

Now It's Called Princeton: A Review

David Gregory

The title of this CD by Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat echoes that of a contemporary folksong about the town of Princeton and its inhabitants. Composed in 2007 by Zeke Hoskin, it sums up with humour in just a few verses (and a chorus) the history of

the town (formerly known as Vermilion Forks) and the Similkameen valley in which it is located, just east of the Cascade mountains in the western Okanagan:

Now It's Called Princeton

Zeke Hoskin

Voice

The Si - mil - ka meen peop - le, be - fore there were trains, Trad - ed pipe stone and

paints all a - cross the great plains. The white man's dis - eas - es brought most of them

CHORUS

down, The rest took their hors - es and got out of town - Trapp ers and min - ers and

ranchers and min - ers and logg - ers and min - ers and tour - ists and min - ers. Now it's called

Prince ton, it once was Ver - mil - ion Forks, But to us it's a town in a bill - ion

The Similkameen people, before there were trains,
Traded pipestone and paints all across the great plains.
The white man's diseases brought most of them down
The rest took their horses and got out of town.

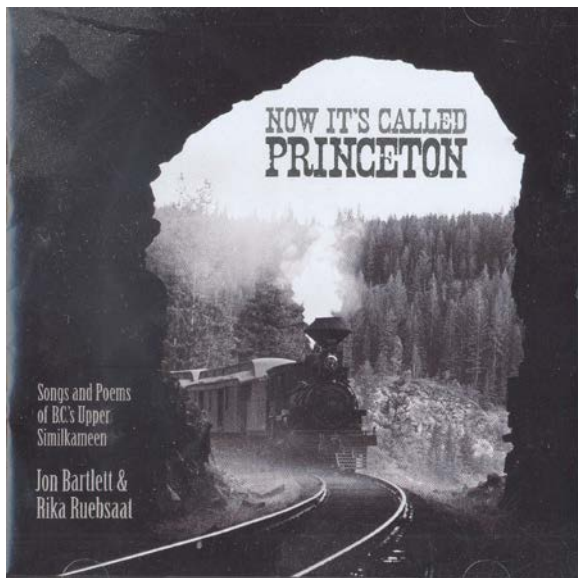
CHORUS:

Ranchers and miners and trappers and miners
And loggers and miners and tourists and miners.
Now it's called "Princeton", it once was Vermilion

Forks, and to us it's a town in a billion.
The big cattle ranches worked well in their day,
But the drive to the big cities just wouldn't pay.
The trappers kept trapping a century or two,
But trapping's a life that supports very few.

Mostly it's copper, but twice it was gold,
A few tons of platinum, a mountain of coal.
They followed wherever the ore could be found,
And too many left blood and bones in the ground.

Now it's the logging that brings in our bread,
And folks from the coast come to live here instead.
The world keeps on changing as decades roll by,
But, whatever we live on, this town will not die.



That song is the final track on this remarkable recording, and it is the only item on the disc that is not traditional in origin. The CD is a creative yet scholarly exploration of the musical culture of the upper Similkameen valley in B.C.'s southern interior during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The social history of the region is interpreted through its vernacular songs and poetry in a way I have never seen done before in Canada.

The material on the disc is divided into four main sections: mining, logging, railways and settlement, with one lone selection about prohibition (although the song "Come All You Coal Miners" could obviously also have been slotted in the mining section). Mining in the Princeton region is evoked by six items, two of which, "The Hard Rock Miner" and "I'm Only a Broken-down Mucker", will be already familiar to listeners well-acquainted with the Phil Thomas Collection of B.C. folksongs and Jon and Rika's earlier recordings. The new pieces are a poem

"A Miner's Candlestick", "The Hangup Stick" (a song from the *Similkameen Star* in 1900), a composition by Hedley miner John Henry titled "Splitting the Core" and a song by Paddy Graber, who worked at the Copper Mountain mine in the early 1950s, called "The Copper Mountain Raise".

Logging is represented by two songs from the Thomas collection: "Hairwire Outfit" and "The Greenchain Song". The topic of railways is accorded four items, including the popular songs "Kettle Valley Line" and "Gerry Go Ile the Car", together with a poem and a song from the *Similkameen Star*, "Wanted, a Railroad" and "Wait Till the Railroad's Finished". About half the CD is devoted to songs and poems about settlers in the Princeton area and their experiences as pioneers, whether attempting to earn their living on the land, in the forests or in the mines. The songs include "The Banks of the Similkameen" (a B.C. variant of "Lakes of Ponchartrain"), and Paddy Graber's moving "The Hope Slide", while among the poems may be found "Dead Horse Upon the Tulameen" and the satirical "A Plea for Single Men".

Taken together with Jon and Rika's companion book, *Dead Horse on the Tulameen* (reviewed in the next section), this compilation of songs and poetry is an extraordinary accomplishment: a pioneering study of which any academic folklorist or historian would have been very proud. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this work, which will hopefully suggest to many local historians and lovers of traditional culture the feasibility of doing the same kind of research for their own town or region.

Yet, let me hasten to add, this very musical CD is not merely a documentary record. It is at the same time a highly entertaining re-creation and celebration of the vernacular culture of southern British Columbia, thereby helping the region to retain its uniqueness and to continue living its own cultural life in the face of TV, the Internet and the powerful, often dominating, culture of the big neighbour to the south.