

“Molson is Becoming Smaller”: A Canadian-American Community After the First War*

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In several areas of the Canadian and American West the period after the First World War was one of decline and depopulation.¹ The people throughout vast sections of the northern great plains — extending from the Dakotas and Montana deep into Alberta and parts of Saskatchewan and Manitoba — felt great distress throughout the twenties and, of

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¹ For the U.S. see Mary Wilma M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains 1900-1925* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), part 3; Carl F. Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), pp. 22, 150ff; Chester C. Davis, “The Development of Agricultural Policy Since the End of the World War,” *Yearbook of Agriculture 1940* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1940), pp. 297-326; John D. Black, “The Present Status of Agriculture in the U.S.,” *Scientific Agriculture*, IX (Jan. 1929): 269-81; “Agriculture in the Great Plains, 1876-1930: A Symposium,” *Agricultural History*, 51 (Jan. 1977).

For Canada see Jean Burnet, *Next Year Country* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951); Report and Papers on East Tilley Drought Area (Tilley East Commission), 1926, microfilm BR 1943, Glenbow Archives, including Report on Southern Alberta Drought Area by B. Russell and W. H. Snelson; Appendix B, “Problems of a Retrograde Area in Alberta,” in W. A. MacKintosh, *Economic Problems of the Prairie Provinces* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1935), pp. 291-94; James H. Gray, *Men Against the Desert* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1967); John H. Thompson, *The Harvests of War* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978); David C. Jones, “Schools and Social Disintegration in the Alberta Dry Belt of the Twenties,” *Prairie Forum*, 3 (Spring 1978): 1-19.

For relevant urban and community studies see N. L. Whetten, “The Social and Economic Structure of the Trade Center in the Canadian Prairie Provinces . . . , 1910-1930,” PhD thesis, Harvard University, 1932; Carle C. Zimmerman and Garry W. Moneo, *The Prairie Community System* (Ottawa: Agricultural Economics Research Council of Canada, 1971); Gerald Hodge, “The Prediction of Trade Center Viability in the Great Plains,” PhD thesis, M.I.T., 1965; Barry Potyondi, “Country Town: The History of Minnedosa, Manitoba, 1879-1922,” MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1979; Lewis G. Thomas, “Okotoks: From Trading Post to Suburb,” *Urban History Review*, VII (Oct. 1979): 3-22; Alan Artibise and Gilbert Stetler, eds., *The Usable Urban Past: Politics and Planning in the Modern Canadian City* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979); Artibise, “The Urban West: The Evolution of Prairie Towns and Cities to 1930,” *Prairie Forum*, 4 (Fall 1979): 237-62.

course, the thirties. During the war and after, machinery and operating costs escalated. Beginning in 1917, a prolonged drought ravaged the dry areas, and following 1920 crop prices plummeted. As farm population diminished, farm sizes increased, and as farmers bought out their neighbours, mortgage indebtedness rose strikingly. With the latter came less outright ownership, more tenancy, thousands of foreclosures and, in the United States, hundreds of bank failures.

While these trends were exhibited very clearly on the prairies, they also occurred elsewhere — especially in areas of similar grain cultivation. One such region embraced a pocket of agricultural land, of about 200 square miles, on the border between Washington and British Columbia in the Okanogan Highlands. Varying from 2,650 feet to 4,600 feet in elevation, heavily forested in parts, and receiving about thirteen inches of rain annually, the region included the Canadian community of Bridesville and what became the much larger American town of Molson.

The fate of Molson typified the general contraction of many western communities by the mid-thirties, from independent status to dependence and finally disappearance altogether.² It also typified the post-war dislocation of the entire boundary country between Oroville, Washington, and Rossland, B.C. In two respects, however, the story was atypical. The more general small town phenomenon was that of decline in the immediate post-war depression, recovery in the late twenties, and relapse in the thirties.³ Molson's experience omitted the recovery. The second atypicality was the town's location on the border, a circumstance which subjected it to pressures either absent in most other communities or greatly diminished. Such pressures, however, greatly enhance its value as a case study, for they have always been essential to the study of borderlands and the permeability of boundaries.

The border is a recurring theme throughout this paper. It is one of those factors external, which, like the war and the drought, set the scene for disintegration. When internal wrangling and incompetence were added to these problems, community leadership was thwarted and whatever solutions it might have proffered never materialized.

² Whetten and Zimmerman and Moneo employ the terms "independent" and "dependent," the former towns including a post office, express office, newspaper and bank; the latter lacking one of these institutions linking them to the outside world. See Zimmerman and Moneo, *Prairie Community System*, pp. 10-11, for the drastic decline in dependent villages in the extreme southwest corner of Alberta between 1920 and 1930.

³ See Zimmerman and Moneo, *Prairie Community System*, pp. 23, 27ff.

From the first there was a powerful symbiotic relationship between the Canadian and American sides of the border.⁴ The Canadian side was occupied first, and many who settled the Molson country came through Canada by rail to the end of the Canadian Pacific Railway at Midway. Some were born in the Kootenays. The founding of Molson, moreover, was financed by the Molson family of Montreal, who were interested in a nearby mining venture.

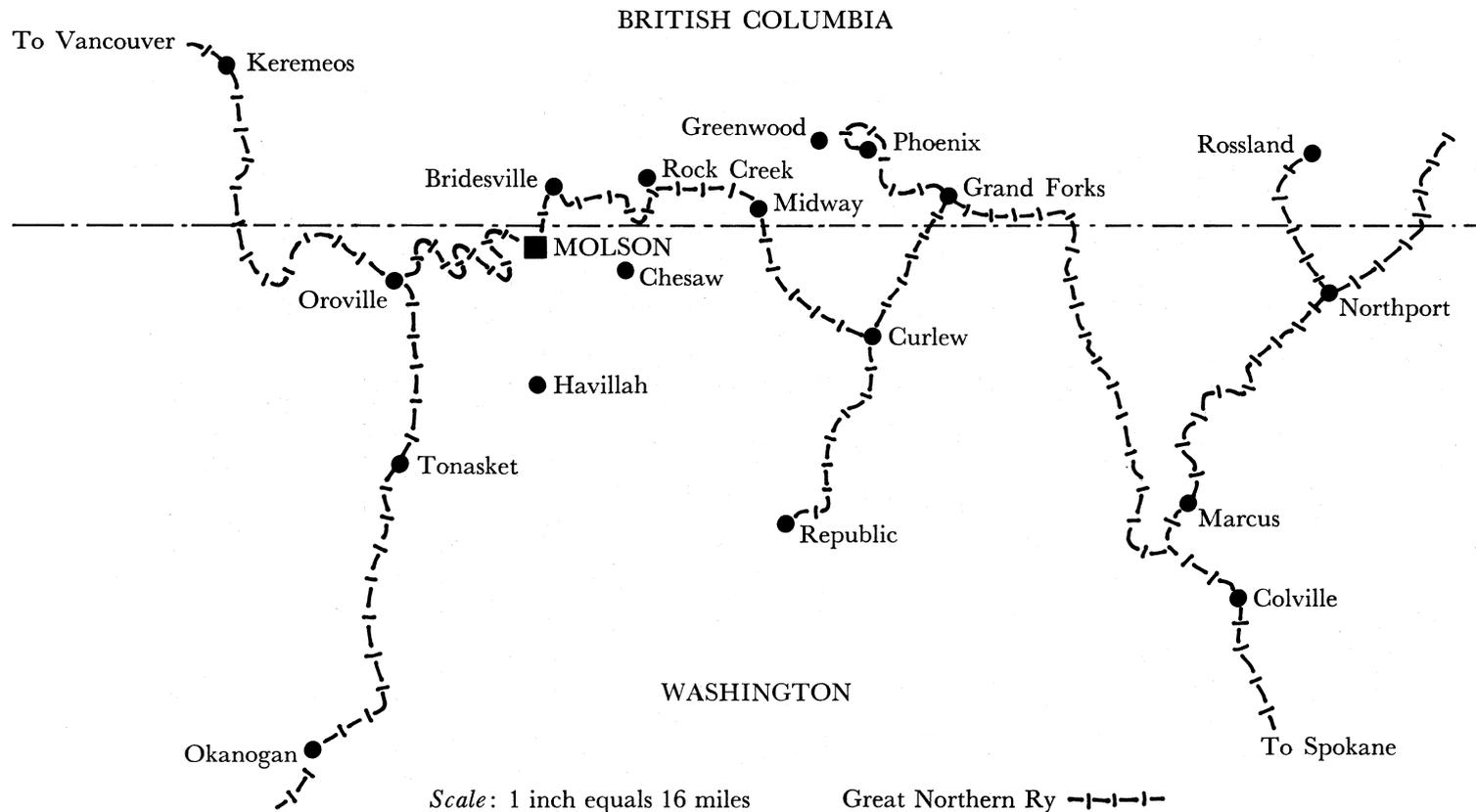
After the north half of the Colville Indian Reserve was opened in 1900, the American side was homesteaded. Before the Great Northern Railway arrived in 1905-1906, American settlers often worked in the Canadian mining or smelting centres of Camp McKinney, Anaconda, Greenwood, Boundary Falls, Grand Forks and Phoenix. Making their grubstakes north of the line before returning to their struggling homesteads, these Americans entertained, banked and married in Canada. They traded principally at Sidley, B.C. Occasionally their children were schooled in Canada, though the reverse also occurred. This intimate relationship and the sense that the border did not exist in the early years were responsible for the absence of Canadian-American antagonism — a fact of life throughout the history of the region confirmed by many informants.

After the GNR linked Bridesville and Molson and bypassed Sidley, the latter declined and Molson began a period of greater self-sufficiency and less direct dependence on the Canadian side. As the town experienced a building boom after 1911 and developed into an important railroad and regional centre, and as the Canadian boundary mining and smelting industry began to experience trouble, Molson became the trading, services and entertainment centre for Canadians in the Bridesville region.

From the beginning Molson was a town divided. Temporarily abandoned in 1901 when the mining promotion collapsed, the old section was claimed by homesteader John H. McDonald and the ensuing battle over the townsite possession became a national *cause célèbre*, lasting two decades. Most of the expansion after 1911 thus occurred in the new section by townspeople seeking clear title to the land. An intense rivalry resulted, complete with duplication of services and much bitterness. Indeed, some "new towners," long-time resident Eva Rise recalled, mailed letters at the

⁴ Molson-Chesaw-Knob Hill Communities, *Okanogan Highland Echoes* (Washington State, 1974), pp. 40, 50, hereafter *Echoes*. Pages are unnumbered in the original, but are numbered here for convenience. Molson-Chesaw-Knob Hill Development Committee, *Okanogan Highland Families* (Oroville: Oroville Gazette, 1975), pp. 6, 28, 51, 110, 116, 117, 119, 129, 142, 147; Howard L. Mooney, *The First Twenty Years* (Colville, Washington: *Statesman-Examiner*, 1976), pp. 15, 17, 18, 82, 83, *et passim*; George Kingsley, *Aural History* 347: 1, Provincial Archives, Victoria, B.C.; Maudie Coss, interview, 24 Mar. 1974, Osoyoos, B.C.

British Columbia–Washington Boundary Country, 1917



Great Northern station rather than go to the post office in old town.⁵ Maude Gavin Nickle, who worked in New Molson, remembered "a small man living in old town [who] stopped to see a new building being put up in new town." When his "fat wife" spied him she "came out and led him away by the car."⁶

In December 1914 the weekly newspaper, the Molson *Leader*, reported that the railway records "show that Molson ships more grain, hay, live-stock and cream than any other town on the entire [railway] although Colville, Chewelah and other towns are several times larger. . . ." Molson, according to the County Assessor, had "made a greater growth in the last two years than any other town in the county." In 1914 "118 town lots were sold." Wheat yields "of 50 to 60 bushels per acre [were] common," oat yields "as high as 110 bushels per acre" were possible, and "total crop failures [were] unknown. . . ."⁷

Town construction in the period up to 1918 included a Methodist Episcopal Church (1913), the first garage (1914), the first lumber yard (1915), a magnificent three-storey school (1915), a new central addition between the feuding sections (1916), another lumber yard (1916), and the two-storey Dunn Theatre (1917), complete with orchestra pit, sloping floors and upstairs hardwood dance floor.⁸

As 1918 dawned, Howard L. Mooney, editor of the Molson *Leader*, eagerly anticipated a continuation of the boom. The past year had featured unprecedented growth. "So great has been the demand . . . for building and other construction," Mooney said, "that those dealing in such lines have been taxed to their limit." By April there would be "underway in Molson one of the greatest building campaigns ever witnessed in any town in north central Washington." "Molson holds greater promise," Mooney exulted, than any other town "in the Northwest."⁹

The promise, however, was never fulfilled. Why it was not can be explained by the impact of the war, mechanization, inflation, economic depression and drought.

⁵ Eva Rise, interview, 13 May 1975, Molson, Washington.

⁶ Mrs. A. J. Maude Gavin Nickle to Harry Sherling, 27 Mar. 1962, in author's possession.

⁷ *Echoes*, p. 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 55, 131, 159, 162, 190; Chesaw *News*, 22 Dec. 1916. I thank Howard L. Mooney for access to the files of the *News*. For other studies on Molson and region see past issues of *Okanagan County Heritage*, Okanagan Historical Society *Reports* and the Boundary Historical Society *Reports*.

⁹ *Leader*, 4 Jan., 18 Jan., 25 Jan. 1918. I thank Cleland Emry, Editor of the Oroville *Gazette* for access to the Molson papers which were thought to have been lost.

Consider first the war. Until 1918 the Great War had bestowed upon the Molson country, particularly the American side, significant benefits. In much of the west 1915 and 1916 were years of bumper crops. The plenitude was accompanied by high demand and high prices for wheat which induced great prosperity. "The present era of high prices," warned Mooney on 25 April 1918, "is . . . a windfall — a streak of luck that cannot in the nature of things continue indefinitely. The fellow who increases his style of living to keep up with the advance in prices will find himself face to face with a serious problem." The 1917 building boom, after all, had been conducted not by new residents as much as by those "who have lived in this country for . . . ten to fifteen years." These people Mooney dubbed "the accumulating class."¹⁰

There was other evidence that residents were in the process of improving their "style of living." This concerned the rather sudden availability of mechanized vehicles. In 1918 two combine harvesters were introduced into the area, followed the next year by the first logging truck.¹¹ More important for the average citizen was the fact that 125 automobiles, "most of them the high priced cars," according to the *Oroville Gazette*, were sold in Molson in 1917. "Considering the size of Molson," the *Gazette* said, "that place contains the banner auto investment community in the state."¹² So rapid was the increase in auto ownership that as early as the summer of 1918 Mooney claimed "with all modesty" that Molson had "reached the age of development" where traffic regulations were necessary. Congestion and indiscriminate parking at shows or other public gatherings were new problems. "When break up comes and people begin to move homeward," he said, "there is unsightly and unnecessary confusion, often damage or annoyance from cars bumping or backing into one another, to say nothing of the risk to pedestrians who meander about through the conglomerated assemblage of gas wagons."¹³

A more serious problem than traffic regulations was that vehicles were costly, and that many farmers bought them in anticipation of continuing prosperity. Some were even willing to mortgage their farms to buy a car. Money paid to loan companies and oil corporations began to leave the district, and costly road building campaigns emerged along with increased taxation.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 Jan. 1918; 4 Jan. 1918.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21 Nov. 1918; *Echoes*, p. 117.

¹² *Oroville Gazette*, Oct. 1917, clipping in possession of Harry A. Sherling.

¹³ *Leader*, 11 July 1918.

¹⁴ The Molson Community Club was typical of clubs formed in the period all over

Just as Molsonites began to incur new debts the war began to dominate the time and deflect the energies of the community from the construction and expansion of 1917. The conflict affected the life of smuggling along the border, a complex life warranting some preliminary amplification. Movement of contraband was motivated by several factors including the proximity of the communities of Bridesville and Molson, the greater availability of goods in Molson, the difference in the cost of goods and the laws regarding alcohol in the two countries, the changing tariffs on goods crossing the boundary, and the more lenient grading practices regarding wheat in the States. Americans smuggled hogs into Canada and brought back woollens. Canadians smuggled in wheat and brought back the cheaper American sugar, binder twine, hardware and coffee.

When contraband was sold across the line it was usually done through an accomplice whose farm adjoined the border. Canadian farms thus situated were ideal for transferring booze and providing little-used routes into the States during the rum running of the twenties and thirties. All night long, the locals recalled, the border was alive with headlamps, blinking and furtive. One farmer and his wife admitted that they had shunned the rum runners for some time, but in the end had allowed their granary to be used for storage. The booze, the woman said, "was packed to the roof." One of the drivers who plied the mountain roads to Spokane revealed that others too became accomplices — from the lawmen along the border to the sheriffs of adjoining Okanogan and Ferry Counties.

Smuggling by Canadians was indirectly encouraged by customs official Allan Eddy, said to have been a smuggler himself, who requested Canadians to go out of their way in reporting to his Bridesville office when they returned from Molson, and who was often not there when they arrived. For some Canadians Eddy was "the boss of Bridesville," a mysterious Soapy Smith figure, loved by some, hated by others, wielding enormous sway over a community fundamentally dependent on its American trade centre. Recognizing this power, at least one Molson businessman is said to have supplied Eddy with free groceries on the understanding that he would ignore certain routine smuggling of foodstuffs and hardware into Canada.

Generally Canadians had the most to gain by smuggling. During the

Canada and the United States in that it was strongly interested in good roads. By February 1923, 16 percent of taxes in the district went to roads. Only education received more. (*Leader*, 21 Feb. 1923.)

war, however, American economy measures moved Molsonites to dabble in the illicit trade in an unusual manner. On 18 April 1918, Deputy Collector Floyd Loomis reported infringements against the National Food Administration regulations aimed at reducing domestic consumption of wheat. "Persons in and around Molson," the *Leader* said, "have been smuggling wheat flour across the line from the Canadian side, thus dodging the substitute requirements of the Hooverizing program which all loyal Americans are abiding by." To bring the miscreants into line the *Leader* threatened publication of the names of those prosecuted. Public derision would complete the punishment and ensure future compliance.

Early in 1918 the State Council on Defence requested that "stores make only one delivery a day to a customer," that they "extend credit for not to exceed 30 days," [*sic*] and that they "emphasize economical goods."¹⁵ By June the town thought little of building booms. Instead it diverted its expansionary energy into a grim conformity of sacrifice and frugality, revealed poignantly on June 4 when the townspeople refused to attend a circus. The public reserve, exclaimed Mooney, "was almost too good to be true." "This is not a time," he said, "to hand over coin to an unworthy cause."¹⁶

By October the grim conformity had become grimmer. Incredible pressure was brought to bear upon all citizens to purchase Liberty Bonds. On October 10, the *Leader* published the Okanogan County Council of Defence request for the names of those who had not purchased bonds. "We would like very much," said Mooney, "to report all in this district 100 percent American." On October 24, Mooney reported a Forestry Department requirement demanding "satisfactory evidence" of "deserving" citizenship from those wishing "free timber, reserve stock range, or other use permits of the Forest Service." A bond, it seemed, was necessary. "You bought a bond," said a farmer-historian Harry Sherling, "or you were an outcast." Indeed, the Molson Loan and Investment Company, run by bank manager G. B. Avery, an ex-Ontarian and leader of the War Savings Stamp work for the area, was much more willing to provide loans to those who also "wanted" bonds.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Leader*, 4 Jan. 1918.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6 June 1918.

¹⁷ Harry A. Sherling, interview, 26 Aug. 1973, Oroville, Washington. Throughout this study Sherling was a key informant. Important advisor and consultant on the two Molson local histories, founder of the museum "Olde Molson," and active member of the Okanogan County Historical Society, Sherling possesses a comprehensive knowledge of the hill country. See Wilson and Sherling, "Harry Sherling's Own Story," *Okanogan County Heritage*, 16 (Fall 1978): 3-24.

The result was a sudden indebtedness for many. When the war ended the loan drives did not. Evidence suggests, moreover, perhaps because their Canadian friends had engaged in war much longer, and perhaps because many had roots in Canada, that Molsonites contributed more than their share. On 23 January 1919, Mooney announced that Molson had just led the county in the purchase of War Savings Stamps, buying \$20,000 worth, or 135 percent of quota. Not until March was the ban on public functions lifted. In April another loan drive, the fifth, began. Finally, in mid-November 1919, the new editor of the *Leader*, Frank S. Emert, declared his exasperation with the unending "drives and campaigns" which had "lost their popularity." "The people everywhere," he said, "are demanding a rest."¹⁸

A rest was needed from spiralling inflation too. On 25 July 1918, Mooney complained of a 900 percent increase in second-class postal rates, a measure designed to reduce paper consumption. The measure was so successful, he said, that "within the last year 556 newspapers have been forced to close. . . ." In fact three newspapers within a few miles of Molson had gone under recently — the *Phoenix Pioneer*, the *Riverside Argus* and the *Chesaw News*.¹⁹ More important for the general population, food and clothing costs were climbing, sometimes drastically. "Food," said the *Leader*, on 9 July 1919, "is at least 75 percent higher than it was six years ago." The price of cotton yarn, local merchant C. A. Potter showed in May 1920, had increased 516 percent over the prewar price, buttons and trimmings 270 percent, and wool yarn 367 percent.²⁰ More costly and more significant still was the heightened post-war demand for land, spurred by the need to resettle soldiers, by a feeling in many circles that the new era would take up where the old had left off, and by a belief that farm sizes would have to increase to make up for inflation, the inevitable reduction in crop prices, and other problems. In response, land prices jumped. Local historian Harry Sherling has estimated that the approximate value of 160 acres of average land increased from \$3,000 to \$4,000 in 1917 to \$5,000 to \$8,000 in 1920.²¹

To the problem of inflation was added that of economic depression particularly acute in the boundary region. In late October 1918 the Great Northern Railway began proceedings for the withdrawal of their lines

¹⁸ *Leader*, 19 Nov. 1919.

¹⁹ *Chesaw News*, 29 Oct. 1915; 16 June 1916.

²⁰ *Leader*, 12 May 1920.

²¹ Harry Sherling to D. C. Jones, 15 Nov. 1976.

from Phoenix, B.C.²² On 21 November 1918, Molsonites read of the Greenwood smelter closure. On 4 June 1919, the paper reported the closure of Granby mines at Phoenix and the smelter at Grand Forks. The centres which had nourished early Molson farmers were fast shutting down. The consequences for the Molson-Bridesville area were mostly indirect. With the closures along the boundary, and others threatened, the railway began losing money and interest in the whole region.

Accompanying the decline of mining was severe agricultural depression. "The farmer and stockman," said the *Leader* on 10 January 1923, "are suffering from a burden of debt." "Since the war," reported Ralph Budd, President of the GNR, "the railroad business and agriculture have suffered more than any other large industries."²³ In 1924 the railway published a book-length tract reviewing operations for the period from 1916 to 1923. It noted that "perhaps the darkest phase of the situation is that there has been, and still is, more agitation coming from Western territory, where agricultural conditions are still unsatisfactory, than from any other part of the country for reductions of rates."²⁴ From late 1918 to mid-1921, in fact, the Molson *Leader* was brimming with such agitation.

In the Molson-Bridesville country the general problems of agriculture were aggravated by drought. While Mooney had been thankful in 1918 that wheat was \$1.83 a bushel, he noted later that 1917 and 1918 had been decidedly unfavourable crop seasons. Despite the promise of bumper crops and record prices, 1919 was another unfavourable year.²⁵ There was, as well, a serious infestation of locusts in the Molson-Bridesville area.²⁶ When 1920 was unimpressive, Emert felt that 1921 would usher in prosperity. The 1921 crop was only fair — good on some fields, but smaller than the pre-drought harvests. When the 1922 harvest was in, Emert still spoke of "successive discouraging crop years."²⁷ In May 1923, he was convinced that "never in the best crop years of the Molson-

²² Great Northern Railway Presidents' Files 8947, W. P. Kenney to L. W. Hill, 22 Oct. 1918, hereafter GNPF, St. Paul, Minnesota.

²³ *Leader*, 21 Mar. 1923.

²⁴ Great Northern Railway Company, Northern Pacific Railway Company, *A Review of Their Operations in the Period 1916-1923 and a Discussion of Some of Their Most Difficult Problems* (New York: Wood, Struthers and Co., 1924), p. 99.

²⁵ *Leader*, 21 Nov. 1918; 12 May 1919; 5 Nov. 1919.

²⁶ "The Entomological Branch: The Outbreak of Locusts in Western Canada in 1919," *The Agricultural Gazette of Canada*, 7 (Mar. 1920): 220.

²⁷ *Leader*, 5 Jan. 1921; 31 Aug. 1921; 17 Jan. 1923.

Chesaw country was the outlook better."²⁸ "I never saw better grain anywhere any year," exclaimed farmer Sivert Rise, whose harvest yielded 45 bushels an acre.²⁹ Two weeks later the price was an abysmal "82 cents for soft white and 78 for red . . . with the market falling."³⁰

Farmer responses to these conditions varied. Many began to diversify and to rely increasingly on dairying and the sale of cream to creameries in Oroville, Curlew, Okanogan, Everett and Spokane. Even so, the shift was not great enough, according to Frank Emert. "Had the investment in beef and dairy cattle been greater during the drought," he reflected, "the financial conditions of the people here would be much different. . . ."³¹ Secondly, the farmers increased the acreage of fall wheat from 7,347 acres in 1921 to 9,731 acres in 1923.³² Since winter wheat was harvested in August, sometimes late July, when spring wheat was still maturing, this strategy lessened the danger of fierce summer drought.

Thirdly, farmers turned to agencies with collective power to solve their problems. In Bridesville a local of the British Columbia United Farmers sprang up and was active for some years after the war.³³ While the United Farmers never achieved power in B.C. as they did in neighbouring Alberta and in Manitoba and Ontario, they reflected the general agrarian revolt of the period in seeking to improve farming conditions. In Molson, agrarian parties such as the Non-Partisan League never achieved a foothold. The Progressive Grange, a more aggressively socialistic organization than the old body, came to Molson near the start of the war but succeeded in so splitting the Grangers that neither group could survive.³⁴ It was not until 1935, after the town was almost finished, that the Grange was re-established.

Instead, the town relied partly on its community club, established in January 1918, to represent farming and business interests. The community club encouraged the Farm Bureau movement, a new farmer organi-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 May 1923.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 July 1923; 29 Aug. 1923.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19 Sept. 1923.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12 Apr. 1922.

³² *Ibid.*, 29 June; 17 Jan. 1923.

³³ *Wrigley's B.C. Directory 1922* (Vancouver: Wrigley Directories, 1922), p. 402; Wrigley-Henderson, *British Columbia Directory 1924* (Vancouver: Wrigley Directories, 1924), p. 57; *Wrigley's British Columbia Directory 1926* (Vancouver: Wrigley Directories, 1926), pp. 60-61. See also Margaret Ormsby, "The United Farmers of B.C.: An Abortive Thirty Party Movement," *B.C. Historical Quarterly*, XVII (1953): 53-73.

³⁴ Harry A. Sherling interview, 27 Dec. 1978, Oroville, Washington.

zation. As a general object, the Farm Bureau sought "to develop a completely unified national organization to act as spokesman for the farmer. . . ." It proposed "to reestablish agriculture in the public mind as the foremost industry . . . and in the prosecution of which man reaches his highest plane of development," and it pursued vigorously the extension of co-operative marketing.³⁵

By June 1919 Mooney reported the Farm Bureau movement "taking firm hold" in Okanogan County, "the Molson-Chesaw tillers being the first to complete the organizations of their unit."³⁶ By July 1919, the Bureau, in co-operation with the County Agent, the U.S. Bureau of Entomology, the Dominion Entomologist in Ottawa and the Minister of Agriculture in Victoria, was eradicating grasshoppers in the hill country on both sides of the line.³⁷ The Farm Bureau urged Molsonites to revise their farming habits. It drew attention to the Palouse country, south of Spokane, where summer fallowing and crop rotation were practised. Focusing on soil fertility, it discouraged the practice of "putting seed in the ground every year and trusting good luck to bring . . . a favorable year."³⁸

Despite these early concerns, the bureau's energy in the border country was not long sustained. For drought and deepening penury, it soon was clear, the organization had few answers. Molsonites also sought one other means of combining their power in the face of adversity: they tried to incorporate the town. The issue of incorporation grew directly out of a need which the community club had been unable to provide — an efficient light and power system. "It is generally conceded," commented Emert on 15 October 1919, "that only through community ownership can satisfactory plants be established and maintained, and that this could best be brought about by incorporation."

Two weeks later, in the school auditorium at a boisterous hearing before the Public Services Commission, experts recommended a new community-owned system. Early in December local banker G. B. Avery circulated a petition for incorporation which was signed "without any opposition" and forwarded to the county commissioners.³⁹ A referendum and an election of officers was set for December 30. On New Year's Eve

³⁵ Oroville Merton Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement* (New York: MacMillan, 1921), pp. 128-30.

³⁶ *Leader*, 4 June 1919.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 June 1919; 13 Aug. 1919.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 Nov. 1919.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10 Dec. 1919.

the headlines rang out: "Incorporation Won At Yesterday's Election." A slate of officers was elected and the town, Emert stated euphorically, was placed "on a working basis." On 2 January 1920, the *Tonasket Times* in the valley noted enviously that "Molson, our neighbor town in the upper wheatlands is reveling in the joys of its first municipal election."

Unfortunately the joys were short-lived. Because the Board of County Commissioners had not given proper notice, the election was declared void. The town would have to endure an embarrassing second election. On 4 February 1920, the *Leader* announced the second results: another "big majority for incorporation," a different mayor and a different council. Bank manager Avery, elected mayor the first time, refused to run the second time, though he did allow his name to stand for councilman. In this venture he was defeated. Three major businessmen — C. A. Potter, G. Pratt and Avery — were in and now were out. J. F. Dunlap, Potter's major mercantile competitor and a man for whom Potter had little liking, was among the elected. Avery, in many ways the prime mover, could not have been anything but disgruntled — first a mayor and then not even a councilman!

Incorporation had hardly "placed the town on a working basis." Through the unexpected medium of two elections it had divided a town with a tradition of division. For several months the new mayor, Dr. F. A. Tyler, physician and druggist of communities on both sides of the border, chairman of the community club, town booster, sportsman, and perhaps most revered citizen in the hill country, attempted to administer the new town. In this endeavour he was ill-supported, especially by Frank Emert, editor of the *Leader* and one-time champion of incorporation.

The reason for Emert's sudden about-face was that the railroad, fearing increased taxation, contested the second incorporation on the grounds that Emert's notice in the paper outlining the area to be incorporated was incomprehensible. Involving the transposition of two lines in the legal description, the error was common enough in newspaper circles — though that was cool comfort for Emert, who probably sensed, quite correctly, that some locals blamed him for what was happening and even suspected that he was in league with the railway. While the railroad failed to annul the town's charter at the county court level, the state supreme court ruled on 6 October 1921 that since the purpose of giving notice was "to give persons affected by the proposed corporation an opportunity to appear and oppose or favor the incorporation . . . this right is denied them unless they be given notice of the true boundaries of the proposed corpora-

tion.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, the incorporation was set aside. The matter was never again pursued.

In general, attempts by the town to meet the crisis on the land were unsuccessful. That the stabilization of the region, particularly the American side, was not achieved was revealed in several ways. Average farm values and values per acre in Washington declined significantly between 1920 and 1925, the former from \$13,885 to \$9,921 and the latter from \$69.49 to \$57.64.⁴¹ An analysis of land assessment rolls for the area approximating 20,500 acres surrounding the town of Molson confirms these trends. The high point in the assessed value of the land occurred in 1918, followed by a severe drop of 26 percent between 1922 and 1924. The 1924 level was maintained through the twenties, followed by a further drop of 18 percent by 1939.⁴² Across the twenties there was a striking accumulation of land in the hands of mortgage companies such as the Netherlands American Mortgage Bank, Western Union Life Insurance Company, Vermont Loan and Trust, and the Continental Land Company. Even local organizations such as the Oddfellows and the Masons invested in mortgages. In 1918 no land in the area was registered to mortgage companies. In 1924 there were 2,017.7 acres and by 1928, 6,531.42 acres. This development was perhaps the most significant single factor in the economic life of the region. Indeed, 32 percent of the total farm acreage was owned by mortgage companies by 1928.⁴³ Because foreclosure proceedings were often delayed until farmers were irrevocably delinquent and because it took time to register the land in the names of the new owners, the mortgage interests, there was a “lag” factor in these figures. That is, the date when it became clear to the destitute that they would lose their land and when most property turnovers occurred was not 1928 but a few years earlier. Further, since mortgage companies had loaned money for more than the land was worth and since they naturally wished to avoid financial ruin, it became very difficult for farmers to buy mortgaged lands. A significant result was a rise in farm tenancy.⁴⁴

The American records also show a growing list of absentee landlords by 1924 and a remarkable increase in farm sizes after 1918. Regarding

⁴⁰ *Washington Reports*, 117 Wa. 275, State Ex Rel. Great N.R. Co. v. Herschberger, Oct. 1921.

⁴¹ *U.S. Census*, 1940, Agriculture, vol. 1, part 6, p. 537.

⁴² Land Assessment Rolls, Township 40, range 49, County Courthouse, Okanogan, Washington.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Harry A. Sherling interview, 3 Aug. 1976; Sherling to Jones, 26 Jan. 1977.

the latter, the number of farmers holding more than 300 acres in 1918 was 14. By 1922 there were 25; by 1924 there were 30, before a decline to 25 again in 1926, reflecting the losses to mortgagees.⁴⁵ Through all the trauma of land dealing, bankruptcy and foreclosures, it was a measure of the local longing for permanency and a return to a simpler, more comprehensible past that area residents continued to refer to specific land parcels after the names of the original homesteaders, a practice never relinquished.

A similar analysis of British Columbian land assessment rolls for townships 65, 66 and 67, approximating 9,850 acres in the Bridesville area, reveals similarities and differences with the American experience. Assessed land values reached a peak in 1920, followed by a fairly serious drop of about 15 percent by 1924. There were fewer Canadian examples of dramatic fluctuations in land ownership, though land tended to concentrate in the hands of Allan Eddy, customs agent, one of the few salaried people in Bridesville. The number of farmers holding over 300 acres was remarkably constant — 13 or 14 — from 1917 to the late twenties.⁴⁶ Not much land was forfeited through the decade and even into the thirties in Bridesville. As farmer Paul DuMont said, “very few lost their places.”⁴⁷ Generally there was less debt and less land transfer, more stability and more original ownership over time on the Canadian side.⁴⁸

Why this difference occurred was related to the fact that farm sizes were 320 acres to start with on the Canadian side and only 160 acres on the American side. Further, not as high a percentage of Canadians bought cars, which were about 35 percent more costly in Canada.⁴⁹ Canadians, moreover, never experienced in their own country the easy money which was available during and just after the war in Molson. Forming a bank was a relatively simple matter south of the line. “A man with some capital or who had some friends who wanted to invest in a venture,” said the Molson community history sardonically, “would hire a friend who had a little experience in office work, rent a corner in someone’s place of business, put in a desk and chair and behold a bank was started! . . . The men in charge of these banks seldom had any real training in banking principles, nor did they seem to realize the responsibility of

⁴⁵ Land Assessment Rolls, Township 40, range 49.

⁴⁶ Kettle Valley Land Assessment Rolls, Townships 65, 66, 67, Bridesville region, Provincial Archives, Victoria, B.C.

⁴⁷ Paul DuMont interview, 23 Dec. 1976, Osoyoos, B.C.

⁴⁸ Fred Schorn interview, 24 Dec. 1976, Osoyoos, B.C.

⁴⁹ Harry A. Sherling interview, 26 Dec. 1976, Oroville, Washington.

their position — that they were to perform a service and that the rise or fall of the community depended upon their judgement and experience.”⁵⁰

TABLE 1
Land Reverting to Mortgage Companies 1918-1928

Township 40 Range 49 Molson
(Total area: 20,500 acres approximately)

1918	0 acres
1922	362.84 acres
1924	2,081.70 acres
1926	5,004.04 acres
1928	6,531.42 acres

Source: Land assessment rolls, Okanogan, Washington.

Because Washington State law forbade banks from making direct loans on real estate, the Molson State Bank, wrote Sherling, “organized the Molson Loan and Investment Company, same building, same people.”⁵¹ The bank then loaned money to the loan company which took mortgages on the land. Since the bank could not handle all the financing, the loan company sold mortgages to virtually anyone who wanted them. The result was far more speculation and wheeling and dealing on the American side. Paul DuMont, a Bridesville farmer, recalled his brother’s failure to obtain a \$5,000 loan from the Royal Bank in Grand Forks, B.C., a branch he dealt with regularly and to which he could offer substantial security in logs. In Canada, DuMont said, “you had to give your soul to get five dollars.” Undaunted, the brother went to Molson and “in two or three minutes” had his loan with no security asked and no guarantor given.⁵²

That the Molson State Bank was in trouble by 1924 perhaps only manager Avery knew. Signs existed — the Commercial Bank had been forced out of neighbouring Chesaw into Molson, deposits had dropped from \$230,000 in 1919 to \$188,000 in 1923, and the bank stopped advertising for a time in 1923 — but few people expected disaster.⁵³ With

⁵⁰ *Echoes*, p. 102.

⁵¹ Sherling to Jones, 9 Jan. 1977.

⁵² Paul DuMont interviews, 23 Dec. 1976; 2 Sept. 1973, Osoyoos, B.C.

⁵³ *Echoes*, p. 88.

disbelief on Thursday morning, 27 March 1924, the town viewed the bank's closed doors.⁵⁴ The pleas of directors Tyler, Ragen and McDowell that they too did not understand were inexcusable and comfortless.⁵⁵ Their reputations, however, saved them from the cloud of mistrust which hung over Avery, the slick and urbane promoter who now departed for Seattle where a similar unsettled future as head of public utilities awaited him.

Many Canadians were affected by the closure, especially those who had cows and shipped cream to Molson.⁵⁶ Most Americans lost money, though the experience varied. The night before the bank closed farmer H. R. Schmidt deposited \$1,100, but because the transaction was not recorded the money was returned.⁵⁷ Not so lucky was farmer Albert Brune. The same night he borrowed \$800, deposited the sum, and had to repay the loan in full.⁵⁸

The bank failure epitomized the calamity which befell the Molson country and many other agrarian communities in the early twenties. The natural accompaniment of the rise in farm forfeitures, farm sizes, farm tenancy, absentee ownership and the collapse of financial institutions was large-scale depopulation, considerable decline in business establishments, failure to rebuild after the omnipresent town fires, and concerted railway attempts to abandon the area.

An analysis of the census, Molson district school reports and the Molson precinct voter register reveals that both the percentage of population loss and the total population loss between 1920 and 1930 exceeded that lost between 1930 and 1940, the former marginally but the latter considerably. Between 1920 and 1930 Molson precinct lost 257 people from a total of 668; over the next decade the loss was only 157.⁵⁹ From 1917 to 1940 school enrolment in the highland districts declined from the all-time high of 464 in 1917 to 175 in 1940, reflecting a drop of 222 up to 1930 compared with a drop of only 67 over the next decade.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Oroville *Gazette*, 28 Mar. 1924.

⁵⁵ Harry A. Sherling interview, 15 May 1975, Oroville, Washington.

⁵⁶ Fred Schorn interview, 24 Dec. 1976, Osoyoos, B.C.

⁵⁷ Harry A. Sherling interview, 23 Aug. 1976, Oroville, Washington.

⁵⁸ Clara Staples interview, 23 Aug. 1976, Molson, Washington. After an audit the depositors received 48 percent (*Echoes*, p. 88).

⁵⁹ *U.S. Census*, 1940, vol. 1, p. 1128. In 1940 the town population was returned separately for the only time — 81, down from perhaps 450 in 1918.

⁶⁰ County Superintendent Annual School Reports, Okanogan County, Okanogan, Washington.

TABLE 2
*Molson Region Population Including
 Tributary U.S. Territory 1920-1940*

<i>Precinct</i>	<i>1920</i>	<i>1930</i>	<i>1940</i>
Molson	668	411	254
Chesaw	278	202	177
Kipling	263	167	125
Havillah	206	202	157

Source: U.S. Census 1940, vol. 1, p. 1128.

Significantly, most of the decline occurred between 1917 and 1924. Given the developments enumerated in this paper, this does not seem surprising. The county superintendent's annual school reports provide, besides enrolment, the number of census children from before 1917 to 1932. In the hill districts tributary to Molson the number of census children in 1918 was 555, the most for any year; in 1924 it was 333. This represented a decline over the drought years of 40 percent. Between 1925 and 1932 the number of census children was remarkably constant, varying from 370 in 1928 to 305 in 1932.⁶¹ That most of the decline occurred in the first half of the twenties was further supported by the voter register for Molson precinct, which showed a decline of 35 percent, much like that in the numbers of census children. Moreover, the number of businessmen on the register dropped from seventy-one in 1920 to thirty-five in 1924.⁶² These figures are corroborated by a comparison of the number and size of ads in the *Leader* in the week before Christmas in 1919 and again in 1923. The former issue contained sixty-one large ads and thirteen small, while four years later there were only twenty-four large ads and ten small ones.⁶³ Also, while the number of ads from outside Molson remained fairly stable, their percentage increased steadily.

Population trends in the Bridesville region seemed to parallel the Molson figures, but with a lag of a few years and a decline far less drastic. The lag reflected the way most trends on the land — for example, the shift into wheat during the war, then more mixed farming, and later more beef cattle — first appeared in the major centre and were then cop-

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Voter Registry, Molson Precinct, Okanogan County, Okanogan, Washington.

⁶³ *Leader*, 19 Dec. 1919; 19 Dec. 1923.

ied by the Canadians. The "softer" decline was caused by the economic factors described earlier. No census data exists relating specifically to the Bridesville area, but school enrolment increased from forty-eight in 1917-18 to a high of seventy-nine in 1921-22, before declining to forty-one in 1929-30. The period of peak enrolment ran from 1920-21 to 1923-24.⁶⁴ Consistent with this trend, entries in *Wrigley's B.C. Directory* for Bridesville suggest that the population may have peaked in the same period. In 1924, 109 citizens were registered compared to fifty-five for 1920 and seventy-nine for 1928 and 1936.⁶⁵ These figures notwithstanding, what must have been increasingly clear to Bridesville citizens throughout the early twenties was that their neighbours were experiencing unprecedented distress, and that the town they shared was slipping badly.

Fires hurried the decline and deepened the demoralization. The Molson Hotel burned on 3 July 1922, and the elegant Tonasket Hotel, remembered since the mining days, burned on 30 July 1923, leaving the town without first-class accommodation.⁶⁶ The American — or Dunn — Theatre was destroyed on 1 May 1924, as was the Molson Theatre on August 10.⁶⁷ Even before the last two blazes, a discouraged editor, Frank Emert, recent emigrant to Oroville, noted "the mute evidence of . . . disastrous fires which have completely wiped out several of our most needed and important business houses and industries." Regarding a recent blaze, he said that had the wind been different, "nothing would have saved the town."⁶⁸ Beaten by flames in the streets and attrition in the fields, Frank Emert, like many others, was through. On 2 January 1924, the *Leader* consolidated with the Oroville *Gazette* and left Molson forever. Barring an increase in businesses and population, Emert said, "no one can publish a creditable newspaper in Molson without incurring . . . a loss."

Caught by the same forces, the railway tried repeatedly to curtail service and then to abandon it altogether.⁶⁹ News of rate increases, service cutbacks and the town's opposition dominated the paper after 1918. In November 1926 W. P. Kenney, the Great Northern Railway director of

⁶⁴ British Columbia, *Annual Reports of the Public Schools*, 1918-30.

⁶⁵ *Wrigley's British Columbia Directory* 1920, p. 115; *British Columbia Directory* 1924, p. 57; *Wrigley's British Columbia Directory* 1928, pp. 223-24; *The British Columbia and Yukon Directory*, 1936, p. 85.

⁶⁶ *Leader*, 5 July 1922; 1 Aug. 1923.

⁶⁷ Oroville *Gazette*, 15 Aug. 1924.

⁶⁸ *Leader*, 12 Sept. 1923.

⁶⁹ See David C. Jones, "The Strategy of Railroad Abandonment: The Great Northern in Washington and British Columbia, 1917-1935," *Western Historical Quarterly* XI (Apr. 1980): 140-158.

traffic and future president, reported that "Molson is becoming smaller. It has dwindled down to 150 people. The two mercantile establishments have consolidated into one." "Wheat shipments from Molson," he noted, "vary from 100 to 150 cars per season" with another "40 to 50 cars from Bridesville."⁷⁰ If this were tonnage enough to warrant rail service, it was not enough to maintain the long and heavily trestled track over the unproductive section west of Molson.

By the end of 1926 the railway had prepared an application to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to have the line from Molson to Oroville torn up.⁷¹ The application recorded the railway's disappointment with the failure of through and local traffic between Spokane and Vancouver, the collapse of mining operations along the boundary, the limited tillable lands along the line, and the discontinuance of logging in the highlands.⁷² With the advent of logging trucks, the improvement of hill roads, and the better milling conditions in the Okanogan Valley, lumbering concerns too were leaving the mountain country.

Since the Great Northern wished to sell its line to the Kettle Valley Railroad, the submission of the application to the ICC was delayed until May 1930, a short interval including one bumper crop and a dream, fleeting and ironic, that hard times were at last over.⁷³ When the railroad finally acted, the locals banded behind Dr. F. A. Tyler, chairman of Molson Citizens' Committee, and J. M. Johnson, chairman of Oroville Chamber of Commerce, and signed a petition of 150 from the Molson country opposing the abandonment and requesting a formal hearing. Loss of taxes, the locals recognized, would impoverish two school districts and greatly inconvenience Molson shippers.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, on 17 April 1931 the abandonment was granted. Dismantling began in the week of 22 April 1932, and by early summer it was finished.⁷⁵

In December 1932 the railway began steps to remove the track east of Molson, through Bridesville to Curlew. "The farming country entirely tributary to Molson," said GNR General Agent Doyle, "is going down hill fast. There are probably as many abandoned farms as operating ones,

⁷⁰ GNPf 8254, W. P. Kenney to C. O. Jenks, 21 Nov. 1926.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, F. G. Dorety to C. O. Jenks, 24 Dec. 1926.

⁷² *Ibid.*, F. G. Dorety to C. O. Jenks, 31 Dec. 1926.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, F. G. Dorety to Geo. B. McGinty, 24 May 1930.

⁷⁴ Oroville *Gazette*, 15 Aug. 1930; GNPf 8254, C. R. Lonergan to Thomas Balmer, 19 June 1930.

⁷⁵ GNPf 8254, F. G. Dorety to R. Budd, 29 Apr. 1931; Oroville *Gazette*, 22 Apr. 1932.

and the grain prospect for the coming year is anything but encouraging." Livestock had "drifted with the general farming conditions to where what movement there is, is trucked in small lots to Tonasket and Oroville." A truck service was bringing inbound merchandise from Tonasket daily. And, significantly, there was "no tonnage inbound or outbound from Bridesville." Everything was "moving through Rock Creek, B.C. on the CPR. . . ."⁷⁶

Considering that Bridesville had been shipping forty to fifty cars as late as 1926, the shift was striking. As Molson businesses declined and the new Okanagan Valley communities of Oliver and Osoyoos began to provide markets, Bridesville's orientation became less north-south and more east-west. Developments in the B.C. forest policy accelerated this trend. Seeking to encourage local industry, the provincial government prevented the export of raw timber from Crown lands and heavily taxed that from private lands.⁷⁷ These measures helped close the large Porter Brothers' Sawmill, on a GNR spur just west of Molson. Employing over a hundred men at times, the American mill unfortunately had most of its timber reserve on the Canadian side. More important for the region's basic economy was the post-war depression and its troublesome offspring — the excessive American tariff of 1922 on Canadian goods moving south. The very high tariff of both countries in 1930 further fractured the international link and encouraged trading more exclusively at home.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ GNPF 8254, quoted in H. H. Brown to W. P. Kenney, 29 Dec. 1932. At this time, before federal farm relief, groups of cattlemen bought huge sections of land for 50 cents an acre, foreshadowing the shift into extensive cattle raising in the 1940s and beyond (Sherling interview, 3 Aug. 1976).

⁷⁷ Benjamin H. Williams, *Economic Foreign Policy of the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1929), pp. 383-84.

⁷⁸ For a review of American tariffs in the period see F. W. Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967), ch. IX, X, XI; T. W. Tomlinson, "The United States Tariff Act of 1922," *The Farm and Ranch Review* 10 (June 1927), pp. 8, 12-13. For a review of Canadian tariffs since the Customs Tariff of 1907 see Canada, "The Customs Tariff and Amendments with Index to Sept. 8, 1930" and Canada, "The Customs Tariff and Amendments with Index to Aug. 21, 1936."

The U.S. Tariff Act of 1922 was the highest in history. Wheat was dutiable at 30 cents a bushel, rye 15 cents, and beef 3 cents a pound — increases respectively over the Tariff Act of 1909 of 5 cents, 5 cents, and 1½ cents. Canadian responses occurred largely in 1930 when the tariff on wheat increased from 12 cents a bushel to 30 cents, on oats from 10 cents a bushel to 16 cents, on rye from 10 cents a bushel to 15 cents, and on butter from 7 cents a pound to 14 cents. With these rates it was not surprising that, small-scale smuggling aside, Canadian products were generally shipped to Canadian markets, often in Vancouver but also in the Okanagan and West Kootenays, and American markets were in Spokane, Seattle and the Okanagan.

These quirks of the border boded ill for Molson and the railway. Nonetheless, in early 1933 L. C. Gilman, railroad advisor, wrote St. Paul suggesting a deferment for "about one year" in the abandonment, since at the earlier hearing there had been "considerable testimony" that Molson still retained an outlet via Spokane. Gilman estimated that "in another year this abandonment would be accomplished without any serious opposition."⁷⁹ The advice, taken by the railroad hierarchy, proved to be correct. When a Bridesville group attended a hearing, railway officials told them that the station's revenue was not enough to pay for the ice and coal oil in the building. "They made us feel as though we were very unreasonable in demanding the line's retention," said Fred Schorn, who took the minutes of the meeting. "They made us feel quite ridiculous."⁸⁰

When the application for abandonment was presented to the Interstate Commerce Commission in mid-July 1934, it revealed a reduction in tonnage forwarded from 15,675 tons in 1929 to only 491 tons in 1933. Tonnage received dropped from 737 tons in 1929 to only 52 tons in 1933. Passenger tickets to and from Molson totalled 1,517 in 1929 and only 50 in 1933.⁸¹ When the abandonment case was heard in Spokane on September 21, no one from the boundary protested.⁸² On 28 February 1935 operations east of Molson were discontinued.⁸³

Amid this precipitous descent fires broke out again and again. It was widely believed that some were deliberately set. With properties valued at a pittance and profitable existence in the hill country unlikely, insurance offered some consolation to desperate men. Among those remaining there was often resentment for any schemer who would level his holdings and render the country, again drought-ridden, even more parched and pitiable. One evening after the railroad had left, flames leapt into the sky over Bridesville. It was the Great Northern station. Of those who watched there was at least one man who laughed a bitter, sardonic laugh and who suspected for the rest of his days the unseen hand of an admitted enemy, Allan Eddy, the new owner of the GNR right-of-way and station.

The thirties finished the disintegration that was underway in the previous decade. The Chamberlain garage closed in 1928 and Van Leuvan's lumberyard burned in 1929. W. F. McKee's harness shop closed in 1930

⁷⁹ GNPF 8254, L. C. Gilman to P. H. Burnham, 11 Jan. 1933.

⁸⁰ Fred Schorn interview, 23 Aug. 1973, Osoyoos, B.C.

⁸¹ GNPF 8254, George H. Hess, Jr. to C. O. Jenks, 27 June 1934.

⁸² *Ibid.*, F. G. Dorety to W. P. Kenney, 25 Sept. 1934.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, C. O. Jenks to W. P. Kenney, 26 Jan. 1935.

and the Molson Union elevator, largest and most important in the hill country, burned in 1932. The McDonald Hale warehouse operated until 1932 and was dismantled in 1934.⁸⁴ In the summer of 1933 two community leaders, outstanding farmers and long-time residents, J. C. McDowell and Ira Sanger, died within a week.⁸⁵ R. F. McCoy moved his dry goods and groceries store to Tonasket in 1935, the Houtz hotel closed in the late thirties, and the Molson Mercantile Dunlap Department store was discontinued in 1937.⁸⁶ Outlying school districts, long part of Molson consolidation, began reorienting themselves toward the Okanogan Valley. In 1932 Circle consolidated with Oroville and five years later Havillah began sending high school students to Tonasket.⁸⁷ In 1940 Dr. Tyler, the moving spirit of Molson, attending physician at the births of scores of hill children on both sides of the line, resident since 1908 and one-time mayor, suffered a heart attack and departed a broken man.⁸⁸ At very nearly the same time the international border crossing between Bridesville and Molson was permanently closed.⁸⁹

Molson never recovered. Its fall had been brought about primarily by external factors — the war, mechanization, inflation, depression and drought. These factors, of course, were common to the Canadian-American west. Why Molson succumbed while other communities survived was related to the post-war drought, which was generally more severe than that elsewhere, except in regions like the Alberta dry belt, where the disintegration was also lasting. Additionally, two other factors existed. The first was the town's location on the plateau above the Okanogan Valley, potentially, at least, a comparative Eden — warmer, milder, and increasingly irrigated. Over the years the mountain people poured into the valley in their respective countries, some to start anew, others to retire. A more crucial aspect of location perhaps was the border itself, which was rendered increasingly impenetrable by a monumental tariff wall, constructed first by Americans and later by Canadians. The

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, H. H. Brown to W. P. Kenney, 29 Dec. 1932; *Echoes*, pp. 58, 59, 104.

⁸⁵ *Oroville Gazette*, 21 July 1933.

⁸⁶ *Echoes*, pp. 55, 56.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 126.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60. Tyler deeply regretted the decline of Molson, a factor which may have aggravated the breakdown of his health in the thirties.

⁸⁹ R. Raymond to D. C. Jones, 13 Dec. 1974. Raymond was Regional Commissioner, Department of the Treasury, U.S. Customs Service, San Francisco. See also Herbert Legg, *Customs Services in Western Canada 1867-1925, A History* (Creston, B.C.: Creston Review, 1962), pp. 32-33. Legg was District Inspector of Customs of the area including Bridesville.

result was the gradual elimination of the town's Canadian hinterland. Generally inimical to the town's best interests, the border, once taken seriously, benefited few except the rum runners and the customs agents. The truncation of the trade area left a region, already small to begin with, even smaller. With the enormous farms emerging from the thirties the restricted population was less able to support a town.

The second factor was the irreversible damage suffered by much of the adjoining boundary country during and after the war. Casting the entire region in a bad light, it discouraged developers and new businesses and dismayed the railroad. Unabated GNR attempts throughout the twenties and thirties to reduce service worried businessmen and farmers alike and doubtlessly figured in any assessment of the region's prospects. The railroad's blockage of the incorporation, moreover, suggested that its best interests and those of the town were not the same. Hamstringing the community's effort to organize itself in the face of adversity, the railway's interference came at a crucial juncture. By the time the court decision was rendered much of the town's energy had drained away.

The failure to incorporate, however, cannot be laid solely or even primarily at the GNR door. Very clearly there were internal difficulties which also shaped the town's fate, not the least of which was a problem of leadership. Nowhere was there any sustained economic direction. The divided loyalties between the old and the new sections frustrated coordination. When citizens and county officials organized the incorporation, they botched it badly. Even more serious was the gross mismanagement of the bank and allied fiscal institutions. Had Canadian banks controlled the community purse, no doubt their more cautious leadership would have stultified the lively American enterprise — but it also would have shortened the sweep of social dislocation and prevented the outright ruin of many.

As for the people themselves, there was little excuse for the careless manner in which so many, trusting and hopeful, participated in the economic calamity, but it was perhaps understandable. The bumper crops of 1915 and 1916 and the high prices had been the lure. The town's reaction to the vast economic processes set in motion — a stress on cooperation and modern scientific farming — was typical of the period, save perhaps for its half-heartedness and lack of cohesive resolution. The reaction failed entirely to stabilize the region, and economic disintegration was the result, complete with increased absenteeism, tenancy, foreclosure and depopulation. For all its history, Molson had been a town for Canadians and Americans. By 1930 it was a shadow of its former self. A

decade later the border was sealed and even the shadow was fast disappearing.

Over the next thirty years Molson became all but a ghost town. The farmers, once the centre's principal support, grew old, and when their sons would not replace them they sold out. In the town only a handful of residents remained by the eighties — without businesses, services, post office, or even a school.