

# 1765 COLUMBIA AVENUE – MINERS’ UNION HALL



## 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, 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, the hall 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 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 1890s that 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. Traditionally, 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 restoration and rehabilitation in the late 1970s and again in 2017/18. It continues to maintain its status as a social centre and rallying point in the community.

### **Character Defining Elements:**

- Its location within 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 large, raised, raked stage. It is one of the few remaining raked stages in Canada.

- 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, 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 screenings, social gatherings, meetings, etc.
- Elements of the place which were restored in the late 1970s, including 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 flourishing and the population of the Rossland Camp was exploding.

Branch #38 was the first branch outside of the United States and was, perhaps, a natural extension of the union for men similarly employed in the mining industry given that many of the local miners came to Rossland from the mines of Montana and Idaho where the workforce was unionized.

The Union men assessed themselves a day's pay to pay for the construction of their meeting hall collecting \$6537.75. The Miners' Hall opened on July 16, 1898, to much fanfare. Miners and merchants closed up shop to join in the fun of a parade, rock drilling contest, tug-of-war and horseracing on Columbia Avenue. The Miners' Hall was declared by the local paper, to be "*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 three-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! This sturdy building withstood not only heavy snowfall, but also a sixteen-man patrol team that conducted drill practices in the attic before the Drill Hall was built in 1904. In 1913, it survived a cyclone.

Weston 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. Accessed from the main floor, an interior balcony built above the front entrance provided more space. On the lower level, there was a smaller meeting area (union's lodge room) with a low stage and family quarters for the union secretary and his family. Below the lower level, in the half basement, were the boilers for heating. The attic was left unfinished until a later date.

### **Miners' Union History**

This history is both interesting and complex and spans the life of active mining in Rossland. Jeremy Mouat's "Roaring Days" (1995) is highly recommended as a well-researched and documented book for those interested.

Rossland was considered 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 late 1890s. The significant labour legislation around the eight-hour work day was attributed to 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.

In 1899 the WFM's insistent lobbying was rewarded with legislation. Premier Charles Semlin enacted a labour program which included the eight-hour work day clause put forth by the WFM. Under pressure, the Premier passed this act, as failure to do so would have cost him many votes. This significant gain by the union was met with immediate opposition from the companies that argued fewer work hours per worker translated into a decrease in production.

For two years, the tension between the union and the company mounted. The breaking point came in 1901 when, due to poor investments, Whittaker Wright's London & Globe Finance Company went bankrupt prompting great losses for many British investors. Unfortunately, most of the Le Roi Mine capital came from these British sources. This disaster, coupled with friction that existed within the union itself, led to a strike vote by the membership on July 4, 1901.

The company, in an effort to keep the mines open, employed and often smuggled strike-breakers from the USA. The WFM was outraged by the company's conduct and sent for William Lyon Mackenzie King, Deputy Minister of Labour. As noted in the *Rossland Miner* on November 19, 1901:

*"According to an account by then Union Secretary Frank Woodside, 'We supplied hundreds of affidavits of violations of the law. After several days of investigation, he met with our executive and told us there was no doubt of flagrant violations.' However, instead of ordering the company to correct the situation, wrote Woodside, King 'told us to call off the strike, and all the members of the executive would*

*get good jobs. We told him that if this was his decision after all the evidence we had produced of violation of the Canadian law, that he had better go back home before the striking miners who were waiting for some action found out his attitude. He left that night'."*

The union continued the strike as long as its funds lasted. Once its financial support began to dwindle, the end of the strike was evident. On January 24, the miners agreed to settle, and the men went back to work. The long and bitter struggle left many members disillusioned with their union, yet some very important legislation arose from the strike. On June 20, 1902, the unions were freed from "liability of financial losses that picketing might bring to employers during a strike" and the ruling remained valid until 1973. King's 1907 Industrial Disputes Investigation Act and the Workmen's Compensation Act were directly influenced by the WFM. The WFM in Rossland played an undeniable role in shaping union history in this country.

The hall sheltered union activists who were seeking refuge from the Pinkerton police employed by the companies. According to Jeremy Moat's *Roaring Days*:

*"Joe Hill, a labour organizer and songwriter later framed for murder by Utah's copper bosses and executed by a firing squad, met with union organizers here"*

Another documented incident involved the secretary of the union and a unionist from Idaho. George B. Casey was elected secretary of the WFM in 1905 and, upon election to office, George and his wife, Clara, moved into the secretary's quarters located on the lower floor of the hall. Mr. Casey hid Jack Simpkins, a unionist who was wanted in connection with the murder of the Governor of Idaho. It was suspected that high ranking members of the WFM were responsible for planting the bomb that killed the governor. The union was embittered by the governor for his alleged command to have miners arrested and then beaten with "bullwhips".

*"Simpkins had twenty five thousand dollars on his head....The Western Federation of Miners' Union*

*made arrangements and hired a young lawyer at that time, by the name of Clarence Darrow to search for evidence ....”*

Mr. Casey was so impressed with Mr. Darrow, with whom he became good friends that he vowed to name his son after the lawyer. In 1908, Clarence Darrow Casey was born on the “Nickel Plate Flats.”

The hall even housed a few extraordinary and occasionally unexpected events such as a childbirth and a boxing match. In 1910, Clara Casey gave birth to her second son, George, in their small apartment in the Miners’ Hall. Before the turn of the century, many Rosslanders witnessed a World Heavyweight Boxing exhibition in the Miners’ Hall. The buzz of excitement and anticipation echoed in the hall when the challenger, Alex Stewart, a member of Rossland’s Police Force, entered the ring with Bob Fitzsimmons, the World Heavyweight Champion. Fitzsimmons literally stunned Stewart and showed the spectators why he held the coveted title.

Following the strike of 1917, the radical socialism that characterized the WFM was replaced with a more conciliatory method of negotiation which saw the birth of the Workmen’s Co-operative Committee. At that time, 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; consequently, the Rossland hall became known as the Mine Mill Hall.

In 1929, Cominco ceased to operate its Rossland mines and the organized labour activity shifted to Trail. The hall was purchased by the Knights of Pythias Lodge 21, Rossland branch. In 1952, the Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers Union repurchased the Miners’ Hall and rebuilt the hall’s foundation. In 1967, the Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers Union merged with Steelworkers, Local 480.

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.

### **Restoration 1978 – 1983**

In 1978, the Rossland Heritage Society was formed in an effort to restore this landmark. It secured a ninety-nine-year lease with the United Steelworkers Local 480 under the condition that the hall be operated and maintained by the Society or by the City of

Rosslund. Extensive damage to the hall was caused by a freely flowing creek beneath the building. The walls were like sponge and daylight could be seen through the cracks in the wall. The supporting timber beams were so rotted by the moisture from the creek that the building could have slid down the hillside. More than one hundred tons of dirt had to be removed from the floor level and \$250,000 had to be spent in order to stabilize the building before any restoration could occur.

The Heritage Society made some interesting discoveries while stabilizing the building. On December 7, 1978, Jim Larson, a member of the work crew, found bones embedded in the wall of the building while removing damaged material. Any visions of scandal quickly disappeared when he found the following note from Joe Kloeman:

*“Rossland, B.C. April 25, 1923  
Placed here by Joe Kloeman. The bones of an  
unknown person, used by the Doctors to demonstrate  
first aid for miners.  
Joe Kloeman”*

While removing some of the decayed walls, the Society found a secret room which contained a bed, a locked ballot box and some diaries. The secret room was apparently designed to harbour union activists from the United States who were hiding from the Pinkerton police at the turn of the century. The diaries were actually journals belonging to the Ladies Auxiliary of the union. Because of the controversy surrounding the women’s involvement in the union, the women were reluctant to be identified, so code letters were used and they were referred to as Sister J., Sister S., etc.

The provincial and federal governments contributed a combined total of \$590,000 for the restoration. The official opening of the renovated hall was held on August 6, 1983.

### **Restoration 2015 - 2017**

By the mid-2010s, the hall was again in need of repair. In November 2015, Fairbank Architects and Thomas Loh Architect provided a design brief for the Miners’ Hall renovation and restoration. This design plan encompassed:

- Building exterior maintenance and upgrade, including new metal roof, replacing deteriorated siding and structural framing, refinishing all siding, trim, windows, removing the existing chimney, repairing exit stairs
- Attic floor reclamation included developing a new Performer's Green Room, lounge, multipurpose room, washrooms, kitchen and upgrading existing staircases. This required new mechanical and electrical work.
- Façade restoration included restoring the gable end parapet, reopening the balcony, and recreating heritage elements of the original balcony. (A true restoration was not possible due to building code requirements).
- Entry Plaza/ Forecourt remodel included reconstructing concrete retaining wall, steps and ramp. Adding decorative railings and bannisters.

Funding for this project was provided by City of Rossland, Rossland Council for Arts and Culture, Columbia Basin Trust, Heritage BC Legacy Fund, Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance, Heritage Canada, Government of Canada through the Canada 150 Infrastructure Fund, Kootenay Savings Community Foundation, Teck Metals Ltd and community members & organizations.

In total \$1.2 million was raised for this renovation. The renovation was completed in 2017 and resulted in a fully restored exterior as well as additional usable space in the attic.



Attic Upgrade – Attic Lounge and Kitchenette

## **2019 Designation of Miners' Union Hall as a National Historic Site**

In June 2019, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada declared the Rossland Miners' Union Hall a National Historic Site. This recognition was the result of significant legislation brought about through lobbying efforts of the Rossland branch, No. 38 of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM).

When Local No. 38 started, unions had no legal protection or recognition. In the battle to obtain both, Rossland became a rallying point for the working man. Not as political as their eastern counterparts or as violent as their American peers, British Columbian miners chose to have their proposals passed into law by the government. The peaceful approach of the local miners and the understanding of good public relations by union leaders, made discussions with government possible. The legislative route gave them legal standing with its accompanying protections and it gave the union the legitimacy and recognition it had not had before the Rossland miners took this approach.

The legislation that was enacted was:

- the Eight-Hour Work Day statute for all metalliferous mines in the province passed into law;

- the federal Conciliation Act of 1900 which helped create the Department of Labour and the Canadian system of industrial relations;
- introduction of labour legislation in BC, particularly the Trade Union Protection Act (1902) which protected unions from liability for employers' financial losses incurred during a strike;
- the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1900 in the British Columbia legislature which was the forerunner to the British Columbia Workmen's Compensation Act of 1917;
- In 1907, the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act with its principle of compulsory investigation became the basis of the Canadian system of collective bargaining.

The WFM's strong unionized voice continued to reach Victoria and Ottawa demanding other statutes and regulations. Many of these original rulings evolved into provincial and Canadian laws on labour, employment, safety and compensation. The WFM was one of the most influential and successful labour unions in British Columbia's history.

The Miners' Hall continues to retain a respected level of social value to the community and as a social hub for local events and activities.