

THE BURNING OF BARKERVILLE



FREDERICK DALLY (1838 - 1914)

Dally, the official photographer to Governor Arthur Kennedy, visited the Cariboo goldfields in 1867 and again in 1868. He had his own studio in Barkerville but it, like the rest of the town, went up in flames on 16 September 1868. Dally afterwards sold his photography business and decided to become a dentist in the United States. He eventually returned to Staffordshire in England. This portrait of Dally in his masonic regalia was taken by H.J. Whitlock and Son Ltd., Birmingham & Wolverhampton 'By Royal Warrant Photographers to the King'. Dally took the majority of photographs that appear in the Cariboo Gold rush section of this book.

HISTORICAL PHOTO#028832 ROYAL BC MUSEUM & ARCHIVES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HENRY JOSEPH WHITLOCK AND SON LTD,
BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND, AROUND 1888.

Frederick Dally, one of the town's photographers, composed the only known manuscript of the burning of Barkerville on 16 September 1868.

"The eve of the great fire of Barkerville was remarkable for the grandeur of the Aurora Borealis so often to be seen in these high northern latitudes. It commenced at 8 p.m. by the shooting up of upright parallel rays in the west and shortly after by the same appearance in the east, also the same in the north. The night was cold and frosty, the brilliancy of the rays increased quickly and seemed so close that an observer in Barkerville, which town is over 4000 feet above the level of the sea, seemed to be within 2000 feet of them or less and could see all the changes minutely. The rays, when buffeted by the cold south wind that came down the canyon on Williams Creek, appeared to throw out a wavering and unsteady light in the same way that a mark will when made by a piece of phosphorous. In the south appeared a long fleecy cloud and leave a striking resemblance to the form of a snake, which changed but little until it felt the effects of the wind, when it began to waver and emit bright irradiations which spread so rapidly that the whole heavens was one bright and then gradually dying out so faint that it would be doubtful whether it had not entirely disappeared and again it would shoot forth brighter and more glorious than ever.

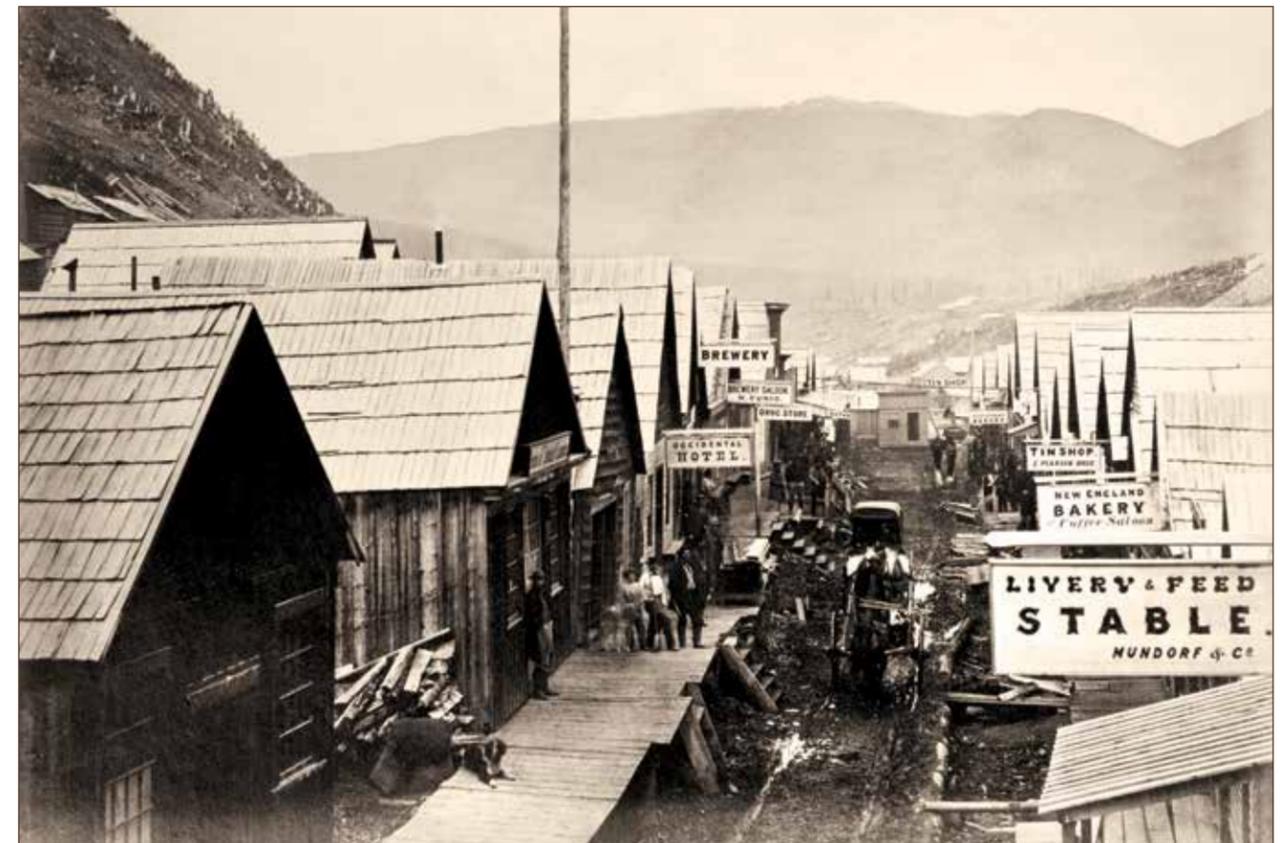
Whilst viewing this grand spectacle, my attention was drawn to the town...where dancing and revelry was going on, by the number of stove-pipes very close together coming through the wooden roofs of the buildings at every height and in every direction that were sending forth myriads of sparks and numbers of them were constantly alighting on the roofs, where they would remain many seconds before going out, and from the dryness of the season I came to the conclusion that unless we shortly had rain or snow to cover the roofs, for they remain covered with snow all winter, that the town was doomed. I may as well here state that Barkerville was the principal mining town in British Columbia, built entirely of wood, and was situated in a valley with Williams Creek running through it, in the Baldhead Range and is surrounded

on all sides by a sea of mountains together with spurs from the Rocky Mountains, of which the Baldhead is the chief gold bearing range in British Columbia.

When I mentioned the probability of a fire to the businessmen of the place they answered me and said, it had become their settled opinion that the wood the town was built of was different to other wood and that it would not burn, otherwise the town would have been burnt long since, for said they, see the number of small fires that have occurred and not one of them sufficiently destructive to destroy a house, and so they remained passive in their fancied security and had nothing done to guard against so dire a calamity.

The morning of the fire was bright and clear and the sluice boxes (used by the miners to convey the water to wash the pay dirt when taken out of their claims) bore traces of a hard frost as the icicles that were depending from the flumes were two or three yards in length by several feet in depth, looking very beautiful. And the business of the day commenced, although trade was somewhat dull, still it was steady and profitable.

I had occasion to go down street to make a call on a young man, Patterson, who had formerly been a steward on the passenger ship "Cyclone" that I came to the country in. He showed me over his large and well built premises containing a large stock of goods and, as he informed me, all



THE MAIN STREET THROUGH BARKERVILLE SHOWING THE BOARDWALK, ROAD AND BUSINESSES BEFORE THE FIRE.

HISTORICAL PHOTO#005191 ROYAL BC MUSEUM & ARCHIVES PHOTOGRAPHY BY FREDERICK DALLY, 1867-1868.

A VIEW UP WILLIAMS CREEK TO BARKERVILLE

In his book "Very Far West Indeed" R. Byron Johnson gives the following description of Williams creek: "The unfortunate little stream had been treated in a most ignominious manner. A little above the town it flowed along silvery and clear as it had been wont to do; but soon inroads were made upon its volume in the shape of ditches cut from it, and continued along the sides of the hills, to feed the huge overshot waterwheels that appeared in all directions.

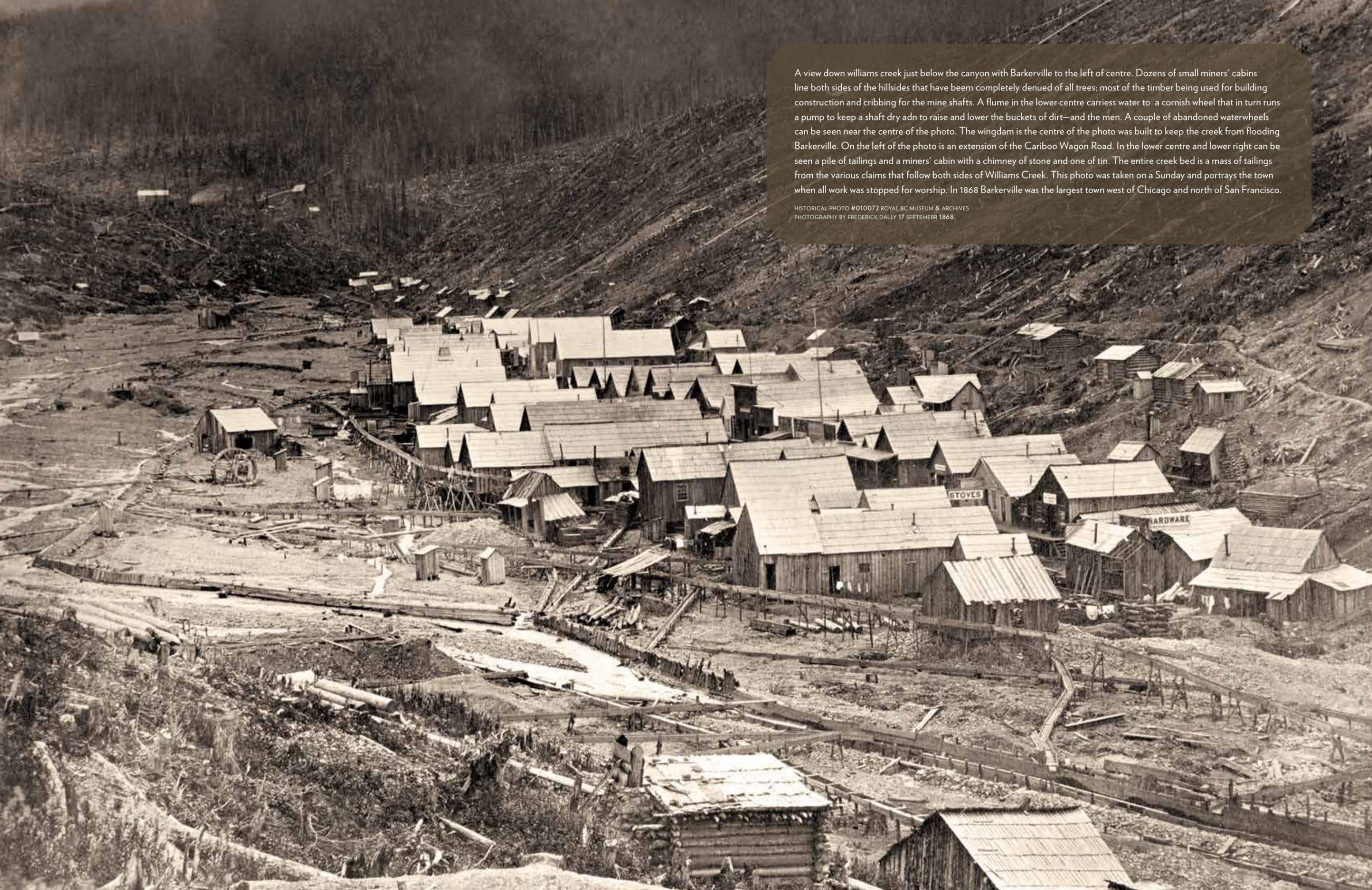
"Then its course became diverted in five or six different channels that were varied every now and then as the miners sought to work the surface. At intervals dirty streams were poured forth by the

sluices, in which the earth dug from beneath was being washed by the water, and here and there the stream was insulted by being shut up for a few hundred yards in a huge wooden trough called a flume.

"Across the breath of the valley was a strange heterogeneous gathering of smaller flumes, carrying water to the different diggings and supported at various heights from the ground by props, windlasses at the mouths of shafts, waterwheels, banks of tailings, and miner's log huts.

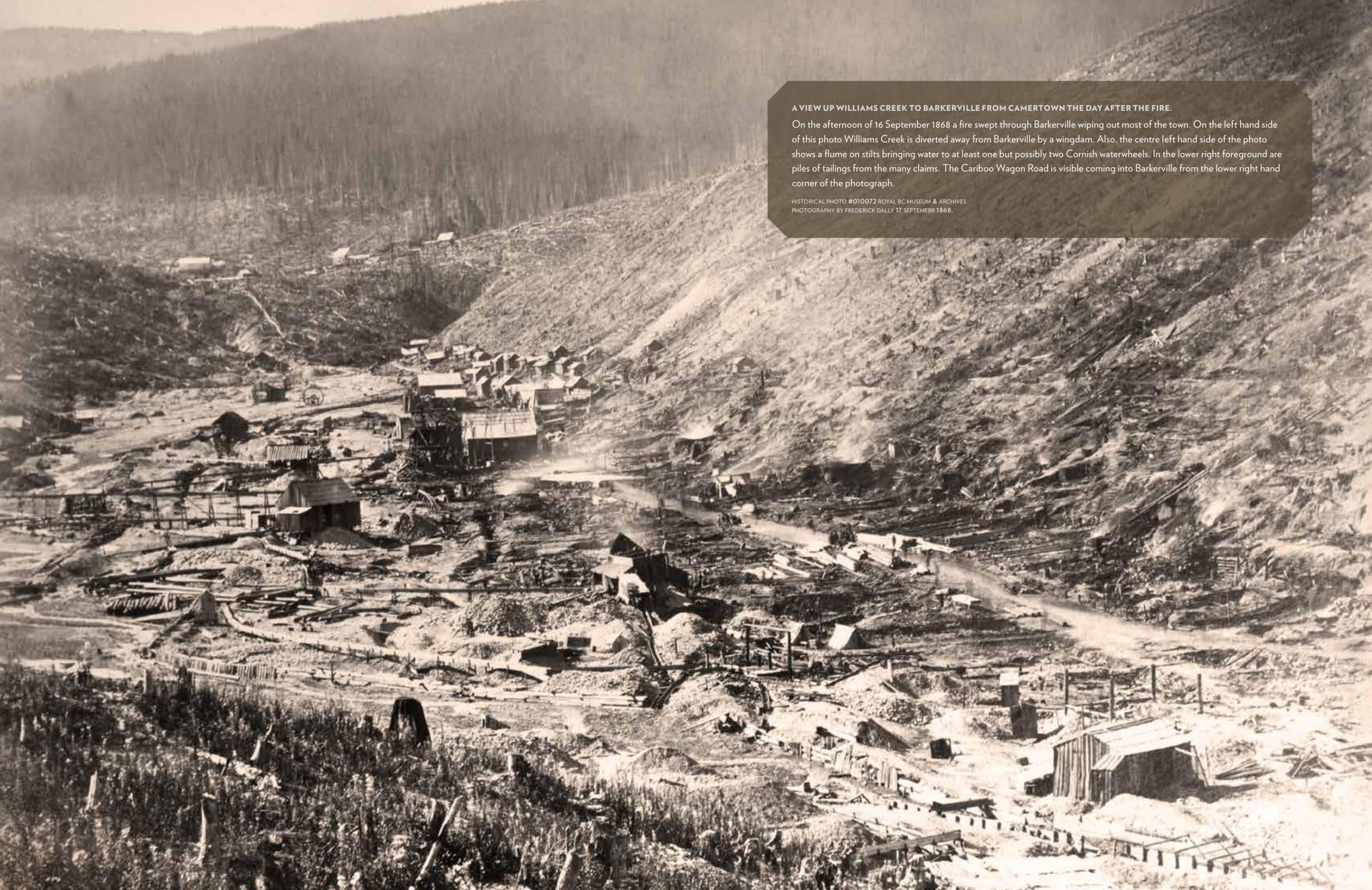
HISTORICAL PHOTO #10070 ROYAL BC MUSEUM & ARCHIVES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRDERICK DALLY, 1868.





A view down Williams Creek just below the canyon with Barkerville to the left of centre. Dozens of small miners' cabins line both sides of the hillsides that have been completely denuded of all trees; most of the timber being used for building construction and cribbing for the mine shafts. A flume in the lower centre carries water to a Cornish wheel that in turn runs a pump to keep a shaft dry and to raise and lower the buckets of dirt—and the men. A couple of abandoned waterwheels can be seen near the centre of the photo. The wingdam in the centre of the photo was built to keep the creek from flooding Barkerville. On the left of the photo is an extension of the Cariboo Wagon Road. In the lower centre and lower right can be seen a pile of tailings and a miners' cabin with a chimney of stone and one of tin. The entire creek bed is a mass of tailings from the various claims that follow both sides of Williams Creek. This photo was taken on a Sunday and portrays the town when all work was stopped for worship. In 1868 Barkerville was the largest town west of Chicago and north of San Francisco.

HISTORICAL PHOTO #010072 ROYAL BC MUSEUM & ARCHIVES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FREDERICK DALLY 17 SEPTEMBER 1868.



A VIEW UP WILLIAMS CREEK TO BARKERVILLE FROM CAMERTOWN THE DAY AFTER THE FIRE.

On the afternoon of 16 September 1868 a fire swept through Barkerville wiping out most of the town. On the left hand side of this photo Williams Creek is diverted away from Barkerville by a wingdam. Also, the centre left hand side of the photo shows a flume on stilts bringing water to at least one but possibly two Cornish waterwheels. In the lower right foreground are piles of tailings from the many claims. The Cariboo Wagon Road is visible coming into Barkerville from the lower right hand corner of the photograph.

HISTORICAL PHOTO #010072 ROYAL BC MUSEUM & ARCHIVES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FREDERICK DALLY 17 SEPTEMBER 1868.



Miners examine the total destruction of the fire that swept through Barkerville on the afternoon of the 16 September 1868. Only one building was left standing. Frederick Dally, after a miserable night sleeping in drenched clothing at Richfield, gathered together his camera equipment and recorded the tragic event for posterity the day after the fire.

HISTORICAL PHOTO# 10071 ROYAL BC MUSEUM & ARCHIVES PHOTOGRAPHY BY FREDERICK DALLY, 1868.

paid for. I congratulated him most cordially as I felt he deserved it for his industry, steadiness and perseverance, but little did I think that in less than two hours not a vestige of the town would remain but a burning mass of ruins. I gave him an invitation to visit my new building, just finished and nicely furnished.

I returned to my house and seated myself in a chair and again meditated on the probability of a fire when I heard several running on the plank sidewalk and heard one exclaim, "Good God! What is up?" I ran instantly to see the cause of the alarm and to my astonishment beheld a column of smoke rising from the roof of the saloon adjoining the steward's house.

I saw the fire had a firm hold of the building and, as there was no water to be had, I felt certain that the town would be destroyed. So I collected as much of my stock of goods as possible together and hastened with them to the middle of the creek and left them there, whilst I made several journeys after other goods. The fire originated in a small room adjoining Barry & Adler's Saloon. One of the dancing girls was ironing and by some means or other, the heat of the stove-pipe set the canvas ceiling on fire, which instantly communicated with the roof and no less than two minutes the whole saloon was in flames, which quickly set the opposite business in the Bank of British North America in flames.

So the fire traveled at the same time up and down the sides of the street, and as fast against the wind as it did before it, and although my building was nearly fifty yards away from where the fire originated, in less than twenty minutes, it together with the whole of the lower part of the town was a sheet of fire, hissing, crackling, and roaring furiously. There was, in a store not far from my place, fifty kegs of blasting powder and had that not been removed at the commencement of the fire and put down a dry shaft, most likely not a soul would have been left alive of the number that was then present. Blankets and bedding were seen to be sent at least 200 feet high when a number of coal oil tins (5 gallons) exploded, and the top of one of the tins was sent five miles and dropped at the sawmill on Grouse Creek.

Every person was thinking of his own property and using desperate efforts to save it, and some not placing it sufficiently far out of reach of the element had all consumed. And others again had it taken so far that during the time they were away trying to save more property, Chinamen and others were stealing from them as fast as they could carry it away. One stout Chinaman showing too many creases about him that did not look quite natural, the police made him strip, and off came six shirts, two pairs of drawers, three pairs of trousers, another had hidden away behind the false canvas wall of his house over one thousand dollars worth of flour, rice, boots etc., etc. and every useful article usually sold by storekeepers in the mines.

The town was divided by the "Barker" flume crossing it at a height of fifty feet, and as it was carrying all the water that was near, it kept the fire at bay for a short time from the upper part of the town, but the hot wind soon drove those that were standing on it away. The fire then quickly caught the other half of the buildings, also the forest on the mountain ridge at the back, and as the sun set behind the mountain the grandeur of the scene will not be quickly forgotten by those who noticed

it. Then the cold frosty wind came sweeping down the canyon, blowing without sympathy on the houseless and distressed sufferers, causing the iron-hearted men to mechanically raise the small collars of their coats (if they had been so fortunate as to have one) as a protection against it. Household furniture of every description was piled up along the side of the creek, and the people were preparing to make themselves as comfortable for the night, under the canopy of heaven, as circumstances would allow. And in the early morning as I passed down the creek, I saw strong men rise from their hard beds on the cold stones, having slept wrapped in a pair of blankets, cramped with cold and in great pain, until a little exercise brought renewed life into their systems. At a quarter to three p.m. the fire commenced; at half past four p.m. the whole town was in flames, and at 10 o'clock the next morning signs of rebuilding had commenced. Lumber was fast arriving from the saw-mill and was selling at one hundred and twenty five dollars per one thousand feet, the number of houses destroyed was one hundred and sixteen. After the fire I found I had the key of my house in my pocket which reminded me of a circumstance that occurred two years before at a town a mile from Barkerville, when a certain Barrister who was in the habit of drinking more than was good for him, when informed that his house was on fire left the saloon he was in and went and stood on the opposite side of the street to his house and exclaimed, "Never mind boys, never mind, I don't care, let it burn, I've got the key in my pocket." (and so had I.)

The fire was caused by a miner trying to kiss one of the girls that was ironing, and knocking against the stove displaced the pipe that went through the canvas ceiling, and through the roof, which at once took fire. This information I got from an eye witness, who never made it generally known thinking that it might result in a lynching scene."