

B.C. marks 160th birthday anniversary

Or, is that 147th? Or, 169th? Or ...

British Columbia quietly celebrated an historic birthday on August 2, when it marked the 160th anniversary of its founding as a British colony back in 1858.

It was the year of B.C.'s first gold rush, sparked by the discovery of significant quantities of the yellow metal on the lower Fraser River, primarily between the fur-trading posts at Hope and Yale.

Tens of thousands of gold-seekers traveled north from California – which, following its own famous ‘rush’ nine years earlier, in 1849, had become the United States’ 31st state – and descended on the Fraser to pan for gold along the river’s multitude of sand-bars and gravel-banks.

(Motorists driving through the Fraser Canyon today may be reminded of B.C.’s 1858 gold rush when they pass through tunnels named Sailor Bar and China Bar, or stop for gas in the town of Boston Bar.)

In response to the influx of so many fevered, sometimes lawless prospectors, the United Kingdom – which had a special and historic interest in the region, primarily through charters issued to the Hudson’s Bay Company – established a new Colony of British Columbia so as to enforce some semblance of law and order.

The vast majority of the mostly-American gold-miners soon were disappointed by their venture to the wilds of British Columbia, however, and returned to the United States.

Still, a few hardy souls persevered in



A wagon-train moves along the original Cariboo Wagon Road in the Fraser Canyon.
PHOTO CREDIT: BC Archives

their quest for gold, fanning-out as they trudged northward, slowly moving up the mighty Fraser and its numerous tributaries.

Early in 1862, an English sailor (from Cornwall) by the name of Billy Barker struck the motherlode on Williams Creek, about 85 kms. east of the present-day city of Quesnel.

B.C.’s second rush – the Cariboo Gold Rush – quickly got underway and before long a new and bustling town, Barkerville, was established high up in the Cariboo Mountains.

Before long, the 400-mile long, government-built Cariboo Wagon Road – also known as the Main Trunk Road – was connecting Yale and Barkerville with a regularly-scheduled stagecoach

service carrying passengers and goods to and from the goldfields.

In the south, steamboats operated on the Fraser River between Yale and New Westminster, the Colony’s new capital city. Paddle-wheelers also ran across the Strait of Georgia, providing communication between New Westminster and the largest city in the region, Victoria, capital-city of the neighbouring British Colony of Vancouver Island.

So, Happy 160th Birthday, British Columbia.

Except, the actual date of the founding of British Columbia is slightly hazy, which makes the celebration of birthdays somewhat challenging.

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In part that's because the Colony of Vancouver Island was founded by the United Kingdom in 1849 – a good nine years before B.C. was created.

That event was sparked by the Hudson Bay Company setting up a trading post, called Fort Victoria, at the southern tip of the island in 1843. And that was motivated by the steadily-increasing number of American settlers moving along the Oregon Trail in the 1840s to take up farming and other pursuits in the Pacific Northwest.

Previously, the Hudson Bay's Pacific headquarters was based at Fort Washington, not far from modern-day Portland. But the creation by the United States government of the Oregon Territory in 1846 prompted the HBC to transfer its operations to Victoria, and the U.K. also felt obliged to assert British sovereignty by founding the island colony.

The two British colonies – Vancouver Island and British Columbia – remained separate and distinct until 1866, when the U.K. unilaterally forced union on the two. Why, London asked, pay for a pair governors, two attorneys-general, two colonial-secretaries and so on, when merging the two tiny and remote colonies into a single entity might produce significant cost-savings?

With a stroke of a U.K. pen, the two Pacific colonies became one – and it

was called British Columbia.

So, the original founding of B.C. – its birth-date – possibly occurred in 1849, when the Colony of Vancouver Island, which later became an integral component of British Columbia, was established.

Or, it may have been in 1858 when the Colony of British Columbia was formed, or it even might be considered as 1866, when the two unique colonies were forcibly married into a united Colony of British Columbia.

So much for the founding dates of the Colony – what about the founding of the Province of B.C.?

Here the answer is much clearer, because B.C. officially joined Confederation and became Canada's sixth province on July 20, 1871.

The newly-created province received six seats in the House of Commons – our population at the time, vaguely counted at less than 40,000, warranted no more than one or two seats on the basis of 'representation by population,' a founding principle of Confederation – plus another three in the Senate.

Canada also agreed to make a number of financial outlays in regards to B.C.'s entry into Confederation. Two

were sizeable, and one was extremely controversial.

The first was a pledge to extinguish the colonial debt of \$1 million, nearly all of which had been incurred in building the Cariboo Wagon Road.

The second was a promise, as described in the Terms of Union, for the Dominion government to begin building a national railway "within two years from the date of the Union ... [and] to secure the completion of such railway within ten years from the date of the Union."

The Conservatives, led by John A. Macdonald, generally supported this provision, while the Liberals were strongly opposed.

Subsequently, in the 1874 general election, Macdonald's Tories were defeated by Alexander Mackenzie's Grits. Construction of the railway was delayed until after Macdonald returned to government in 1879, and the Canadian Pacific Railway finally was completed in 1886.

B.C.'s population boomed once the CPR was opened – although not as quickly as did the population of Canada's prairies – and by 1901 the Pacific Province had 179,000 residents.

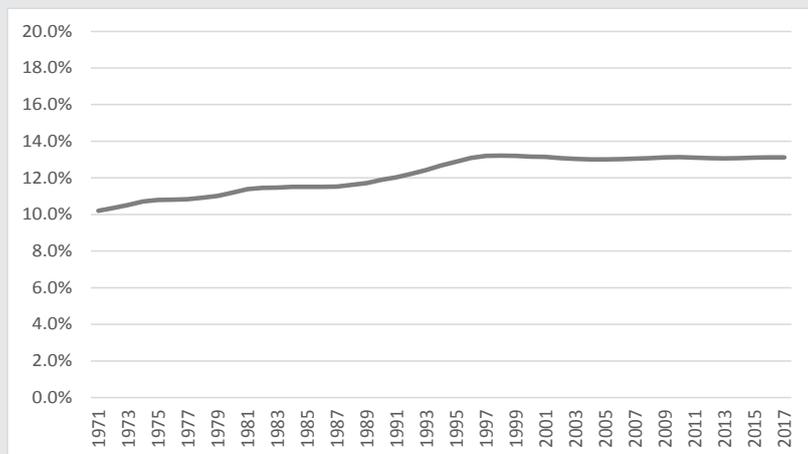
In 1931, even though B.C.'s population had exploded to 694,300, the province still remained the smallest – in terms of residents – in western Canada.

The Great Depression and the Second World War changed everything, and by 1951 B.C. – with a population of almost 1.2 million – had become the largest province in western Canada, and the third most-populous in the entire country.

In 2017, B.C. had more than 4.8 million residents – which represented 13.1 per cent of Canada's total population. And our province also had 42 seats in the House of Commons, or about 12.4 per cent of the total.

And few acknowledged our birthday – the 146th – as a Canadian province on July 20, because we celebrate B.C. Day on the first Monday of each August. This year that date was August 6.

B.C.'s share of Canada's population has stabilized over last two decades



SOURCE - Statistics Canada.