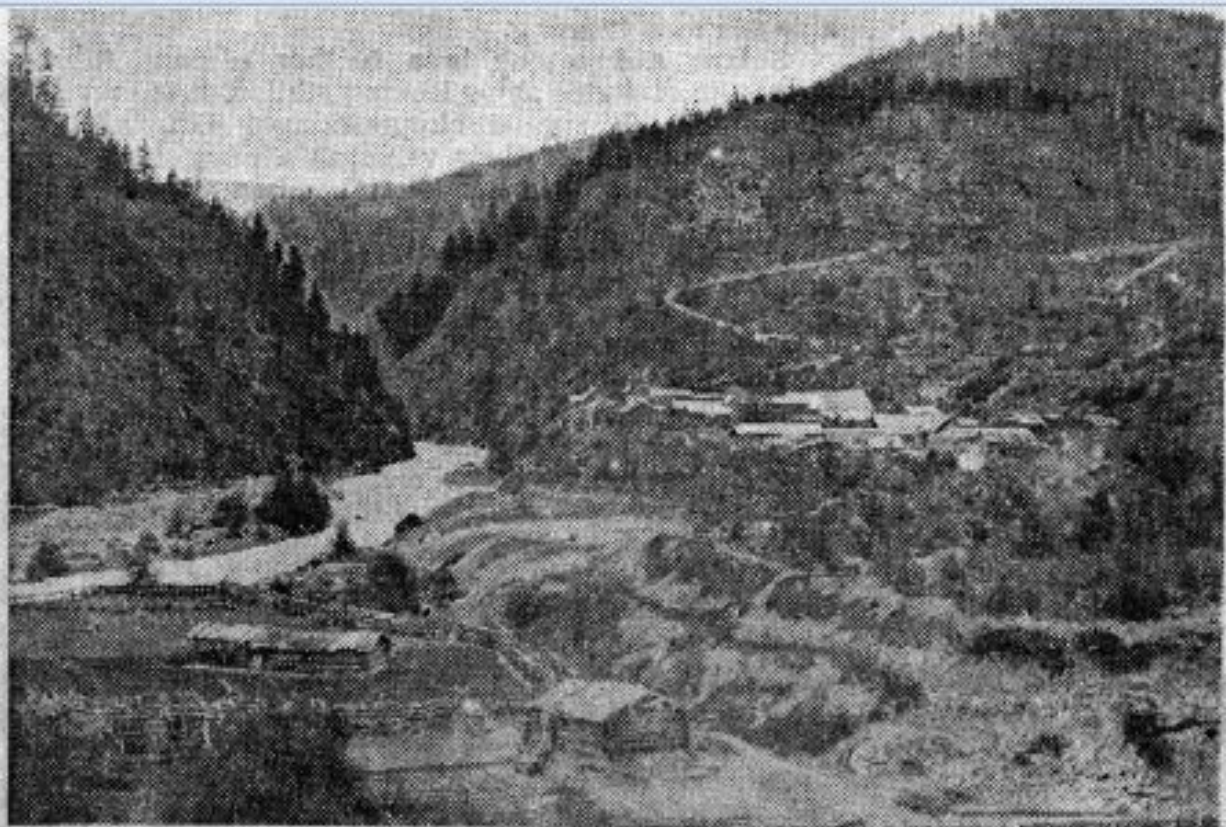
A dim figure moves ant-like across the flat and one may hear the dull rattle of an armful of wood being dropped on a rough plank floor. That is all that remains of the colorful, riotous mining camp that was Granite City.



Child and dog play in deserted streets of what was the boisterous mining camp of Granite City, near Princeton.



Today only four people live in Granite City. One is Bill Frew who still makes a few dollars along creek.



In its heyday . . . between 1887 and 1891 . . . Granite City was centre of the richest placer mining in the entire Princeton area.