

“A Picture of Prosperity”: The British Columbia Interior in Promotional Photography, 1890-1914

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The development of photo-reproduction technology in the latter half of the nineteenth century made possible the presentation of innumerable images to a very large audience. To the Europeans of the time, reproductions of photographs were instrumental in forming strong new impressions of distant places. “In the nineteenth century, an age voracious for information, the camera immediately became its travelling eye.”¹

On 30 October 1869, the *Canadian Illustrated News* published the first photographic halftone, the product of a delicate process of chemical applications, washes, raised wax plates and molds.² Subscribers saw the photograph reproduced, however crudely, in its true likeness, a remarkable technical phenomenon with great potential in the publishing world. Halftones were soon common features of pictorial newspapers such as the *Illustrated London News*, *Harper's Weekly* and *The Graphic*, as well as of books and other forms of printed material.

Of course, illustrated books were published in Europe and in North America long before the appearance of halftone technology. Engravings of landscapes frequently supplemented descriptions of foreign lands. Sketches from the field were used as the basis for intricate and detailed wood engravings. When photographic equipment achieved a certain degree of portability, it was possible to replace the “on-location” drawings with photographs, which supplied a great deal more visual information about the setting, as well as a greater variety of images. Eventually, photographic images were projected directly onto the engraver's block.³ Even though they may have been based on photographs, these engravings were still products of an artist's interpretation, including the option to add, omit or embellish features. Many of the engravings were — and are

¹ Gus Macdonald, *Camera Victorian Eyewitness, A History of Photography: 1826-1913* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), p. 34.

² Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell, *Canadian Photography, 1839-1920* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), p. 167.

³ *Ibid.*

— fine works of art, but the Victorians did not grant them the same degree of credibility that they did photographs.

The general belief that the photograph could only depict reality was an assumption used by many to make particular gains. Most readers were probably unaware of the highly interpretive nature of the published photograph. Photographic content was determined by the critical eye of the photographer and selected to suit the business ends of the publisher. The camera angle and position were undoubtedly given great consideration, as were the lenses and printing methods. Every step involved some degree of interpretation.

British Columbia was shown in the illustrated press of the late nineteenth century from an optimistic perspective. The image of the region as a vibrant new land of prosperity and opportunity was being firmly implanted in the European mind. While it is difficult to assess the degree to which photographs per se influenced contemporary impressions of British Columbia, it is equally difficult to deny the influence of the camera or overlook the selectivity with which it portrayed the province.

By the mid-1890s, immigration to British Columbia and the resulting land boom were growing in momentum. The movement west which had begun in earnest with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway reached its peak in the first decade of this century. Throughout this period, real estate was a prevailing interest. Everyone was concerned with land: where to buy it, who was selling it, how to exploit it and what profits were to be made from it. Immigration and the land boom were interdependent; the lure of usable land brought in new settlers who created a demand and kept the market competitive.

British Columbia's potential was aggressively publicized by the federal and provincial governments, municipal boards of trade, agricultural associations and railway and steamship companies, as well as numerous land companies. They generated a large body of promotional material directed at both individual and commercial interests, across Canada and abroad. While the material took many forms, photographs were nearly always an integral part.

The Canadian Pacific Railway produced handsome "photographic view albums" emphasizing the scenic beauties visible from the main line. Boards of trade promoted specific locales through illustrated brochures which were also favoured vehicles of the real estate companies. European and American visitors published travelogues which were often illustrated with photographs. Postcards, created by both the amateur and the professional photographer, appeared in profusion. Thousands must have

been sent to eastern Canada and Great Britain. Government agencies published guides and literature for immigrants and settlers, drawing on the services of many professional photographers.

Regardless of the source or format of these materials, the text and illustrations usually exhibit the optimistic attitude of the times. The positive and attractive qualities of the province are continually and clearly emphasized. Outright deception would appear to be quite rare; negative aspects are generally ignored rather than misrepresented. As an American investor allegedly said about a town in the interior, "there is no excuse for anyone enlarging on the facts, and the hard thing is to endeavor to conceal one's enthusiasm while telling the truth."⁴

Much of the promotional literature endeavours to conceal its enthusiasm with carefully worded claims of veracity. An example can be found in one of the earliest photographically illustrated land brochures, published in Vancouver about 1892: "This little book is devoted to the interests of the country which its pages profess to describe. An effort has been made to do it justice, without exaggeration, or statements calculated to mislead. There are frequent pictorial illustrations, which give to the eye as clear a conception of the general character of the country as can very well be obtained without a personal visit."⁵

Some publications take even greater pains: "The following pages will tell of Summerland. The statements made therein are carefully considered and they are presented as reliable. To make unreliable statements here would be as unwise as unjust, since a misled and disgruntled citizen is a poor asset to have in any community."⁶

On the other hand, many publications state their bias blatantly and without qualification: "The climate of British Columbia presents as a whole all the conditions which are met with in European countries lying within the temperate zone, the cradle of the greatest nations of the world and is therefore the climate best adapted to the development of the human race."⁷

This latter attitude is frequently implied by the photographs in land promotion material. The photographs themselves are varied in content,

⁴ Summerland Trust Company advertisement for "fruit lots" at Naramata in: Summerland Board of Trade, *Summerland in the Sunny Okanagan Valley*, *British Columbia* (Summerland: Review Publishing Company, 1909).

⁵ Okanagan Land and Development Company Limited, *Land of the Okanagan*, *British Columbia* (Vancouver: Daily Telegram Print, n.d., [c. 1892]), p. i.

⁶ *Summerland in the Sunny Okanagan Valley*, p. 5.

⁷ Grand Pacific Land Company Limited, *Kelowna British Columbia* (Winnipeg, [c. 1912]), n.p.

but the recurring elements are predictable. There are countless images reflecting the Victorian fascination with scenic beauty. One common composition is the wide panoramic landscape which generally includes a mild parklike foreground and a mountainous backdrop. Townsites are usually shown as peaceful inclusions in these sweeping vistas (see Plate I). Pleasant weather in favourable seasons is the norm; climatic extremes are rarely shown except within a recreational context. The harsh temperatures and snows of winter appear only as opportunities for sleigh rides and skating parties.

Topographical extremes are dealt with in a similar fashion. Rugged terrain, when shown, is pictured in a manner acceptable to the Victorian eye. "To the central Canadian and immigrant Englishman, the mountains were merely an intriguing landscape novelty."⁸ The semi-arid aspect of the southern Interior is carefully avoided. In fact, an unappealing view like the Similkameen Fruit Land Company photo captioned "Sage Brush Land on Company's Property"⁹ is a startling departure from the norm. In other published views, undeveloped land is presented as being ultimately productive. In a brochure about Kaleden,¹⁰ pictures of forested acreage are referred to as the future townsite and potential orchards.

Most books and pamphlets feature views expressing the benefits of domesticating the west. The land is shown in its most attractive stages — as a promising expanse of young crops in the spring, or as the provider of plenty in the fall. Farm owners and their employees are pictured in their best attire as if no labour has been required (see Plate II). A sense of success, community and healthy competition is expressed in photographs of agricultural exhibitions and prize-winning produce. The products of other industries such as mining, ranching and logging are shown in equal abundance: vast cattle herds roam across the photographs, and stacked lumber awaits the builder. The many ingenious schemes for collecting and distributing water are displayed with considerable pride by the real estate companies. In a brochure about the settlement of Walhachin,¹¹ the extensive irrigation works are prominently featured. This is

⁸ Maria Tippet and Douglas Cole, *From Desolation to Splendour: Changing Perceptions of the British Columbia Landscape* (Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Company Limited, 1977), p. 49.

⁹ Similkameen Fruit Land Company Limited, *The Similkameen Valley, B.C.* (Winnipeg, n.d.), p. 10.

¹⁰ [Summerland Land Company], *Kaleden (Beautiful Eden), Southern Okanagan, B.C.* (n.d.).

¹¹ British Columbia Horticultural Estates Limited, *Walhachin, British Columbia* (Victoria, [c. 1913]).

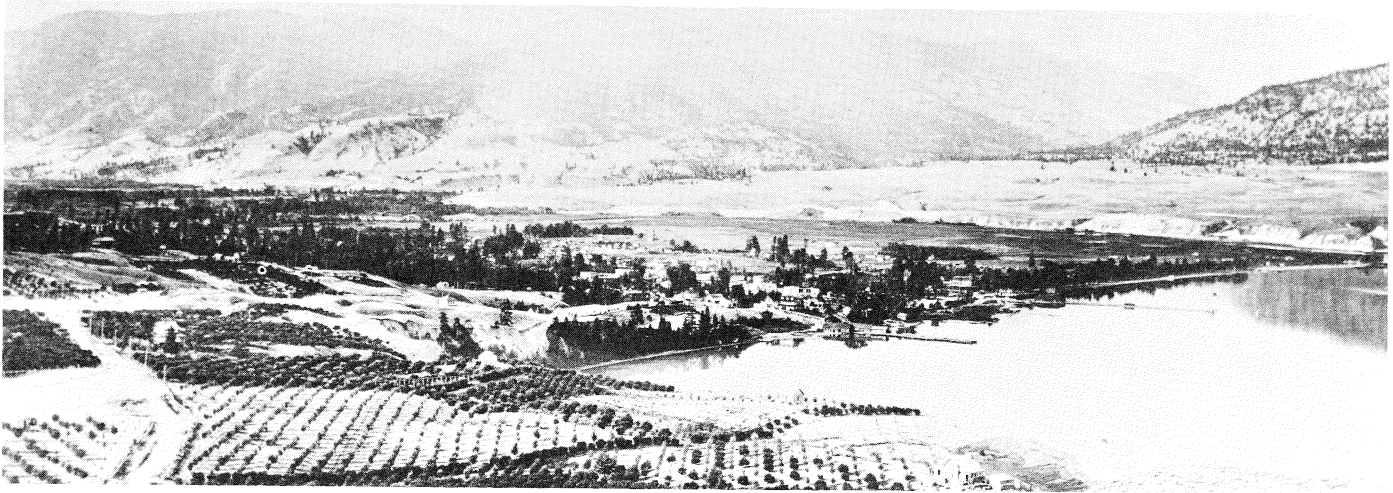


PLATE I. *Panoramic view of Penticton, 1912.* (R. N. Atkinson Museum, Penticton; print courtesy of *Sound Heritage Series*, Sound and Moving Image Division, Provincial Archives of British Columbia)



PLATE II. *Young orchards at Okanagan Centre.* (Kelowna Centennial Museum; print courtesy of *Sound Heritage*)

especially ironic in light of the fact that the collapse of this system spelled the end for Walhachin.

Even though much of British Columbia was still uninhabited, the majority of photographs in promotional literature give an impression of accessibility. Modes of transportation are emphasized as evidence of progress and links to civilization. It is not uncommon to see a railway track running across one section of a photograph or in fact dominating the image (see Plate III). In addition, the steamboats that served the inland and coastal waters of the province are frequently depicted. Photos showing enthusiastic crowds greeting the arrival of a steamboat stress the importance of connections to the outside world (see Plate IV).

Other indications of progress and prosperity can be found in photographs of the growing communities. Public buildings such as schools, hospitals and churches are reflections of civic pride. Scenes of neat streets, sidewalks and attractive storefronts are similarly used. The handsome homes of successful individuals are presented as the norm, creating an illusion of general affluence. An obvious example is a photo of a large two-storey house with the caption, "A Fruit Rancher's Comfortable Home."¹² In later publications, amenities like automobiles begin to appear as symbols of individual wealth and general progress.

Promotional literature is quick to point out the richness and variety of social life in the settlements. People are usually shown in groups and engaged in such recreational activities as picnics, riding, boating or skating (see Plate V). These diversions characterize the carefree atmosphere that was supposed to prevail in the colonies, an atmosphere particularly attractive to vigorous young immigrants.

The optimistic image presented in promotional photographs is reinforced by the format of the booklets in which they appear. To this end, layout, typography, captions and other elements have been carefully chosen. One publisher went to the expense of bordering each page of a booklet with coloured screened drawings of community activities.¹³ These intricate drawings provide as much information about the prospective lifestyle as the photographs do themselves. Every positive aspect of the community is included. On each page the copy describes the land, the photograph verifies the reality of the description and the decorative border provides supplementary details which underline the general theme.

¹² Department of the Interior, *British Columbia: Canada's Land of Promise on the Pacific* (Ottawa, 1913), p. 15.

¹³ *Kelowna, British Columbia*, n.p.

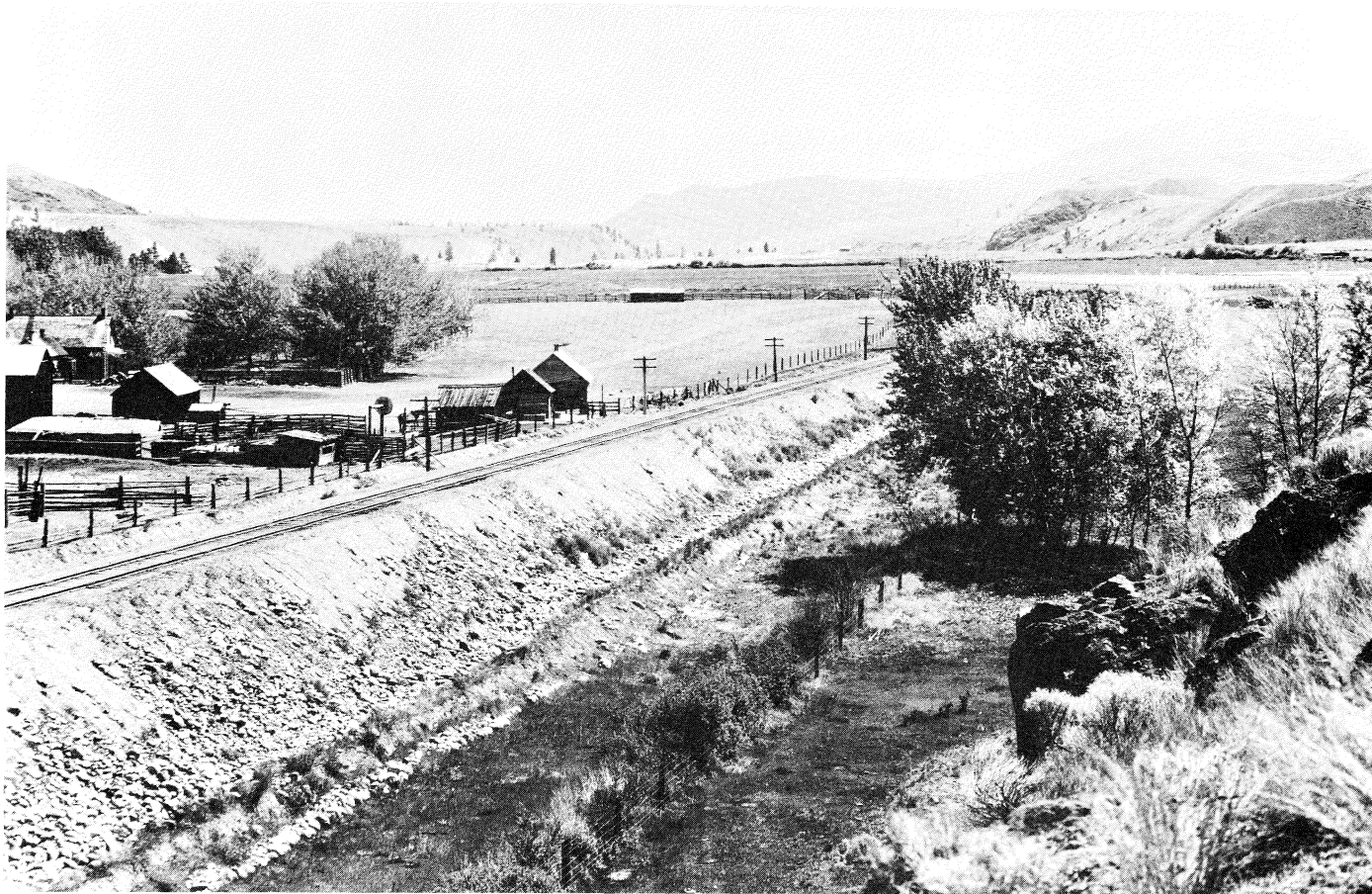


PLATE III. *Looking east from the ranch house [Walhachin] (74360).*

COURTESY OF THE PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

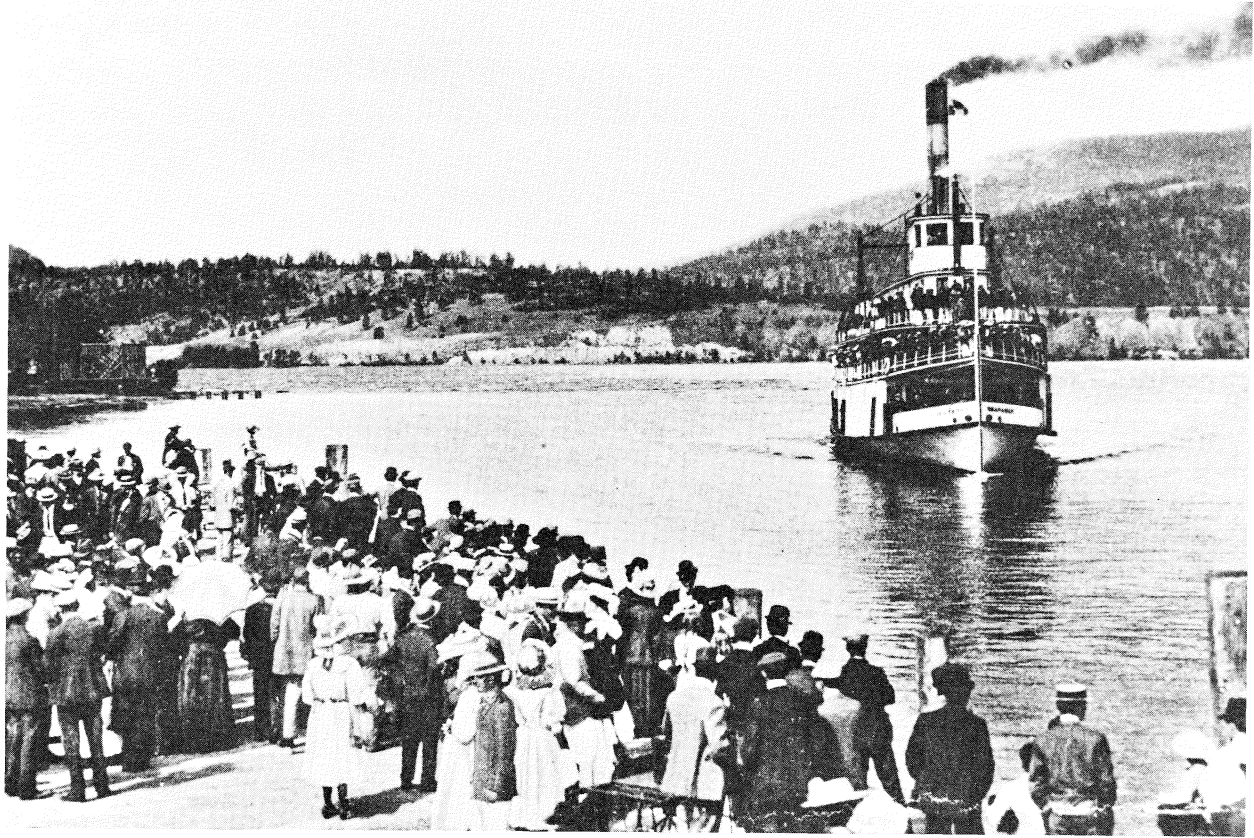


PLATE IV. *S.S. Okanagan arriving at Kelowna wharf, 1909.*

COURTESY OF THE KELOWNA CENTENNIAL MUSEUM



PLATE V. *Kelowna Park, Regatta Day, 1909.*

COURTESY OF THE KELOWNA CENTENNIAL MUSEUM

Of course, this is an extreme and singular example; the publishers were usually more subtle in their approach to design.

Another type of page design frequently used involves groupings of photographs with common subject matter. These groupings supposedly present varying perspectives of one central idea, but in fact they are carefully designed to portray only the most attractive elements of the idea.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the published photographs are in a horizontal format, corresponding to the shape of the pamphlets in which they appear. Wide expanses of land are ideally pictured in this format. The most striking examples are the pages which unfold into wide panoramic views — a popular design technique (see Plate VI).

The captions used with photographs in land brochures are extremely important in conveying desired impressions. Many captions are matter-of-fact descriptions — place names, dates and so on. Others are general statements which present the photograph as an image indicative of common conditions. For instance, “A Picture of Prosperity”¹⁴ is printed under a photo of a well-laid-out orchard (see Plate VII) and “A Money Maker,”¹⁵ under a tree laden with fruit. In extreme cases, the captions deal in generalizations which actually serve to distort the meaning of the photograph. The caption of one photograph reads “Showing part of Main Street and some of Kelowna’s autos.”¹⁶ The same photo appears elsewhere captioned “Delegates to the Sixth Annual Convention of the Western Canada Irrigation Association, held in August 1912 at Kelowna, starting out on a sightseeing trip”¹⁷ (see Plate VIII). While the first caption is not an outright lie, the reader is certainly led to believe that the scene is more typical than it actually is.

The “picture of prosperity” depicted through the selective eye of promotional photography is far from being a comprehensive view of British Columbia. Perhaps more significant than the subjects illustrated are those which are conspicuous by their absence. For example, the popular enthusiasm for the country is rarely balanced with an objective view of its negative aspects. No attempt is made to acquaint potential settlers with

¹⁴ John George Murkinder, *Souvenir 1908: Kelowna, “The Orchard City”* (Kelowna, 1908).

¹⁵ C. G. Guy and Company, *Okanagan Valley Orchard Lands* (Vernon, [c. 1910]), p. 3.

¹⁶ G. H. E. Hudson [photographer], *New Book of Views illustrating Kelowna, The Orchard City of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia* (Brooklyn: The Albertype Company, n.d.).

¹⁷ [Kelowna Board of Trade], *Kelowna in the Okanagan Valley* (Winnipeg: Bulman Bros., [c. 1912]).



PLATE VI. *Cattle range, south Okanagan Valley.* (Provincial Archives of British Columbia; print courtesy of *Sound Heritage*)

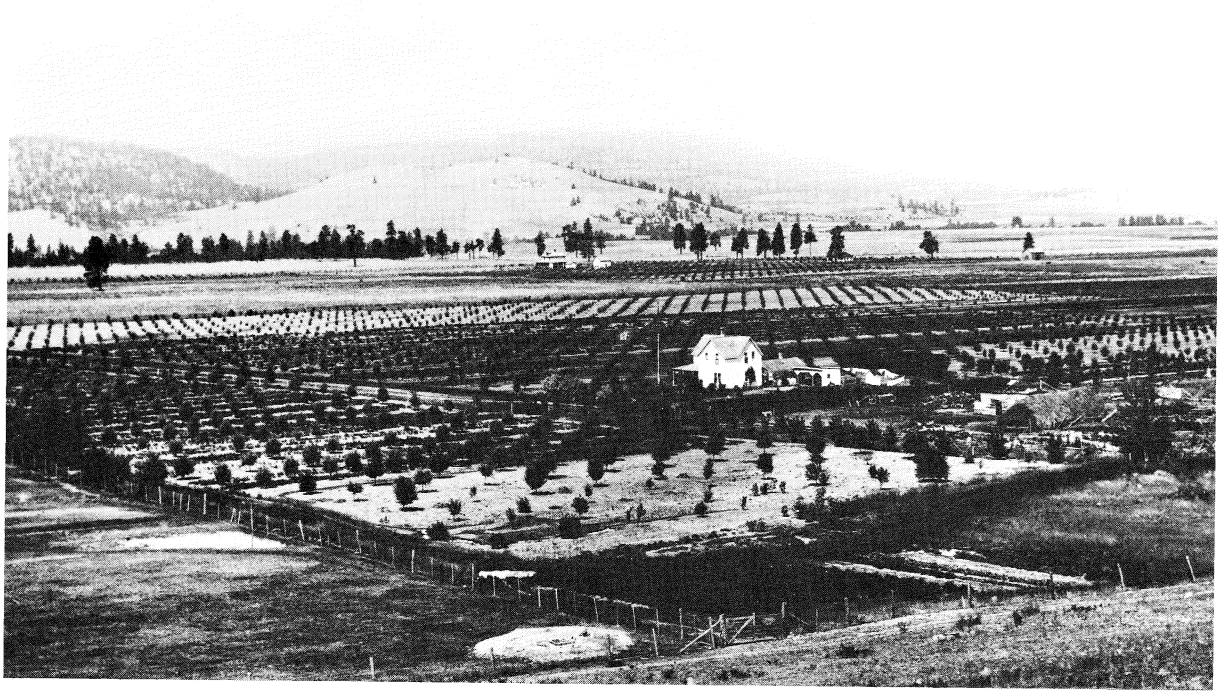


PLATE VII. *A Picture of Prosperity, Sproul Orchard, near Kelowna.*

COURTESY OF THE KELOWNA CENTENNIAL MUSEUM



PLATE VIII. *Irrigation Association Convention delegates on sightseeing tour of Kelowna, 1912.*

COURTESY OF THE KELOWNA CENTENNIAL MUSEUM

the hardships of the frontier. However, some of these hardships are documented in non-promotional photographs and postcards.¹⁸

Most notably absent from promotional photographs is the sense of isolation and alienation. While it can be argued that the transcontinental railway effectively reduced the remoteness of the province, the settlers must have continued to feel physically and psychologically separated from their places of origin. Many of them found that British Columbia was not at all the kind of place they had expected. The published photographs had not revealed the considerable distances between settlements and between families. When seclusion from others is shown, it is depicted as a matter of choice and pleasure for the quieter moments of life. The photographs almost seem to disguise the existence of negative aspects by presenting an illusion of familiarity to the viewer. At times the countryside suspiciously resembles that of rural England.

Viewed from today's perspective, turn-of-the-century land promotion brochures are definitely biased in their portrayal of British Columbia. Without question, they exploited the public's naive way of interpreting photographs as truth. Despite their manipulative nature, these publications were instrumental in bringing about the settlement of the west. In addition, they provide as a legacy countless enduring images of the land they helped to populate.

¹⁸ For a discussion of postcard photography during this period, see Allan Anderson and Betty Tomlinson, *Greetings From Canada* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1978).