

1765 Columbia Avenue - Miners' Union Hall



Miners' Hall 2012

### **Heritage Register - Building**

- 1) **Historical Name:** Miners' Union Hall
- 2) **Common Name:** Miners' Hall
- 3) **Address:** 1765 Columbia Avenue
- 4) **Date of Construction:** 1898
- 5) **Design, Style, Architecture, Architect:** E. J. Weston

### **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

#### **Description:**

Rossland Miners' Union Hall, located on a sloped lot at the west end of Columbia Avenue in Rossland, B.C is a large, steeply gabled brown and tan wood-frame building with an

upper storey balcony. It bears the Date “1898”, and the words “Miners Union” and “Miners Union Hall” on its front façade.

### **Heritage Value:**

Rossland Miners’ Union Hall is valued as a monument to the Rossland Miners’ Union No. 38 local of the Western Federation of Miners’, the first metalliferous mines union local in BC, and one of the most influential and successful unions in the history of the province. Built in 1898, this historic place was the central organization point for the Miners’ Union, whose fight for just and safe labour conditions at the end of the nineteenth-century led to the legislation of the eight-hour work day, amended the Trade Union Act, and paved the way for the union movement in British Columbia and Canada.

Rossland Miners’ Union Hall is an important part of the British Columbia’s heritage because it is a symbolic icon of the province’s early mining industry. Having survived a series of major fires in the town’s history, this historic place is one of BC’s earliest surviving Miners’ union halls, and is one of the few extant wooden buildings of this era, stature, and use in the province. It is valued as a touchstone to the mining heyday of the late 1890’s, which initiated the development of infrastructure, transportation, and permanent settlements in this part of the Kootenay Boundary region of BC.

Designed by architect E.J. Weston, and incorporating a variety of spaces such as a lodge room, dancing room, and a small stage, it is significant that the Rossland Miners’ Union Hall continues to function in its intended multi-purpose community capacity. Historically the hub of the community, this historic place has retained a respected level of social value for over one hundred years, a fact which warranted its provincially-sponsored restoration and rehabilitation in the late 1970’s, and maintained its status as a social centre and rallying point in the community.

### **Character Defining Elements:**

- Its location within the City of Rossland, on the south side of the western end of Columbia Avenue
- Its situation on a sloped lot and its relationship to Columbia Avenue
- Its appearance of having two storeys at street level while actually being three storeys tall
- The identification of the place as a Miners’ union hall, as seen in such elements as exterior lettering, and interior spaces originally intended for use by the union
- Surviving elements of its 1898 multi-purpose design by architect Weston, such as interior spaces, configurations, and finishes, and exterior elements such as the upper-storey balcony, and spare decorative elements.
- The ongoing multi-purpose use of the hall for dances, theatrical productions, film screening, social gatherings, meetings, etc.

- Elements of the place which pertain to its restoration in the late 1970's, including restored exterior and interior fixtures, fittings, and finishes, interior spatial configurations, and exterior modifications.



Miners' Hall c. 1910

## HISTORY

### **Construction of the Miners' Hall**

The Miners' Hall was built in 1898 by the members of Branch #38 of The Western Federation of Miners'. The Rossland Branch was formed in the summer of 1895 just when mining development was taking off and the population of the Rossland Camp was exploding. Branch #38 was the first one outside of the States and was perhaps a natural extension of the Union of men similarly employed in the mining industry and given that many of the local miners had come to Rossland from the mines of Montana and Idaho where the workforce was unionized.

Apparently, the Union men assessed themselves a day's pay to go to the construction of their meeting hall and \$6537.75 was collected. The Miners' Hall opened on July 16, 1898 to

much fanfare and celebration and was declared to be, by the local paper, “the most substantial building of its character in the Kootenays”. Looking at the front of the building on Columbia Avenue it appears to be a wooden sided, peaked roofed, two storey building with a balcony off the top floor, designed in a high Victorian style. However, its location on a steep slope hides the fact that it is actually a 3 storey building and there is a half basement below that - certainly a landmark building when viewed from Lower Rossland. The supporting beams are fully 12”X12”, similar to the ones used in the mine tunnels and give credence to the label, substantial! The building measures \_\_\_ x \_\_\_.

The architect for the Miners’ Hall was E. J. Weston and he designed the interior of the building for multi-use purposes. On the main floor there was a raised, raked stage large enough for groups to entertain, and a spacious main hall suitable for large gatherings and social events. There was an interior balcony built above the front entrance way that was accessed from the main floor which provided more space. On the lower level, there was a smaller meeting area (Union’s Lodge Room) with a low stage and also family quarters for the Union Secretary and his family. At one time, there was also a “secret” room on the lower level, apparently used to hide union activists from the States trying to avoid the Pinkerton police due to labor struggles there. Below the lower level, in the half basement, the boilers for heating were located. The attic was left unfinished until a later date but there is the suggestion that it was used as a practice area for the Rocky Mountain Rangers before the Drill Hall was built in 1904.

### **Miners’ Union History**

This history is both interesting and complex and spans the life of the active mining in Rossland - perhaps best left to other sources for details and context - events, people, political attitudes, legislation, lobbying efforts, industrial relations and union affiliations, etc. Jeremy Mouat’s, “Roaring Days” (1995) is highly recommended as a well-researched and documented read for those interested.

It can however, safely be said that Rossland was a union town from its beginning and Branch #38 of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) was at the center of the hard rock Miners labour movement in the province in the late 1890s. The historic labour legislation around the 8 hour day came about because of the lobbying effort of the WFM during a window of opportunity on the provincial political scene. Mouat remarks that the union also played a special role in resource towns. Along with fraternal organizations and churches, the union encouraged a sense of community within a disparate and highly mobile population.

### **Miners’ Hall History - after 1900**

In 1904 The Union (WFM Branch #38) loses a court case to Gooderham, the owner of the Center Star and War Eagle Mines and loses the Hall. The union is forced into receivership as a result of the financial implications - see page 104/05 of Jeremy Mouat’s, “Roaring Days”. However, the Union continues to exist and to use the Miners’ Hall as its headquarters as it is reported that the Branch helped to protect American activists in the Miners’ Hall in 1907 because of their pursuit by Pinkerton men from Seattle hired to track them down by mining owners in the States. Also, we know that in 1917, the WFM changed their name to the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, to distance themselves from the

militancy and confrontational style of previous years and the Rossland hall became known as the Mine Mill Hall.

In 1929 Cominco ceased to operate its Rossland's mines and the organized labour activity shifted to Trail. It seems that the Hall was purchased then by the Rossland Branch of the Knights of Pythias as their lodge. However, the Mine Mill & Smelter Workers Union repurchased the Miners' hall in 1952 when the Mine Mill Union merged with Steelworkers, Local 480 and some restoration work was done at that time on the foundation.

From 1968 until 1978 The Rossland Light Opera Players used the Miners' Hall for set construction, practices and storage under a lease agreement with the Steelworkers.

In 1978 the Rossland Heritage Society initiated the huge task of attempting to restore the Miners' Union Hall to its original condition and use as a community focal point for social activities. Derelict was the best descriptive word of the Hall at this time. Together the Society, Local 480 and the City developed a plan and with a great deal of financial support from the senior levels of Government the restoration work began. The most costly part of the project dealt with the foundation and the open surface waters flowing between its footings. In September of 1983 a beautifully refurbished and restored Miners' Hall reopened!