

2197 Columbia Avenue - Velvet Block



Velvet Block 2010

Heritage Register - Building

- 1) **Historical Name:** Velvet Block
- 2) **Common Name:** Velvet Hotel
- 3) **Address:** 2197 Columbia Avenue
- 4) **Date of Construction:** 1896/1897
- 5) **Design, Style, Architecture, Architect:**

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Description:

The Velvet Block is located on the southwest corner of the intersection of Columbia Avenue and St. Paul Street in Rossland, B.C. It is a substantial, two storey, flatroofed building of wooden construction and marks the entrance to Rossland's

downtown core when arriving on Highway 3B from the south. It is located on a sloping lot and the back of the building is fully 3 storeys high with a business premise located in the basement area, accessed by a door on south side of building. A variety of businesses are located in this building accessed by 3 separate entrances on Columbia Avenue.

Heritage Value:

This building was constructed in the “boom” years of Rossland’s early development (1896/97), and is one of the five remaining buildings in this block of the downtown that date back to this time. It is a visual reminder of the type, style and construction of many of the commercial buildings erected in Rossland prior to 1900.

The Velvet Block is a landmark, with a significant footprint and location that has always marked the eastern edge of Rossland’s downtown core.

Character Defining Elements:

- original footprint and location
- plaque on Columbia Avenue facade identifying this building as one of Rossland’s significant heritage buildings.



Velvet Block c.1900

HISTORY

The Velvet Block, on the corner of Columbia Avenue and St. Paul, was built in either 1896 or early 1897. Development of Rossland's downtown started in the western portion, focused first around Spokane Street and Columbia Avenue, but during the boom years of 1896 to 1898, many commercial buildings were erected along both sides of the 3 block length of Columbia Avenue and indeed, along Washington Street, from Columbia Avenue to 1st Street, providing an almost complete streetscape of 2 and 3 storey buildings in the business core. (The Insurance Map of Rossland, dated July 1897, shows all the commercial buildings at that point in time, providing information about the size, height, and construction materials used.)

The 1897 Insurance Map labels this building as the "St. Elmo", a 3 storey, wooden framed building that because of the sloping lot, was actually a 4 storey building at the back (south) with a plumber's shop located in the basement. The main floor appears to be divided into two commercial spaces and the words, "Rooms Over" are also printed on the diagram of the building. (This pattern of commercial space on the main floor and accommodation above is very common on the 1897 Insurance Map.) It is interesting to note that the July 1897 Insurance Map shows that 7 of the 10 lots on this Block already had 2 & 3 storey buildings on them, that Lots #13 & #15 were empty and Lot # 20 had the Stone Block "under construction".

The first (1898) Tax and Assessment Rolls for the newly incorporated City of Rossland tell us that the Block 43, Lot #11 property and building were owned by John McLeod and A. W. MacNaughton. The land was valued at \$3,300, being the highest valued property on this Block. The building was valued at \$3,000, (half of real value) which shared the highest value for any of the 8 buildings on this Block with the newly completed Stone Block at the other end of the Block, now on the Tax Roll. An early picture, circa 1900, shows a two storey rectangular bay on the northeast corner of the building extending from the second floor to the roof line. Wooden detailing and different paint colors on the front facade visually separate the floors and is repeated under the parapet of rooftop. There are two entrances on Columbia, one lead to the rooms on the second and third floors and one to the commercial enterprise.

McLeod and MacNaughton owned the building but it would appear that they did not operate a business in the commercial spaces themselves. Harold Kingsmill in the "First History of Rossland", published in 1897 refers to, "Lockhart & Jordan - Importers and Dealers in Furniture, Carpets and Undertakers' Goods", opening their "commodious" store for trade in May of 1897. Kingsmill uses phrases such as, "largest and most complete stock of the kind in this part of BC; the firm is a buyer in car-load lots from the best factories of Canada; also an importer from the United States; includes everything from the plain but serviceable quality to the most exquisitely carved and upholstered furniture; business occupies two well-filled floors". Kingsmill refers to both C. B. Lockhart (Ontario roots) and J. M. Jordan (Georgia, USA roots) as experienced merchants and in addition, adds that Lockhart was a skilled undertaker and a graduate of the U. S. College of Embalming. The "First History of Rossland" goes on to say that, "Undertakers' goods form an important but inconspicuous part of the stock, and funeral directing, embalming and undertaking are a part of the business of the firm. In this connection, it is pertinent to state the firm owns two fine hearses, one white and one black."

Information about the early years of this building's use has been difficult to find. There is no mention of the St. Elmo other than on the 1897 Insurance Map. Reading the ledger of Licences for the City of Rossland, there was no liquor licence issued for the St. Elmo or The Velvet.

We only have two photos of this building in its early years, circa 1900 as shown above. Tax rolls tell us the building at that time was still owned by McLeod and MacNaughton but the signage in the photograph reads,

**J. M. JORDAN
FURNITURE, CARPETS, LINOLEUMS, OIL CLOTHS, ETC.**

There is no mention of Lockhart on the sign, or undertaking services, but an ad in the 1902 Rossland Miner newspaper refers to the location of this furniture store as St. Paul and Columbia Avenue. A sign between the second and third floors on the front facade, "Velvet" appears in the photo - perhaps this is a reference to rooms on the third floor? The 1912 Insurance Map of Rossland shows that this building still is used as a Furniture Store on the main and basement levels with "Rooms Over". We know from other sources that J. M. Jordan purchased the two buildings on the northwest corner of Columbia Avenue and Queen Street in 1911 and opened there, yet again, "the largest furniture store in the Interior of B. C."

Heritage Streetscapes – East end of the downtown

Block 43 is part of the original Township of Rossland which was purchased from the Provincial Government, by Ross Thompson in 1894. Block 43 lies between Columbia and LeRoi Avenues and between St. Paul Street and Lincoln (Queen) Street.

The Insurance Map of Rossland, July 1897, shows the developed Blocks and Lots in the town at this time and provides very accurate and often detailed information about the commercial buildings - their size, construction material used, height and general usage.

The northern portion of Block 43, (facing Columbia Avenue), is divided into ten 30' by 100' lots and The Insurance Map shows that buildings existed on 7 of these lots as of July, 1897 and the Stone Block was "under construction". The buildings were most likely constructed in 1896 or early 1897 and all the buildings were at least 2 storeys in height and four were 3 storey buildings. Anchoring the east end of the Block and on lot 11 is the St. Elmo (Velvet).

The lots were 100 feet deep and none of the buildings are shown to have been more than 60' deep with a 30' frontage. (Perhaps the steep terrain of this Block explains this.)

The southern section of Block 43 was never affected by the disastrous fires of 1927 and 1929 that destroyed so many of the commercial buildings built in Rossland prior to 1900. Today, we point to this streetscape and that of the one across Columbia Avenue as having the densest concentration of heritage buildings in Rossland's Downtown.

Changes in Usage and Names:-

- 1914 - E. H. S. Wynn purchased the building and sold it to Mrs. Life, 4 years later
- 1920 W. K. Esling purchased the building, and apparently used it as his headquarters during at least a portion of his political career as a Conservative MLA (1921 - 1924 and MP - 1925 to 1945. Esling died in 1946.

- Insurance Map of 1938 shows that the building was used as the Gospel Hall with offices and apartments on the 2nd floor.
- The building was given to the Gospel Hall “for a nominal sum” to fulfill Mr. Esling’s wishes upon his death (December 1946)
- The building was originally 3 storeys high on Columbia Avenue but the top floor was removed in the 1940s for “tax purposes”
- In 1930, it has been said that the building temporarily housed Rossland’s only miniature golf course - run by Alec Smith who was the Allan Hotel proprietor, ex-mayor of Rossland and former proprietor of Hoffman House.