

BREAKING THE PEACE:

*Fictions of the Law-Abiding Peace River Country, 1930-50**

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Writing of the Canadian Prairies from 1900 to 1920, historian David C. Jones emphasized the presence of what has been termed the “country life ideology.”¹ This “social construction of identity” embraced the notion that cities were the antithesis of morality, sober living, respect for authority, and well-ordered human relations.² Conversely, rural life was purifying, highly moralistic, and, not surprisingly, almost completely free of crime or criminal behaviour. Indeed, lives tied to the land and agriculture constituted the moral backbone of the nation. These notions were not new, however, nor were they specific to the Canadian Prairies. Twenty-five years ago, Raymond Williams documented the “cultural persistence” of this ideology at the core of English history and society.³ He argued that the dichotomy of city and country, and the role it has played in shaping our perceptions of the world, should be central to any attempt to understand historical or contemporary society.

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¹ David C. Jones, “There Is Some Power About the Land”: The Western Agrarian Press and Country Life Ideology,” in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: Pica Pica, 1992), 455-74.

² The phrase is found in Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, eds., *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6.

³ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1-2. The interconnection between country and city has been developed by William Cronon, “Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town,” in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Mills, and Jay Gitlin (New York: Norton, 1992), 28-51.

There have been many variations on Williams's theme. Robert Wiebe noted that the figure of the yeoman farmer remained a core ingredient in the American identity even as mechanization and modernization were overtaking agriculture at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ In his thoughtful study of American culture and society during the Gilded Age, Alan Trachtenberg depicted the profound relationship between notions of the land and the forging of an American identity in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵ And in a well regarded study of the American west, historian Patricia Limerick noted these same themes of rural nostalgia existing within American history, where Thomas Jefferson and others attach "ideals to rural life that reality cannot match."⁶

In Canada Doug Owram and R. Douglas Francis have both explored the changing perspectives of the west and of rural life, and their place within regional and national identities.⁷ In the course of exploring the idea of nationhood in Canada, Carl Berger encountered the rhetoric of North as a particular Canadian variant on the dichotomy of city and country.⁸ In a fashion, Karen Dubinsky has continued this thread but, in so doing, would reposition our sense of city, country, and North. In her impressive study of rape and heterosexual conflict in Ontario, Dubinsky explored the moral character of regional identification and attribution. Cast in this light, both the city and the North in Ontario assumed a morally questionable identity, while agricultural areas remained morally chaste.⁹ Dubinsky's work offers a thought-provoking counterweight to the Peace River country of British Columbia, where the combination of rurality and northerness are construed in a fashion consistent with Berger's hardy and morally superior Canadians of the early twentieth century. Recent scholarship in British Columbia has continued pursuing these themes while

⁴ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 126-7.

⁵ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 11-37.

⁶ Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), 131.

⁷ Doug Owram, *Promise of Eden: The Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); and R. Douglas Francis, *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989).

⁸ Carl Berger, "The True North Strong and Free," in *Interpreting Canada's Past*, vol. 2, *After Confederation*, ed. J.M. Bumstead (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986), 157-74; and Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 128-52.

⁹ Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 143-62.

returning to one of Williams's basic conclusions in 1973. For just as Williams argued that the notion of a "working country" as "a place of physical and spiritual regeneration" was a long established idea in nineteenth-century Victorian England, geographer David Demeritt has recently concluded that in British Columbia the country life movement drew upon a concern that the unchecked degeneration of the countryside would eventually undermine the national well-being.¹⁰

Elaborations on rural and city life occupied an integral place in community self-perception in the Peace country, the far northwest extension of the Canadian prairie.¹¹ As in much of the prairie west, the attachment in the Peace to a generous vision of agricultural life involved a measure of self-deception and selectivity. Not only did the people of the Peace subscribe to the ideology of rural morality and the superiority of agrarian life, they also maintained a faith that disorder and lawlessness were rarities in agricultural communities.¹² In effect, Peace country residents created and sustained an image of the region as essentially crime free and considered that outbreaks of lawlessness or violence were typically associated with outsiders or those who could not live up to the region's elevated standards of morality. On closer inspection, this is more than another manifestation of a mythical construction of rural life. At its base it required a belief – or, as American historian Edmund Morgan has suggested, a fiction – in which we make "our world conform more closely to what we want it to be."¹³ Essentially, fictions allow "us to believe that the emperor is clothed even when we can see that he is not."¹⁴ Thus for residents of northeastern British Columbia, there was little disorder, violence, and crime in the region because their absence was consistent with the idealization of rural life and the reasoning that brought them to the Peace in the first instance.

¹⁰ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 252. David Demeritt, "Visions of Agriculture in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 108 (Winter 1995-6): 47-8. See also Cole Harris and David Demeritt, "Farming and Rural Life," in Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographic Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).

¹¹ For a broader contextual discussion of English Canada's sense of the land, see Larry Pratt and Matina Karvellas, "Nature and Nation: Herder, Myth, and Cultural Nationalism in Canada," *National History: A Canadian Journal of Enquiry and Opinion* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 59-77.

¹² For an examination of agricultural discourse in British Columbia, see Demeritt, "Visions of Agriculture in British Columbia"; and Harris and Demeritt, "Farming and Rural Life."

¹³ Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988), 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

The existence of this fiction is not, itself, of paramount importance. After all, any community wishes to think well of itself; rather, the fiction of the crime-free and orderly Peace is captivating because of its persistence in the face of considerable evidence of disorder, violence, and criminality. Furthermore, the actual substance of the fiction and, indeed, its very existence was, as David Garland has observed in another context, subjected to “an ongoing process of struggle and negotiation.”¹⁵ Not everyone, let alone the younger generation, necessarily shared the perceived and preferred moral order of one segment of the community.¹⁶ Therefore, my primary concern is to detail the environment in which this fiction existed and then to explore the means whereby it was maintained during the Second World War. Although a variety of factors shaped perceptions of crime and disorder during the 1940s, community leaders and newspaper editorialists were inclined to blame outside forces for disorder and crime. In effect, while it became increasingly difficult to minimize or dismiss the presence of crime and disorder in the Peace, many residents were still able to believe that the region itself remained true to its law-abiding pioneer roots.

THE PIONEER PEACE

By almost any measure, the northeastern portion of British Columbia was isolated on the eve of the Second World War. Although at the northern edge of the great interior plain, the Peace had failed to attract the attention of the homesteaders who began flooding into the southern prairies after 1896. The absence of a treaty with local Indigenous peoples and the availability of “surrendered” agricultural land on the southern prairies ensured that the region would remain sparsely populated. Even after the signing of Treaty Eight with the Denne-za and Cree in 1899 and 1900, and the eventual decision to open up the Peace River Block to homesteaders in 1911, the area remained on the distant edge of immigrant prairie settlement.¹⁷

For the hearty few who ventured north after the turn of the century, the Peace was accessible by two basic routes.¹⁸ The main point of

¹⁵ David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ Demeritt has pointed out the hostility of agrarianism towards Aboriginal land use and practice. See Demeritt, “Visions of Agriculture in British Columbia,” 42.

¹⁸ For recent descriptions of the Peace country, see David W. Leonard and Victoria L. Lemieux, *The Lure of the Peace River Country, 1872-1914: A Fostered Dream* (Calgary: Detselig,

entry began at Edmonton and ran to Athabasca Landing and then forward along the Athabasca and Lesser Slave Rivers to Lesser Slave Lake. From there, goods and people passed overland to Peace River Crossing at the confluence of the Peace and Smokey Rivers, whence settlers and their effects could be further distributed via water or land trail. The second route ran from Edmonton to Edson and then north to Sturgeon Lake, where merchandise and homesteaders were dispersed in the south Peace from Grande Prairie to Pouce Coupé and, eventually, Dawson Creek.¹⁹ It has been estimated that before passable dirt roads were constructed, travel from Edmonton to most destinations in the Peace country could take three weeks even at the best of times.²⁰ The railway from the Alberta capital finally reached Dawson Creek in 1931 and gravel roads appeared in the following decade, although they became common only after the Second World War.²¹ A passenger bus service from Edmonton to the BC boundary was established in 1942 and was extended to Dawson Creek by 1946.²² Direct connections to the rest of British Columbia awaited the completion of the Hart Highway and the Pacific Great Eastern (PGE) Railway in the 1950s.²³

With the opening of the Peace River Block and the arrival of depression and drought on the southern prairies during the 1920s and 1930s, northeastern British Columbia became a destination for homesteaders. The census figures reveal, in part, the significance of this influx. Although the data for 1881 and 1891 are suspect, prior to 1901 the non-Native population of the Peace was meagre. When F.C. Campbell, as agent for the provincial government, filed his inaugural report in 1909, he counted only eighteen resident non-Natives in the

1992); and David Leonard, *Delayed Frontier: The Peace River Country to 1909* (Calgary: Detselig, 1995). Older descriptions can be found in Gordon E. Bowes, *Peace River Chronicles* (Vancouver: Prescott, 1963).

¹⁹ Geoffrey Allan Willis, "Development of Transportation in the Peace River Region of Alberta and British Columbia: With an Evaluation of Present Day Rail and Road Commodity Flow Patterns" (master's thesis, University of Alberta, 1966), 28-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58. Although it is undeniable that roads in the Peace were of poor quality, Cole Harris and David Demeritt have pointed out that, as late as 1941, "there was still no more than a skeletal provincial road system." See Harris and Demeritt, "Farming and Rural Life," 223. See also Harris, "The Struggle With Distance," in *The Resettlement of British Columbia*, 161-93.

²² Willis, "Development of Transportation in the Peace River Region," 59.

²³ The Hart Highway was opened officially on 1 July 1952, and the first train on the PGE, carrying W.A.C. Bennett and his Cabinet, arrived in the south Peace on 2 October 1958. Bennett drove the last spike at Fort St. John one day later. See Bowes, *Peace River Chronicles*, photographic section.

entire northeast.²⁴ Campbell may have seriously undercounted, although the substantial non-Native settlement of the Peace began in 1911 with the opening of the Peace River Block. The census of that year recorded 1,644 residents, a figure that is probably high. By 1921 the census recorded 2,144 residents in the Peace River and Liard regions of the province, and by 1931, with the arrival of the railway, the number of residents had climbed to 7,013. This total increased to 8,481 by 1941 and then jumped again to 14,349 in 1951 (Table A). The vast majority of Peace country residents lived on farms or in small settlements of a few hundred souls.²⁵ Therefore, while it can be said that the region became populated with newcomers after 1911, it was this influx that shaped the region's rural character and strengthened the local identification with the country life ideology.

TABLE A
Population in Northeastern British Columbia

	YEAR			
	1921	1931	1941	1951
Regional Population	2,144	7,013	8,481	14,349
Dawson Creek	No data	No data	518	3,589
Fort St. John	No data	No data	No data	884

POLICING THE PEACE

Policing duty in the Peace during these years of slow but steady growth fell to the British Columbia Provincial Police (BCPP).²⁶ For all of its size, the annual report of the superintendent of provincial police for 1924 listed only three men serving the Peace River subdivision before the First World War.²⁷ The staffing level dropped by two in 1925 but soon doubled.²⁸ The number continued to fluctuate until 1938, when the contingent had increased to eight.²⁹ Regional headquarters was located at Pouce Coupé, where a corporal and two constables assisted the NCO. Two men were stationed at Dawson Creek

²⁴ *Victoria Colonist*, 16 January 1910.

²⁵ Canada, *Census of Canada*, 1951, table 5, 5-83.

²⁶ On the BCPP, see Lynne Stonier-Newman, *Policing a Pioneer Province: The BC Provincial Police, 1858-1950* (Madeira Park: Harbour, 1991).

²⁷ *Report of the Superintendent of Provincial Police for the Year Ended December 31st, 1924* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1925), x27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1926, s23.

²⁹ *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, 1938* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1939), 3.

and two more at Fort St. John.³⁰ By 1945 police strength had risen to fifteen, with four men stationed in Pouce Coupé, six in Dawson Creek, two in Fort St. John, and one each at Lower Post and Muskwa.³¹ This number held until August 1950, when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police replaced the BCPP in the region and across the province.³²

The BCPP approach to policing in the Peace was consistent with the role of peacekeeper rather than with the role of crime fighter.³³ Making certain that inebriates arrived home safely and that street-corner pugilists did as little damage to themselves as possible was preferable to jailing such enthusiasts. Or, conversely, in the case of two sticky-fingered boys who absconded with an armful of comic books from a local five-and-dime in Fort St. John, a reflective afternoon in the village lock-up and supper served by the jail matron, who happened to be the mother of one of the boys, proved to be a long-remembered lesson in law and order.³⁴ Given the enormous physical area that the police covered in the Peace region, the indifferent quality of roads until the late 1940s, and the limitations of communication within the area, treating occasional errors in judgement as something other than crime was critical to the effectiveness and stature of the police. Effective policing skilfully patrolled the line between acceptable levels of disorder and criminal acts.

In such a setting, where many residents lived on isolated homesteads or in small rural communities where they claimed to know everyone else and, often enough, their business, policing also involved investigating coffee-shop rumours of questionable or suspicious behaviour. Pursued while individual men or officers performed formal and unofficial duties as game wardens, postal workers, and government agents, this activity provided the police with valuable insight into what was occurring within the community.³⁵ Or, as the annual report for 1924

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹ *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, 1945* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1947), T35.

³² "Scarlet Riders of the Plains' Take Over BC Police Job," *Alaska Highway News*, 24 August 1950, 4.

³³ See R.C. Macleod, "Canadianizing the West: The North-West Mounted Police as Agents of the National Policy," in R.D. Francis and Howard Palmer, *The Prairie West: Historical Readings* (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1992), 225-38.

³⁴ Incident related to author by one of the boys involved, over forty years after the comic book heist.

³⁵ Reporting on occasions of assistance to provincial government departments, Sub-Inspector H.H. Mansell noted work done with the Game Department, Health Department, Brand Inspectors, the Department of Agriculture, the Provincial Secretary's Department, and the local fire marshall in Dawson Creek. See "Peace River Subdivision," *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, 1943* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1945), VII. The Mounted Police shouldered similar activities on the Prairies and in the Yukon.

argues: "There appears to be no general appreciation of the varied duties police are called upon to carry out. Apart from their natural function – the prevention and suppression of crime – members of the British Columbia Police are both requested and expected to perform a multiplicity of labours only partially identified with the preservation of law and order."³⁶ Although the source of some complaint, these other duties and the insight they provided allowed the police to encourage lawful behaviour and to warn those contemplating a departure from the straight and narrow.

As such, it is not surprising that the number of criminal cases reaching the courts was quite low.³⁷ From 1920 to the end of 1940, only sixty-six felony cases were tried before either the County or the Supreme Court sitting in the region.³⁸ Further, the total number of misdemeanour and felony cases heard in the five years from 1938 to 1942 rose above 80 in only one year, when it reached 92.³⁹ Despite these figures it would be incorrect to conclude that crime, violence, and disorder were not concerns. During the 1930s there were a number of high profile cases in the Peace, most notably several homicides and attempted murders, rapes, and sexual assaults; a \$32,000 fur robbery; and a brutal late-night brawl in which two sober combatants thrashed each other until one was bludgeoned to death with a two-foot length of pipe.⁴⁰ Indeed, with the exception of an inexplicable lull in crime reporting from the end of 1932 to the beginning of 1937 (covering, as it did, 1935, when reported crimes reached a level that would not be surpassed until 1942), readers of the region's only newspaper from 1930 to 1944, the *Peace River Block News*, could easily have concluded that crime and violence were grave problems. Publisher C.S. Kitchen, who was also a stipendiary magistrate in Dawson Creek, filled his newspaper columns with reports of suicides, murders, thefts, assaults, bad-cheque artists, and shoot-outs between

³⁶ *Report of the Superintendent of Provincial Police for the year ended December 31st, 1924* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1925), x9.

³⁷ To get the flavour of this environment, see W.L. Morton, ed., *God's Galloping Girl: The Peace River Diaries of Monica Storrs, 1929-1931* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1979).

³⁸ Based on the cases recorded in the County Court Plaintiff and Procedure Books and the Supreme Court Cause Book from 1920 to 1940, stored at the Dawson Creek courthouse. Police court records begin in 1940. The case files for these years are stored in the British Columbia Archives (BCA); see GR2235, file R 91-4374-1; and GR2036, file 69-15.

³⁹ "Details of Criminal Offences: Peace River Sub-District, 1938-1942," in *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, 1939-1943* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1939-43).

⁴⁰ See Jonathan Swainger, "Breaking the Peace: Crime and Community Identity in Northeastern British Columbia, 1920-1960," in *Criminal Justice History: An International Annual* (forthcoming 1999).

suspects and police officers.⁴¹ For example, the murder of Joseph and Annie Babchuck at Cecil Lake, northeast of Fort St. John, in the autumn of 1930 received detailed coverage from the time the couple was found dead until Michael Sowry, arrested in January 1931, was found guilty and then hanged seven months later.⁴² Seven years later, the *News* provided grisly coverage of a fifteen-to-twenty-minute brawl between Morely Kier and William Matthews, in which Kier eventually died from eighteen contusions, a skull fracture, and exposure after being left unconscious on a Dawson Creek street in the early morning of 8 December 1937.⁴³ While keeping local citizens informed of criminal activity, the *News* also championed efforts to have more police stationed in Dawson Creek. Burglaries were becoming so common in 1931 that the *News* suggested the provincial attorney general be sent the message: "Eighth burglary last night with gun play. If you cannot send us a policeman, for God's sake send the militia."⁴⁴

In its own peculiar manner, the *Alaska Highway News* in Fort St. John pursued a similar approach to crime reporting after the newspaper began operation in 1944. Owned by Margaret "Ma" Murray and her husband George, the weekly maintained a steady flow of crime stories, despite a rocky relationship between Ma and the local police.⁴⁵ Near the end of the war, reports of thievery from the United States Engineering Department facilities proliferated, as did stories

⁴¹ For a range of the stories, see "Fort St. John News," *Peace River Block News*, 22 July 1930, 7; "Durant Coupe Stolen from Rolla," *ibid.*, 12 August 1930, 1; "Two Found Dead at Cecil Lake," *ibid.*, 9 September 1930, 1; "Sentenced to Five Months Imprisonment," *ibid.*, 21 April 1931, 1; and "Burglaries Perpetrated at Dawson Creek," *ibid.*, 12 May 1931, 1. By the mid-1940s the *Peace River Block News* ran a weekly police court column.

⁴² "Two Found Dead at Cecil Lake," *Peace River Block News*, 9 September 1930, 1; "BC Police Search for Slayer of Two: Chase Leads to Winnipeg and Back to Lonely Settlement," *ibid.*, 21 October 1930, 1; "Babchuck Murder Case Reopened: Hythe, Alta. Man Arrested in Connection - Preliminary Hearing at Fort St. John," *ibid.*, 27 January 1931, 1; "Fort St. John News," *ibid.*, 27 January 1931, 1; "Preliminary Hearing of Mike Sowry in Babchuck Murder Case," *ibid.*, 3 February 1931, 1; "Fort St. John News," *ibid.*, 10 February 1931, 1; "28 Witnesses Proceed to Murder Trail," *ibid.*, 12 May 1931, 1; "Sowry to Hang August 14th for Babchuck Murder," *ibid.*, 2 June 1931, 1; and "Mike Sowry Executed at Oakalla Jail," *ibid.*, 25 August 1931, 1. See Morton, *God's Galloping Girl*, 179-80; and Morton L. Bennet, "Hanged by a Thread," *Shoulder Strap*, 1, no. 3 (1939): 5-10.

⁴³ See "Morely Kier Succumbs from Injuries Received in Early Morning Fracas," *Peace River Block News*, 10 December 1937, 1; "Inquest Held on Death of Morely Reid Kier," *ibid.*, 17 December 1937, 3 and 5; "Matthews Committed for Trial on a Charge of Murder," *ibid.*, 31 December 1937, 1 and 4; and "Belo Matthews Acquitted of Murder Charge," *ibid.*, 26 May 1938, 1.

⁴⁴ "Dawson Creek Still Enjoys Night Robberies," *Peace River Block News*, 18 August 1931, 1.

⁴⁵ See "Police and Prisoners Moving to Airport: Arrangements Considered Good - Confirmation Expected Hourly," *Alaska Highway News*, 7 December 1950, 1 and 12; and "Traders Air Drinking, Ribaldry: Justice Department Criticized, Too," *ibid.*, 12 July 1951, 1.

of vehicle and liquor offences.⁴⁶ The newspaper also melodramatically described the death of Shirley Durocher, killed by her husband Philip in late July 1944.⁴⁷ Yet despite the publicity and café gossip surrounding such crimes and other indiscretions, the region subscribed to the notion that disorder, crime, and violence did not significantly affect the Peace. After reporting all manner of criminal activity around Fort St. John, Ma Murray still claimed that “this area of the Peace River is so crimeless as to be almost stuffy.”⁴⁸ Almost a year later, and despite a regular stream of crime stories, Murray asserted that the region was so crime free that the police could concentrate on community betterment.⁴⁹

The fiction of the crime-free Peace obscured the contradiction between rhetoric and reality. This fiction operated on at least two levels. First, residents assumed that they were all essentially cut from the same cloth. The region was peopled with hard-working, law-abiding folks whose days were filled with the unrelenting tasks of homesteading. For example, when the Dawson Creek burglary ring was broken up in 1931, the *Peace River Block News* trumpeted that the arrests and convictions proved that there would be “no wild west tactics here.”⁵⁰ And when it appeared that this moral unity was crumbling, Ma Murray lamented that the “old west with all its romance and honesty is passing away” when it becomes necessary to lock all doors to avoid the depredations of “sneak thieves.” Indeed, “the law of the frontier that you respect another man’s goods and chattels no longer runs in the west.”⁵¹ And, as Inspector G.J. Duncan reminisced with regard to the pioneer conditions of the 1920s and 1930s: “Crime

⁴⁶ “Police Court,” *Alaska Highway News*, 16 March 1944, 2; “District News,” *ibid.*, 27 April 1946, 1; “Truck Plunderers Worry Our Highway Officials: Warehouses Broken Into, Tires Lifted, Parts Taken – But Try and Prove It,” *ibid.*, 15 June 1944, 1; and “Stern Justice Handed Out by a Jury Persecuted by Long Hours on Hardwood Chairs,” *ibid.*, 11 October 1945, 1.

⁴⁷ “Murder, Accidents and Tragedy Take Death Toll: ‘X’ Marked the Spot for the Woman,” *Alaska Highway News*, 27 July 1944, 1 and 6. See also, “Rex vs. Durocher,” in *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, 1944* (Victoria: King’s Printer, 1945), 119; and “Mrs. Durocher Is Interred,” *Peace River Block News*, 3 August 1944, 1. As is the case in most jurisdictions, the historic incidence and perception of domestic violence in the Peace is difficult to identify. In this particular instance, a number of individuals have suggested that Shirley Durocher’s murder was a consequence of her rumoured marital infidelities.

⁴⁸ “Ho Hum: There’s No Crime Wave Here Anyhow,” *Alaska Highway News*, 6 December 1945, 1.

⁴⁹ “Crime-Free St. John Leaves Cops Time for Community Betterment,” *Alaska Highway News*, 12 September 1946, 1. For crime reporting, see “Thieves Steal Jail at ‘Alcan,’ Report: Fort Alcan ‘Brig’ Lined with Wallboard Not Steel,” *ibid.*, 9 May 1946, 1; “Reckless Driving Charges Before Local Police,” *ibid.*, 16 May 1946, 2; and “Police Court News,” *ibid.*, 13 June 1946, 1.

⁵⁰ “Heavy Sentences Issued to Men for Breaking and Entering,” *Peace River Block News*, 13 October 1931, 1.

⁵¹ “Out Where the West Begins,” *Alaska Highway News*, 4 September 1947, 2.

among these people was not prevalent. They were too occupied for law breaking.⁵² These founding ideals remained the core of the Peace country *mentalité*, even as pioneer conditions were passing. Pioneers continued to believe that recent arrivals or others who, for unknown reasons, did not subscribe to country life ideals, caused crime and disorder, if and when it did occur.⁵³

Second, because the pre-war population remained relatively low, there was a sense that people knew their neighbours and could look out for each other. This familiarity also allowed residents to be particularly observant of all manner of comings and goings. Indiscretions of any sort were soon potential fuel for local rumour mills; it was almost impossible to contemplate a misstep without someone taking note. Furthermore, serious crimes were recorded with excruciating detail in at least one newspaper and, thus, may have inadvertently created the impression that crime was widespread. The combined effect of this style of newspaper reporting and coffee-shop gossip meant that many local residents believed that they “knew about” most of what was occurring. Essentially, “knowing” about local crimes and a willingness to pigeonhole offenders as outsiders sustained the belief that the real Peace was crime free. While these mental tricks were relatively effortless during the 1930s and early 1940s, the arrival of the US Army to build the Alaska Highway challenged the fiction of the crime-free Peace.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The beginning of war in September 1939 did not have an enormous effect on the Peace region. Some residents joined up, and those who remained increased agricultural production in aid of the war effort. However, the announcement in late February 1942 that an all-weather road would be built to Alaska from northeastern British Columbia signalled a critical turning point in the region's history.⁵⁴ Rationalized by wartime expediency, the construction of the highway and its attendant links to the rest of Canada and North America shattered

⁵² “Policing the Peace River District,” *Alaska Highway News*, 28 April 1949, 6.

⁵³ I would like to thank John Belshaw of University College of the Cariboo for raising this very interesting generational perspective.

⁵⁴ The rumour of the highway construction hit the news in late February 1942. See “U.S. Army Engineers Hint Strongly of Alaska Military Highway Through Dawson Creek,” *Peace River Block News*, 26 February 1942, 1; and “Alaska Military Highway Through Dawson Creek Ratified by Joint Canada-US Defense Commission,” *ibid.*, 5 March 1942, 1.

the isolation of British Columbia's Peace country.⁵⁵ The highway connected the region much more closely to a broader North America and fundamentally tested the fiction of the crime-free Peace. This test initially took form with the arrival of thousands of American troops and civilian personnel.

Some disorder and occasional incidents of crime were to be expected from such an influx. This possibility was anticipated by the announcement, shortly after construction of the highway was made official, that, at the US Army's request, more police would be stationed in the northeast.⁵⁶ The arriving Americans were not, however, the only cause of disorder. The Dawson Creek burglaries of 1931, the attempted axe murder committed by homesteader Ross Jeffrey in 1934,⁵⁷ the murder of Albert Demean in late 1935,⁵⁸ the dramatic Fort Nelson fur robbery of 1936,⁵⁹ and the brutal domestic murder at the Stephen Delorie homestead in January 1937 were all evidence that local residents had figured prominently in criminal cases in previous years.⁶⁰ Furthermore, construction supplies and material goods brought in for the highway strongly tempted some local residents, especially

⁵⁵ M.V. Bezeau, "The Realities of Strategic Planning: The Decision to Build the Alaska Highway," in *The Alaska Highway: Papers of the 40th Anniversary Symposium*, ed. Kenneth Coates (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985), 25-38; and Kenneth Coates and William Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II: The US Army of Occupation in Canada's Northwest* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

⁵⁶ "US Army Requests Larger Police Force," *Peace River Block News*, 26 March 1942, 1. The commissioner's report for 1942 noted that "the added responsibilities attending the construction of the Alaska Highway necessitated an additional three men, and with the tremendously increased population in that area an addition to our police strength will have to be provided for next year." See *Report of the Commissioner of the Provincial Police, 1942* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1943), 7. Seven more men were added in 1943. See *ibid.*, 1943, w8.

⁵⁷ See "Ross Jeffrey Attacks Parents with Axe," *Peace River Block News*, 29 May 1934, 1; "Fort St. John News," *ibid.*, 12 June 1934, 4; "Fort St. John News," *ibid.*, 19 June 1934, 4; "Ross E. Jeffrey [sic] Is Acquitted by Jury," *Peace River Block News*, 12 October 1934, 1; and "Fall Assize Court Business Completed in Record Time," *Cariboo Observer*, 29 September 1934, 1 and 5. I would like to thank Brian Milthorp of Quesnel, British Columbia, for locating this newspaper report.

⁵⁸ "Albert Demean Brutally Murdered Near Tupper," *Peace River Block News*, 3 January 1936, 1; "Suspects Are Arrested in Demean Murder Case," *Peace River Block News*, 14 February 1936, 1; "Miller and Mueller Again Remanded," *ibid.*, 22 February 1936, 4; "Local and Personal," *ibid.*, 13 March 1936, 4; "Demean Murder Suspects Sent Up for Trial," *ibid.*, 20 March 1936, 1; "Murder Trial to Be Held at Pr. George," *ibid.*, 1 May 1936, 1; "Mueller and Miller receive Ten Years for Demean Death," *Peace River Block News*, 29 May 1936, 1-2.

⁵⁹ "Hudson Bay Co's. Post at Fort Nelson Held Up by Masked and Armed Men," *Peace River Block News*, 24 July 1936, 1; "Trapper's Story of Fort Nelson Fur Robbery," *ibid.*, 7 August 1936, 1; "Furs Stolen from Hudson Bay Co.," *ibid.*, 14 August 1936, 1; and "Sheffield Courvoisier Sentenced Five Years," *Peace River Block News*, 22 October 1937, 1.

⁶⁰ "Farmer Slays Family: Husband Succumbs Self-Inflicted Wounds - Mother and Two Children Had Throats Slashed with Razor and Beaten with Hammer," *Peace River Block News*, 22 January 1937, 1.

those who had struggled with pioneer privation during the lean 1930s. Yet, despite previous incidents of lawlessness and the opportunities presented during the 1940s, the only wartime study of crime in the Peace concluded that “the American occupation of the Canadian Northwest during World War II was not accompanied by an orgy of lawlessness and violence.”⁶¹ Rather than expecting that an “orgy” might have occurred, perhaps a more profitable enquiry would have been to ascertain the precise nature of disorder, as opposed to crime, during the decade.

As during the 1930s, the perception that the Peace was relatively crime free endured during the war years, despite evidence to the contrary. While reports of crime did not mushroom, police investigations increased, as did cases of drunkenness, theft, and personal violence. While the figures for the entire decade are incomplete, the number of police investigations outlined in Table B suggests that the police were increasingly busy during the 1940s.⁶² Second, as shown in Table C, the actual number of complaints and convictions during the decade increased notably. It is of particular note that by 1949, with the war over and the US Army long since departed, reported crime was still six times greater than was reflected in pre-war levels, although the population had not quite doubled from 8,439 in 1941 to 14,349 in 1951.⁶³ Specifically, in 1941 the Peace country recorded one indictable offence for every 111 citizens, while the provincial ratio was one offence for every 210 citizens. Less than a decade later, the ratio was one indictable offence for every twenty-nine residents, while the provincial rate was one for every 183 residents.⁶⁴ Despite claims to the contrary, at the beginning of the decade reported levels of crime in the Peace were higher than the provincial average, and by mid-century the region far outdistanced the rest of the province. This may not have

⁶¹ Kenneth S. Coates and William Morrison, “Controlling the Army of Occupation: Law Enforcement and the Northwest Defense Projects, 1942–1946,” in *Law for the Elephant, Law for the Beaver: Essays in the Legal History of the North American West*, ed. John McLaren, Hamar Foster, and Chet Orloff (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1992), 207–8.

⁶² The report for 1942 noted the significant increase in patrol mileage in the Peace River subdivision, “accounted for by the unusual conditions attending the construction of the Alaska Highway, which demanded a greater police concentration than heretofore.” See *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, 1942* (Victoria: King’s Printer, 1943), 10.

⁶³ Based on statistics in *Reports of the Commissioner of the Provincial Police, 1938–1949* (Victoria: King’s Printer, 1939–50).

⁶⁴ See “Census and Estimated Population Aged 16 Years and Over: Canada and the Provinces, 1881–1959,” in *Historical Statistics of Canada*, ed. M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), 114–26. The 1941 and 1951 ratios are based on BCPP statistic from 1941 and 1949.

TABLE B

Number of Police Investigations: Peace River Subdivision

YEAR	1941	1943	1945	1956
Investigations	1,082	6,571	5,000	6,681

TABLE C

Criminal Statistics Breakdown: Peace River Subdivision

YEAR	CASES	CONVICTIONS	DISMISSALS	AWAITING TRIAL
1938	92	67	25	-
1939	64	51	10	3
1940	79	72	7	-
1941	76	68	8	-
1942	179	167	11	1
1943	570	548	20	2
1944	515	492	21	2
1945	353	336	15	2
1946	321	307	10	4
1947	397	380	17	-
1948	335	307	24	4
1949	483	463	19	1

resembled an "orgy," but it certainly constituted a steep increase in police activity and recorded levels of criminality during the 1940s.

Although American military and civilian personnel were not wholly responsible for the increase in reported levels of crime, sensational cases publicized during the war sustained a belief in the association. In February 1943, W. Evans, an African-American soldier stationed near Dawson Creek, was apprehended by the American military police and charged with the attempted rape of a local woman. The US authorities refused to release Evans into Canadian custody but instituted a court martial wherein the accused was found guilty and sentenced to fifteen years at hard labour. Dishonourably discharged, Evans served his sentence in the United States.⁶⁵ Two days after Evans's arrest, a subcontractor to the US Army illegally stored sixty

⁶⁵ See "Two Women Brutally Assaulted Here," *Peace River Block News*, 11 February 1943, 1; and "Colored Soldier Sentenced to 15 Years Imprisonment," *ibid.*, 25 March 1943, 1. See also "Evans, W. (Attempted Rape)" in Report of the Commissioner of the Provincial Police, 1943 (Victoria: King's Printer, 1945), w18-19.

cases of dynamite and twenty boxes of blasting caps in a Dawson Creek livery stable. When the stable caught fire on 13 February, the explosion wrecked an entire downtown block and killed at least five people. Although the subcontractor was found liable and fined \$10,000, on appeal the verdict was reversed and no one was held accountable for the explosion, deaths, or damage.⁶⁶

A year later, Theresa Seline, an American civilian overstaying her visitor's work permit, was tried and acquitted for murdering her husband Roy Seline on 2 January 1944.⁶⁷ Three months later, Guy Bradley Newton, a former employee of the US government, was shot and killed during a scuffle with Sergeant John T. Massey in the military police barracks at Dawson Creek. Why Newton, who had his travel papers for home in Minnesota, was in the barracks, and how he came to possess Massey's automatic pistol, was not explained in the lone newspaper report.⁶⁸ And then, in the autumn of 1945, American Bryon Bruce Potter was tried, found guilty, and hanged for murdering his lover, a married woman, in Dawson Creek.⁶⁹ These and other cases hardly constituted an "orgy" of lawlessness, but they certainly lent an easy credence to the notion that crime in the Peace – especially high-profile cases – was largely the result of outsiders.

⁶⁶ See *Rex v. Miller Construction Company*, BCA, GR22335, box 2, file 53/43; See "Dawson Creek Rocked by Terrific Explosion Saturday Evening, February 13th," *Grande Prairie Herald Tribune*, 18 February 1943, 1; "Explosion and Fire Takes Five Lives: Whole Business Block Destroyed – Store Fronts Crumble, Windows Crash in Other Business Blocks from Blast," *Peace River Block News*, 25 February 1943, 1; "Coroner's Inquest Held Here: Jury Brings in Verdict," *ibid.*; "List of Dead and Injured," *ibid.* For an examination of the explosion and its effect on Dawson Creek, see Catherine Mooney, "Dynamite, Death, and Destruction: The Explosion of 1943," prepared for Seminar in Local History, Fort St. John Campus, University of Northern British Columbia (November 1995).

⁶⁷ *Rex v. Theresa Seline*, Supreme Court Cause Book, Dawson Creek courthouse, [sccb] vol. 1, 12/1944 and BCA, GR2036, box 1, file 12/1944. See also "U.S.E.D. Garage Superintendent Found Shot to Death in Trailer: Wife of Dead Man Charged with Murder," *Peace River Block News*, 6 January 1944, 1; "Jury Returns Verdict in Death of Roy Matthew Seline at Inquest," *ibid.*, 13 January 1944, 1-2; "Preliminary Hearing of Seline Murder Case: Hearing Held at Pouce Coupe – Wife of Murdered Man Committed for Trial at Next Assize," *ibid.*, 1; "Not Guilty Verdict Returned in Seline Murder Trial," *ibid.*, 22 June 1944, 1.

⁶⁸ "Verdict Returned in Shooting Affair," *Peace River Block News*, 13 April 1944, 1.

⁶⁹ *Rex v. Bryon Bruce Potter*, 27/1945, sccb, vol. 1. See "Murder Charge Is Laid When Mother Stabbed," *Peace River Block News*, 19 July 1945, 1; "Remand B. Potter," *ibid.*, 26 July 1945, 1; "Murder Preliminary On," *ibid.*, 23 August 1945, 1; "Potter Committed to Trial," *ibid.*, 30 August 1945, 1 and 6; "Potter Held for Higher Court As Evidence Completed in Preliminary Trial," *ibid.*, 6 September 1945, 1 and 5; "Potter Trial Starts Oct. 1," *ibid.*, 27 September 1945, 1; "Potter Will Die on Jan 10: First to Hang in This Area," *ibid.*, 4 October 1945, 1; "Potter Hanged at Oakalla," *ibid.*, 17 January 1946, 1. For a ghoulish aside on the Potter case, see "Sordid Shooting Case Ends: Weigner Gets Two Years," *Alaska Highway News*, 14 October 1948, 1.

On the other hand, and undoubtedly encouraged by the unwillingness of juries to convict, resident theft from army supply depots and dumps was rampant after 1942. These incidents provided an interesting spin on the fiction of the crime-free Peace. In the eyes of many residents, such pilferage was not theft but, rather, the work of “needy settlers ... carting away lumber, doors, plumbing and electrical wire” along with truck tires, engines, and fifty-gallon drums.⁷⁰ Notwithstanding these allusions to thrift, Constable Bill Lumsden of the BCPP warned, “It makes no difference what local citizens may think of War Assets or surplus government property. The point is, any intrusion on these properties is an offense – and theft is theft, whether from the government or from widows and orphans – and we intend to prosecute all offenders to the limit.”⁷¹ The warning, which had little effect, was repeated one month later.⁷²

Such thefts, viewed by the local residents as relatively insignificant when weighed against wasteful military policy,⁷³ did not subvert the local image of the law-abiding Peace. Some even claimed that disposing of the usable materials was a greater crime than retrieving these same items from pits and dumps throughout the northeast.⁷⁴ In concert with such rationalizations, the willing attribution of increased disorder to the American presence allowed the region’s law-abiding image to remain intact.

Two cases in the latter half of 1948 reinforced the tendency to attribute crime to outside influences. In late August 1948, as a polio epidemic loomed over the north Peace, the attention of local residents was diverted to a search for the body of John McComas, a man believed

⁷⁰ “Thieves Steal Jail at ‘Alcan,’ Report: Fort Alcan ‘Brig’ Lined with Wallboard Not Steel,” *Alaska Highway News*, 9 May 1946, 1. See also “More Scandal on the Dumphead,” *ibid.*, 31 July 1947, 2. See, generally, Coates and Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II*, 204–11.

⁷¹ “At Police Court: Vagrancy, Thefts, Weapons and Dogs on the Police Blotter,” *Alaska Highway News*, 27 June 1946, 1.

⁷² “District Briefs,” *Alaska Highway News*, 29 August 1946, 8. For two earlier cases, see *Rex v. David Gordon Dunn*, BCA, GR2036, file 49/44; and *Rex v. Alan McIntyre Moodie*, BCA, GR2036, file 119/44.

⁷³ When two young farmers were arrested for such behaviour, Ma Murray exonerated the farmers and directed blame at the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. See “More Scandal on the Dumphead,” *Alaska Highway News*, 31 July 1947, 2. In a later case, a local jury acquitted the Tompkins brothers after considering the evidence for eight minutes. Judge J.O. Wilson of the Supreme Court “was not pleased with the verdict.” See “Tompkins Brothers ‘Rolled out the Barrels’ But Got No Barrel of Fun: Theft and Manslaughter Charges Fill Assize Docket – Soldier Gets Off, Truckers Not Guilty,” *Alaska Highway News*, 26 May 1949, 1.

⁷⁴ This exact sentiment was expressed by Thomas McC. Dauphinee, Chairman of the Hasting East CCF Club to Prime Minister Mackenzie King. See Dauphinee to King, 12 July 1944, NAC, RG 36/7, vol. 36, file 11-16 re Investigation concerning Destruction of US Equipment.

to have been killed somewhere near mile 100 of the Alaska Highway.⁷⁵ McComas and his thirteen-year-old daughter Louise had left Dayton, Ohio, intent on starting life anew in Anchorage. Gustav Weigner had joined the two after soliciting a ride through a newspaper advertisement. Other than a heated exchange between the deceased and Weigner after the vehicle became stuck outside the Nelson Reed farm in Hythe, Alberta, the trip had been uneventful until the threesome stopped near mile 100 on the Alaska Highway. It was here that Weigner shot McComas in the head with a .22 rifle and, in a panic, fled to Bushnell, Nebraska, with Louise. After purchasing a small restaurant where he and Louise lived as brother and sister, Weigner became embroiled in a legal clash that led him to admit having killed McComas. Following a coroner's inquest and preliminary hearing in Pouce Coupé, Weigner was remanded in custody to await trial in Prince George where, in October, he was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to two years imprisonment in the BC penitentiary.⁷⁶

Response to the Weigner case was sharp. During the preliminary hearing, attention concentrated on the alleged but evidently unfounded suspicions concerning the relationship between the accused and thirteen-year-old Louise McComas. Of particular interest was the girl's apparent indifference to her father's death and to the fact that, despite Weigner's actions, she still "liked" him.⁷⁷ When Weigner was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to two years imprisonment, Kansas-born newspaper editor Ma Murray barely contained herself. Claiming the light sentence reversed local traditions, Murray touched on the American connection: "The light sentence to the oily young Ohio salesman is not in keeping with the traditions of the Cariboo courts ... While another American at Dawson Creek killed his paramour three years ago, he got hanging and had his head wrenched from his body when dropped through the scaffold at Oakalla prison farm."⁷⁸ Murray's conclusion was clear: the Americans who

⁷⁵ The following is based on "Manhunt On at Blueberry for Body of Slain Tourist," *Alaska Highway News*, 26 August 1948, 1; "Murder Charge Follows Discovery of Body on Alcan Highway: Self Confessed Slayer Will Come Here for Hearing - Coroners Jury Adjourned - BC Police Will Seek Protection of Justice For Travellers on Highway," *ibid.*, 2, September 1948, 1-2; "Weigner's Guilty Conscience Was His Undoing: Trigger Finger Pulled Him into Confession of Fatal Shooting," *ibid.*, 9 September 1948, 1 and 5; and "Highway Murder Case to Higher Court," *ibid.*

⁷⁶ "Sordid Shooting Case Ends: Weigner Gets Two Years," *Alaska Highway News*, 14 October 1948, 1.

⁷⁷ "I Like Him - I Like Him! I Still Like Him,' Says Victim's Daughter," *ibid.*, 9 September 1948, 3.

⁷⁸ See Note 69.

built the highway and later followed its course to Alaska were a mixed blessing.

Less than a month after Weigner was found guilty of manslaughter, another crime signalled that the “peaceful” Peace was under siege. Driving home after attending a movie in Dawson Creek on the evening of 12 November 1948, the James Watson family was confronted by two masked bandits just off the Alaska Highway.⁷⁹ Rather than stopping in response to what was later described as a warning shot, driver Fred Watson reversed and sped back towards Dawson Creek. One of the bandits, armed with a 30-30 rifle, fired another shot at the fleeing vehicle. The bullet passed through the truck and back seat, striking sixty-two-year-old James Watson in the back. Watson died from his wound four days later in St. Joseph’s hospital in Dawson Creek.⁸⁰ When it was revealed during the coroner’s inquest and delinquency hearing that the bandits, aged 11 and 13 years, had been reading between thirty and fifty American crime comics a week, a moral panic erupted across the Peace country.⁸¹

Local outrage over the “comic book murder” fed into an ongoing debate about American crime comics and the perceived rise in juvenile delinquency across North America and Great Britain. In Canada E. Davie Fulton, the Conservative MP from Kamloops, had led this movement to ban American crime comics, and James Watson’s death reinvigorated his stalled campaign.⁸² Although the local furor resonated with language drawn from the fiction of the crime-free Peace, George Murray’s comments, as MP for Cariboo and part owner of the *Alaska Highway News*, were especially notable for directing blame at American publishers. Claiming to be merely a “humble publisher,”

⁷⁹ The following is based upon “Dawson Creek Juveniles Charged with murder As ‘Comic Book’ Idea Backfires for Youths,” *Alaska Highway News*, 25 November 1948, 1; and “Two Juveniles Charged with Death of J. Watson,” *Peace River Block News*, 25 November 1948, 1. See also Frederic Wertham, “Murder in Dawson Creek,” in *Seduction of the Innocent* (London: Museum Press, 1955), 274-6. A Watson family history is contained in *Lure of the South Peace* (Dawson Creek: South Peace Historical Book Committee, 1981), 232-4.

⁸⁰ “Kilkerran Resident Jim Watson Dies from Bullet Wound,” *Peace River Block News*, 18 November 1948, 1.

⁸¹ “Dawson Creek Juveniles Charged With Murder.” See also Note 77 and “Remarks on Comics in Court Session By Prosecuting Attorney and Magistrate,” *Alaska Highway News*, 9 December 1948, 1.

⁸² For a broader examination of the comic book murder, juvenile delinquency, and the campaign against American crime comics, see Jonathan Swainger, “American Crime Comics As Villains: An Incident from Northern Canada,” *Legal Studies Forum* 22 (March 1998): 1-16. See also Augustine Brannigan, “Mystification of the Innocents: Crime Comics and Delinquency in Canada, 1931-1949,” *Crime Justice History: An International Annual* 7 (1986): III-44.

Murray stated that “this country is deluged with filth from the publishers of the United States and no effort is made to stop this material coming past the border.”⁸³

Reflecting similar sentiments among his fellow parliamentarians, Murray’s comments were also consistent with the fiction of the crime-free Peace and its assertion that criminality was foreign to the well-ordered community. Fulton’s bill banning the importation of American crime comics into Canada received third reading and was passed on 5 December 1949, slightly over one year after James Watson died from the wound he received in the comic book holdup.⁸⁴ As far as local residents were concerned, the peril had been vanquished, and once again the crime-free Peace could return to normal.

The problem was that, by the end of the 1940s, the concept of “normal” had been exposed to considerable pressure. The panic following the comic book murder suggested that a good deal of unease about the younger generation had surfaced in the Peace after the war. Increased attention given to the provision of recreational facilities and the construction of a teen town in Dawson Creek and Fort St. John was grounded in a concern that local young people had too much time on their hands.⁸⁵ This anxiety was especially notable in Fort St. John where, throughout the 1950s, juvenile delinquency remained a recurrent theme in the *Alaska Highway News*.⁸⁶ As in the past, it was easy to blame outside forces such as “a moron like Elvis

⁸³ George Murray, Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, 21 October 1949, 1,042-3.

⁸⁴ The Fulton Bill would not end governmental attention to allegedly dangerous literature. See Senate of Canada, *Proceedings of the Special Committee on Sale and Distribution of Salacious and Indecent Literature, 1952-1953* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1952-3). For an interpretation of this investigation, see Mary Louise Adams, “Youth, Corruptibility, and English-Canadian Postwar Campaigns Against Indecency, 1948-1955,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 11 (1995): 89-117.

⁸⁵ For a range of the newspaper stories before and after the comic book murder, see “Juveniles Charged With Drinking Liquor,” *Alaska Highway News*, 29 January 1947, 1; “Boom, Booze and Broken Homes Contribute to Current Juvenile Delinquency Wave Here: Magistrate Ogilvie Sentences Scheck and McGillivray to Four Months Hard Labour, Elsie Ferguson Gets Six Months for Vagrancy, One Juvenile Held,” *ibid.*, 24 April 1947, 1; “Antidote Against Crime,” *Peace River Block News*, 13 May 1948, 2; “Council Urged to Act on Age Limit,” *ibid.*, 26 August 1948, 1; “Teen Town to Be Organized in St. John: Cadets Acquire New Leader,” *ibid.*, 23 September 1948, 3; “MORE JUVENILE TROUBLE,” *ibid.*, 9 December 1948, 8; “Curfew for Juveniles: Police to Crack Down Commissioners Told,” *ibid.*, 22 September 1949, 1.

⁸⁶ See, for example, “Child Psychology,” *Alaska Highway News*, 14 September 1950, 2; “Morals and Manners,” *ibid.*, 12 April 1951, 2; “Juvenile Steals Local Car, Wrecks It,” *ibid.*, 14 August 1952, 1; “Juvenile Delinquency,” *ibid.*, 14 May 1953, 2; “Juvenile Delinquency,” *ibid.*, 15 April 1954, 1; “Boy Scouts to be Organized Here: Overcome Juvenile Delinquency,” *ibid.*, 26 April 1956, 1.

the Pelvis, former truck-twister, who 'sends' the fems of tender age."⁸⁷ However, while Ma Murray was able to attribute rising delinquency to Elvis Presley, by 1956 this denial of local responsibility was unconvincing.

The northeast had ceased being an island of right-thinking people who allegedly subscribed to the same set of ideals. By 1951 the population had almost doubled to 14,349, Dawson Creek had increased sixfold to 3,589, and Fort St. John had been incorporated as a village, counting 884 residents.⁸⁸ Within the decade the Hart Highway and the PGE linked the Peace with the rest of British Columbia, and the last vestiges of the region's physical isolation were swept away. As R. Jeremy Wilson has argued concerning political behaviour, improved communication systems had eroded localism across much of the province by the late 1940s and in the Peace region by the mid-1950s.⁸⁹ Perhaps more than any other factor, the establishment of the gas and oil industry in the northeast marked the end of an era, at least as it concerned notions of crime and criminality. The multi-million-dollar gas industry arrived with hundreds of workers who, when the occasion warranted, roared into local communities where they blew off steam and spent pocket money. One result was predictable. According to one police court docket the forty-nine misdemeanor cases heard in 1952 increased by seven times in the next year and by ten times in two years.⁹⁰ While some could rightly blame the rig crews for the increased turmoil and, in so doing, remain faithful to the ideal of the crime-free Peace, demonizing those who worked for an industry that promised a bountiful future was an awkward proposition. Pointing to outsiders as the cause of disorder and crime had lost much of its credibility by the mid-1950s.

Most accepted the changing tenor of the times and adapted their perspective accordingly. One such adjustment involved the realization that northeastern British Columbia shared some of that wildness discerned by Karen Dubinsky in northern Ontario. It was not, however, a wildness that flowed from savagery but from "good clean living," the open spaces, a defiant individualism, and a toughness born of life in the last, best, west. Therefore, when confronted with a *Vancouver Sun* depiction of Fort St. John as a riotous community

⁸⁷ "Is There a Teen-age Problem?" *Alaska Highway News*, 11 October 1956, 2.

⁸⁸ Canada, *Census of Canada*, 1951, table 5, 5-83.

⁸⁹ R. Jeremy Wilson, "The Impact of Communications Developments on British Columbia Electoral Politics, 1903-1975," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 3 (September 1980): 528.

⁹⁰ Police court docket, 1952-4, Dawson Creek courthouse.

where brawls erupted in the streets, resident James Kendell countered that while there “may be an occasional scuffle” he was sorry that “we can’t dig up a knifing or shooting affray. Our people are still rather naïve and reckon fists are the thing to settle an argument.”⁹¹ Apparently, even the brawls in northeastern British Columbia were civilized.

Such assertions aside, and given the links established during the previous decade, it was no longer possible for most residents to “make believe” that the Peace was very different from the rest of British Columbia or, for that matter, from the rest of North America. Yet despite the increasing threat that lawlessness and disorder posed to the country life ideology, not everyone abandoned the core notions identified by Williams, Jones, Trachtenberg, and others. This sense of distinctiveness and the fiction of the crime-free Peace endured because, in opening up and making productive this distant edge of the great interior plain, the settler generation had invested in an ideal of family farming and of pioneer morality. The ideal of the law-abiding Peace validated these people’s accomplishments, and they were understandably reluctant to surrender it. No matter what, *their* Peace would always be crime free. Indeed, their commitment to that ideal and morality can be measured not only by the fiction of the crime-free Peace, but also by the fact that it survived as long as it did despite substantial evidence that the idyllic pastoral countryside of their imaginations had long since passed beyond their reach.

⁹¹ “Letters to the Editor: An Answer to Scott,” *Alaska Highway News*, 3 October 1957, 2. Kendell, who was married to Georgia, Ma Murray’s daughter, was responding to Jack Scott’s column in the *Vancouver Sun*, which, after attracting a great deal of local commentary, was reprinted in the *Alaska Highway News* on 17 October 1957. See “Jack Scott’s Field Day,” *Alaska Highway News*, 17 October 1957, 5 and 9.