

# Remembering the history of interned miners

## July 2015 marks the centennial anniversary of Fernie internment camps

Submitted by Wayne Norton

In Canada's ongoing four-year commemoration of significant milestones of World War I, the sudden and chaotic internment of over 300 miners at Fernie should not be overlooked. It is a strange episode and misunderstood.

Ignoring the urgent advice of their union leaders, English and Italian miners at Coal Creek on Tuesday, June 8, 1915, suddenly refused to return to work until all their fellow workers born in Austria-Hungary and Germany had been dismissed from employment by the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company.

Before the company had an opportunity to respond, the acting premier of British Columbia, William Bowser, instructed the Provincial Police in Fernie to intern all unmarried mine employees who were German or Austrian citizens. The chief constable posted notices commanding all those affected to report to police, and advised his officers in Coal Creek, Michel and Natal to swear in special constables. Realizing the Fernie jail could not accommodate so many prisoners, he made arrangements to use Fernie's skating rink as the site for a temporary camp. Internment was to begin Wednesday, June 9.

Described as "enemy aliens" during the war years, more than 300 Austrian-

born and a dozen German employees of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company were interned at the skating rink over the course of the next few days. Well over half were from Michel and Natal, communities where there had been no demand at all for their dismissal. They were joined by a handful of prisoners from logging camps near Waldo and Elko.

A century later, it is difficult to determine what actually motivated the Coal Creek miners. Enthusiasm for the war was high following the sinking of the Lusitania and Italy's entry on the allied side, but levels of local unemployment and under-employment were also high. The demand was likely more an attempt to secure economic advantage than simply an expression of patriotism. In 1915, actions and expressions of a patriotic nature were seldom subject to much scrutiny.

However, Bowser's motivation seems perfectly clear. "Full advantage," he declared, "should be taken of the chance to relieve unemployment."

He said his purpose was to create employment for "deserving men who find themselves out of work" and to remove "a menace" to the peace of the community.

Personally responsible for sending troops to quell the bitter miners' strike on Vancouver Island two years earlier, Bowser more likely had in mind the fearful prospect of intervening in another miners'

strike rather than subversive activities by enemy aliens. He claimed to have the full cooperation of the federal military authorities in charge of internment operations.

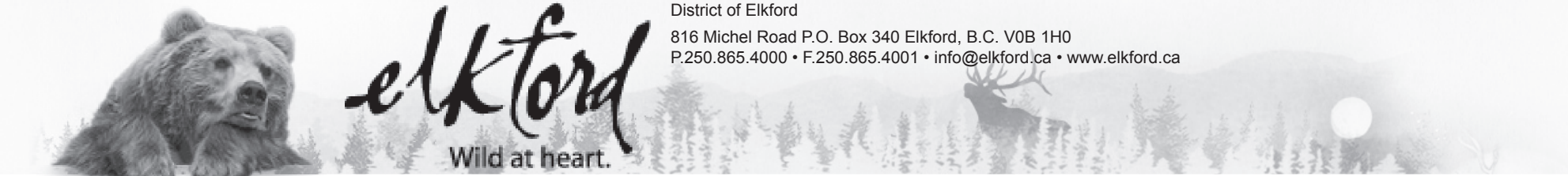
Newspapers in Victoria and Vancouver all approved of his action, but questions of legality quickly arose. Bowser had acted beyond his constitutional authority. Apparently, even the broad powers of the War Measures Act were not sufficient in justifying his action. This made the internment of enemy aliens a matter of federal jurisdiction and justified the imprisonment of those who declared loyalty to Germany or Austria-Hungary, who had attempted to flee to the United States, or who — by virtue of being unemployed — were simply suspected of disloyalty. None of these conditions applied to the men held in Fernie.

Bowser was advised there was "no legal authority" for detaining anyone at the skating rink. Clearly, he did not have the cooperation of military authorities who refused to take custody of the prisoners. Bowser soon found himself denying rumours that the internees were about to be released; he told Prime Minister Borden riots would break out if they were. The *Fernie Free Press* asked, "Where are we at?" and answered "Who knows?" Militia units in Calgary were reported to be awaiting orders to leave for Fernie. The distressed

acting premier of British Columbia must have realized he had inadvertently created the conditions necessary for a repetition of the event he most sought to avoid — military intervention in a miners' strike.

Adding to his dismay, the internees retained the services of a Cranbrook lawyer who agreed to apply for writs of habeas corpus in the names of two Austrian prisoners, one of whom had been employed by the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company since 1908 and another who had come to Canada as a seven-year-old in 1891. But before the court case could be heard, the federal government intervened. Order-in-Council 1501 declared internment of enemy aliens was justified if their presence in the mines might lead to disorder. It was specifically intended to address the unique situation at Fernie.

Military authorities took command of the prisoners on June 30, operating the camp for three months at the skating rink before moving it to more permanent quarters at Morrissey. Canada's only provincially-sanctioned internment had a history of only three weeks' duration, was made legal only after the fact, and left an unwelcome legacy of social division. On the centenary of the camp's first days, this event in local history provides much cause for reflection.



District of Elkford

816 Michel Road P.O. Box 340 Elkford, B.C. V0B 1H0  
P.250.865.4000 • F.250.865.4001 • info@elkford.ca • www.elkford.ca

### 2015 Property Tax Notices Annual Utility Notices and Home Owner Grant Applications

The District of Elkford 2015 Property Tax Notices and the 2015 Residential Utility Notices were mailed out on May 22, 2015. If you have not received your notices, please contact the District of Elkford Office.

To avoid the 10% penalty, all payments and eligible Home Owner's Grants must be received before Thursday, July 2, 2015 at 4:30 pm. If your financial institution makes your property tax payment and if you are eligible, you will still need to claim your annual Home Owner Grant and also pay your annual Utilities Notice (water, sewer, solid waste) before July 2, 2015. Unclaimed Home Owner Grants and unpaid utilities are also subject to the 10% penalty.

**New for 2015: Eligible taxpayers may claim their Home Owner Grant online. Details are included in the brochure and on our website.**

The District of Elkford Office is open Monday to Friday, 8:00 am to 4:30 pm. Please note that all District offices will be closed on Canada Day: July 1, 2015.

#### Upcoming Council and Committee Meetings

- June 8<sup>th</sup> Regular Council @ 6:00 pm
- June 22<sup>nd</sup> Regular Council (AGM) @ 6:00 pm

These meetings will be held in the Council Chambers at  
816 Michel Road and are open to the public.

### Elkford Introduces Odd and Even Numbered Watering Days

At the March 23rd Regular Council Meeting, the new Outdoor Water Conservation Bylaw No. 769, 2015 was adopted. The new bylaw replaces the District's Water Conservation Policy No. 2004-05.

To ensure capacity in the District's reservoirs in the event of a fire emergency, Bylaw No. 769 restricts watering between April 1st and September 30th to odd or even numbered days corresponding to your address within the hours of 4:00 am to 10:00 am and 8:00 pm to 11:00 pm only. If your address is an even number and your sprinkler is on, and you see that your neighbour, whose address is an odd number, also has their sprinkler on, one of you is in violation of the new bylaw.

This bylaw, and others, are available for viewing on our website at [www.elkford.ca](http://www.elkford.ca).

### We are looking for volunteers for Wildcat Days 2015



Interested  
in helping?

Contact  
us today!

Phone:  
250.865.4010

Email:  
[recreation@elkford.ca](mailto:recreation@elkford.ca)

### Water Smart Ambassador

The District of Elkford has hired student Jadon Canlas as the 2015 Water Smart Ambassador. Jadon will be responsible for providing water conservation education to residents and businesses, as well as providing irrigation audit services to help residents maximize the performance of their automatic sprinkler systems. Please contact the Ambassador at [watersmart@elkford.ca](mailto:watersmart@elkford.ca) or 250.910.4028.

### District of Elkford Call for Volunteers: Urban Wildlife Management Advisory Committee and Citizens' Advisory Committee

The District is seeking to fill two (2) volunteer positions on the committees. Membership is open to residents of the District of Elkford only. Volunteer Application Forms and copies of Reference are available at the District Municipal Office or the District of Elkford's website at [www.elkford.ca](http://www.elkford.ca). Applications will be accepted at the District Municipal Office in person, by mail, fax, or e-mail, no later than June 12, 2015 at 4:30 pm.

### Off-Road Vehicles

New Provincial regulation will require a Provincial license plate starting in November 2015. You are still required to register your off-road vehicle and display your District of Elkford license plate in accordance with the Off-Highway Recreational Vehicle Regulation Bylaw No. 671, 2006. Operating your off-road vehicle within the District, except on a shared-use recreation trail identified in Bylaw No. 671, 2006, is prohibited.