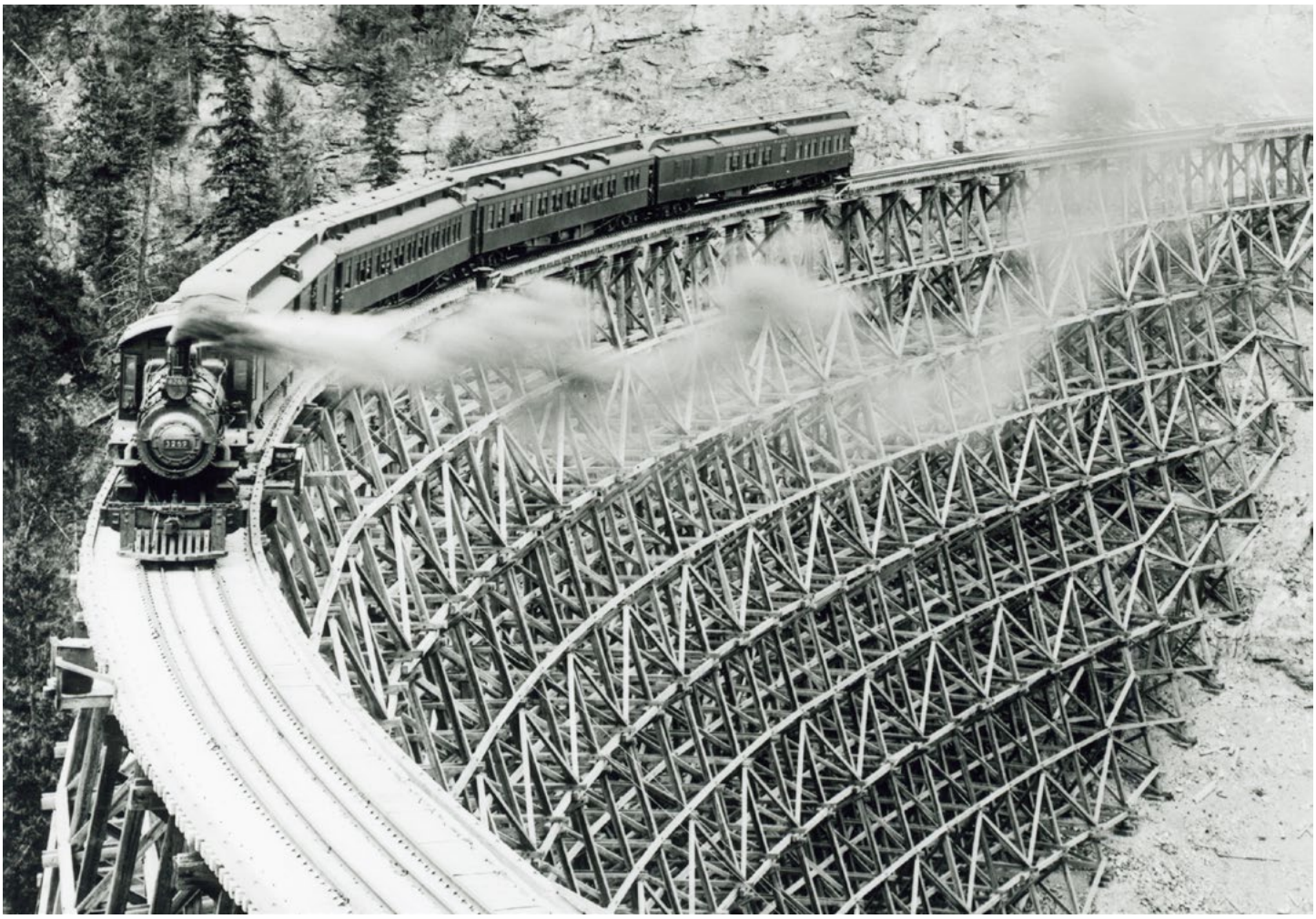
WELCOME

to the
Myra Canyon Explorer



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TRANS CANADA TRAIL
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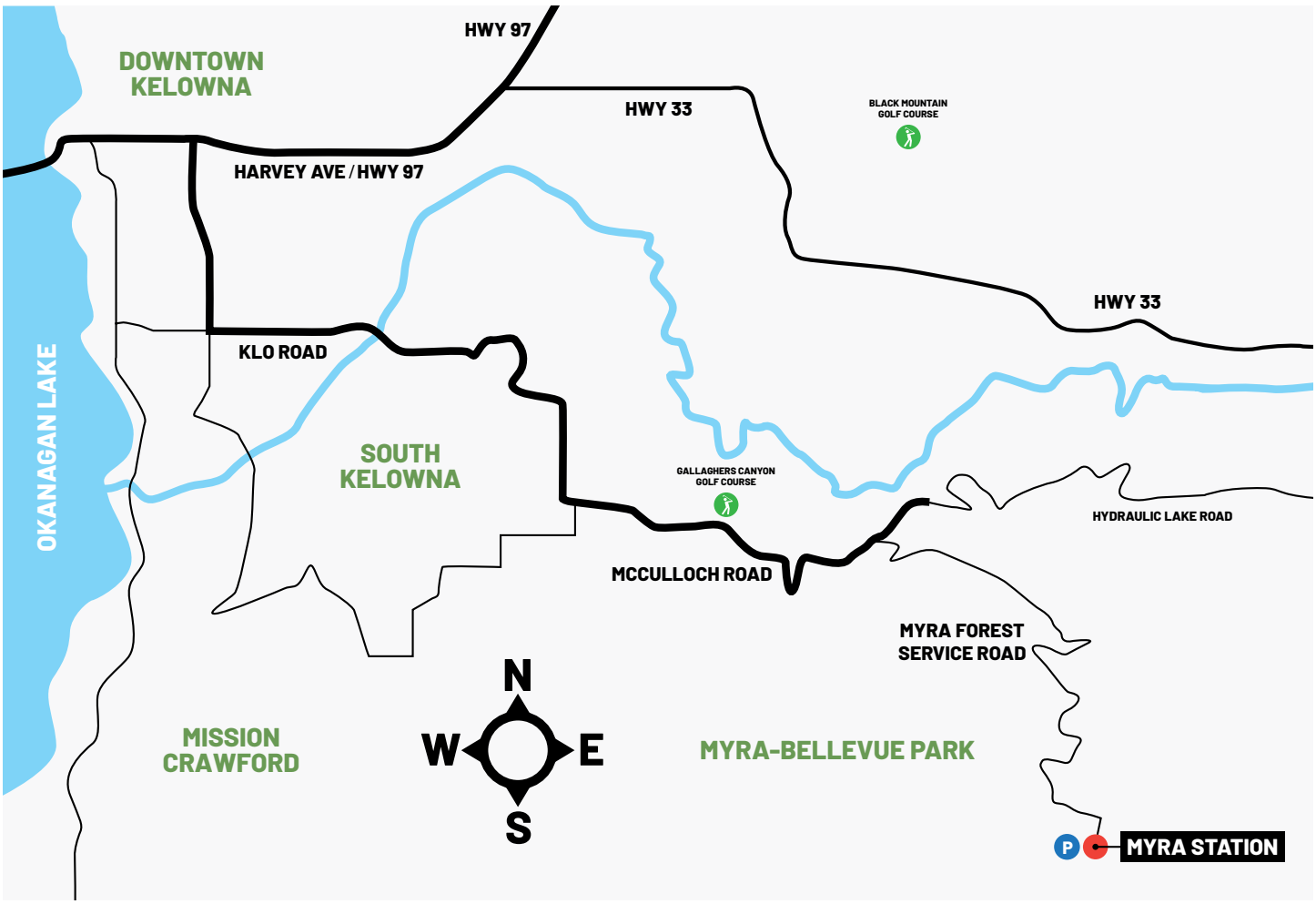
BRITISH COLUMBIA | BC Parks

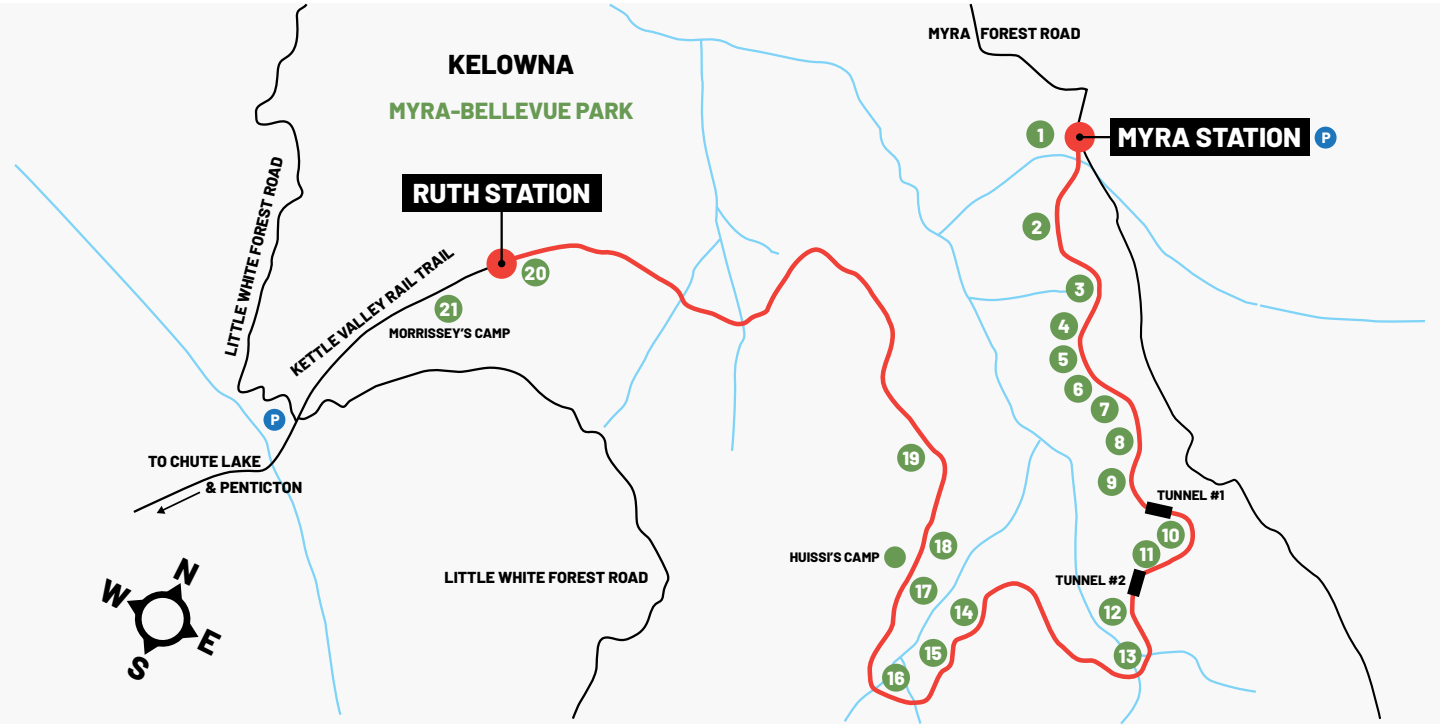
MYRA STATION

parking lot location



NOTE: The Myra Forest Service Road (FSR) to the popular Myra Canyon Trestles is generally a rough, gravel road that's manageable for most vehicles but can have potholes, washboarding, and rocks, requiring caution; conditions vary seasonally.

ENJOY
the self-guided trestle tour



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Discover the Okanagan Valley

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Myra Canyon and Kettle Valley Railway Self-Guided Tour

Why build a railway in Myra Canyon?

To understand why this railway was needed, it helps to understand British Columbia's geography. Between the Pacific coast and the Alberta border lie six north–south mountain ranges. In 1846, Britain and the United States set the 49th parallel as the border, but enforcement was weak. During the 1859 Cariboo gold rush, large numbers of Americans entered British territory.

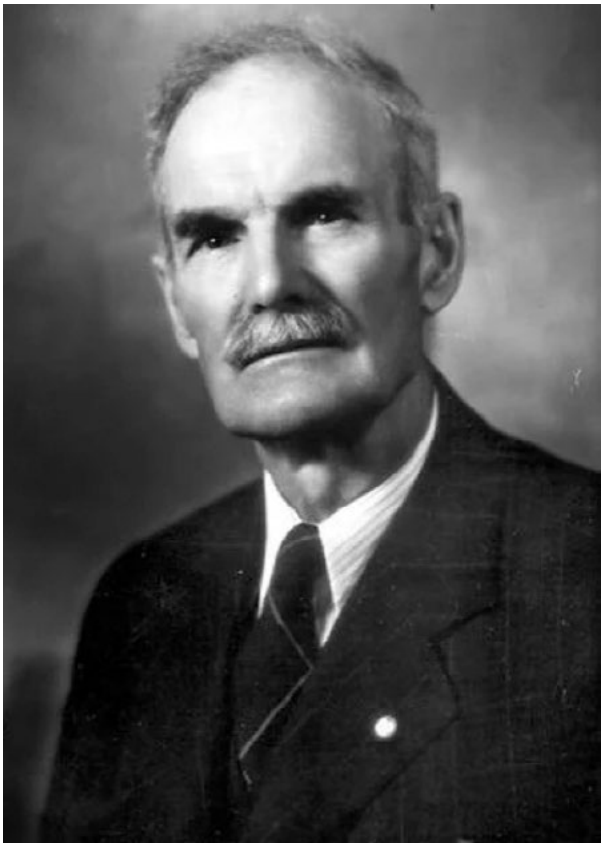
When British Columbia joined Canada in 1871, its natural resources were at risk of American exploitation. One condition of Confederation was completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, finished in 1885. Speed was essential, so the CPR followed a more northerly route through Kamloops, leaving southern BC without rail access.

In 1886, major silver discoveries near Nelson sparked a mining boom in southern BC. It became critical to keep these resources in Canada, creating an urgent need for an all-Canadian railway linking the Kootenays to the coast.

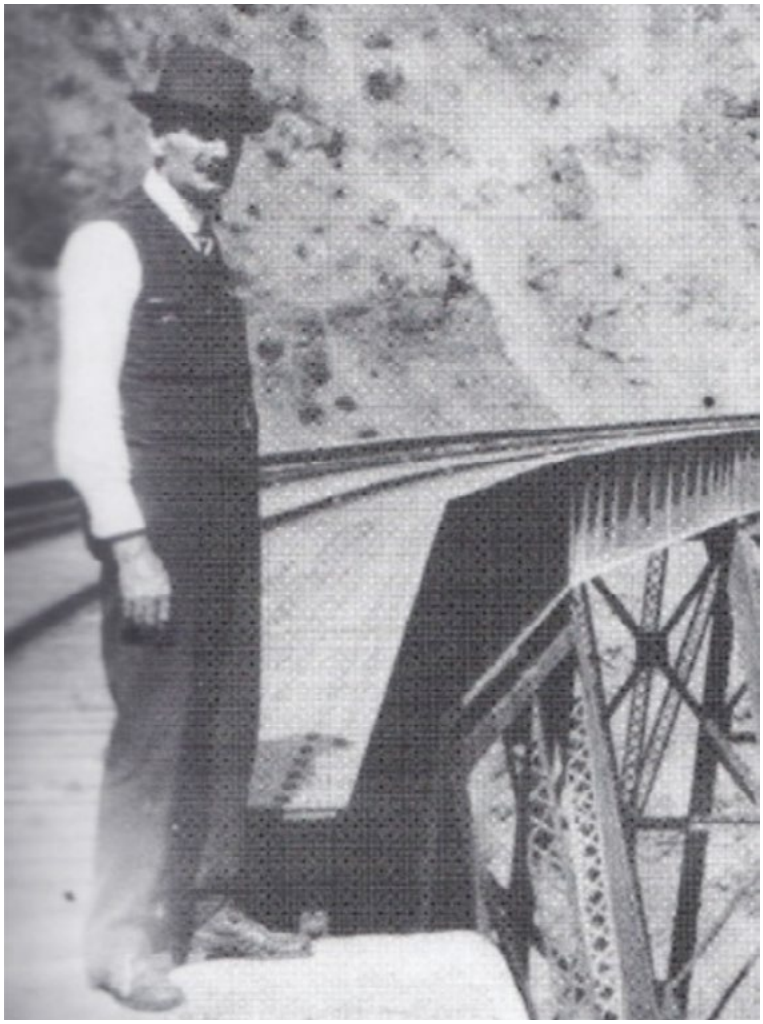
Most miners were American, supplies came from Spokane, and ore was refined in the United States, economically tying southern BC to the US and raising fears of political absorption. Completing the Kettle Valley Railway became essential to secure BC's place in Canada.

Who engineered the Kettle Valley Railway?

Born in Lanark County, Ontario, on June 16, 1864, Andrew McCulloch rose to become the legendary chief engineer of the Kettle Valley Railway. For British Columbians isolated in the Southern Interior, he built a lifeline through the mountains linking them to the province and helping secure the Kootenays against American takeover. The railway became known simply as **“McCulloch’s Wonder.”**



Andrew McCulloch
Chief Engineer of the Kettle Valley Railway



In 1888, McCulloch graduated from the Dominion Business College in Kingston, Ontario. A year later, at just 24, he abandoned accounting, boarded the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) west, and never looked back. He rose through the railway ranks — labourer, surveyor, resident engineer, division engineer — until, in May 1910, J.J Warren, president of the Kettle Valley Railway, named him chief engineer of the Kettle Valley Railway.

McCulloch seemingly hated Myra Canyon — and with reason. Though the gap across is barely a kilometer, the canyon plunges 700 feet. There was no direct crossing. The only possible route clung to the canyon walls, forcing the railway to curve along its rim for 12 kilometers, draped around the cliffs like a necklace.

Who built the railway?

Workers clearing rock and debris from the railway right of way

Surveyors at work laying the way

Building the Kettle Valley Railway became the largest construction project in Okanagan history. Contractors were paid $2.5 million — roughly $85 million today. At the height of construction in 1913, some 2,000 men labored in the canyon, living in camps perched above the rail bed along the cliffs. Huissi's camp near trestle 4 and Morrissey's camp near Ruth Station still mark where these crews lived and worked, preserving the story of the men who carved a railway through the mountains.

Many in the small town of Kelowna looked uneasily on the flood of foreign labourers, referring to them as "navvies" or "blanket stiffs." Yet these men were the heart of the Kettle Valley Railway. Far from home, Italians from Naples, Austrians from Habsburg Galicia, Russians from Vladivostok, Swedes from Stockholm, and countless others risked their lives in Myra Canyon. There was limited power equipment used in the construction of the KVR. Virtually all the work was done by hand. Through hardship, danger, and isolation, they carved a railway from sheer rock — an enduring monument to their strength and sacrifice.

Contractors were paid $2.5 million – roughly $85 million today.

The Work - Constructions Jobs on the KVR

Construction of the KVR required many men with a variety of skills. Engineers, surveyors, carpenters, accountants, inspectors, camp foremen, storekeepers and clerks (who managed the supplies and operational logistics) and had a working knowledge of English were all necessary at various stages of construction. These jobs were mostly filled by ‘whites’ who had the training to manage these more advanced tasks.

Kettle Valley Railway brass - seated - Andrew McCulloch left, JJ Warren right

The so-called “foreigners” were given the hardest work. With little more than muscle and grit, they labored using picks, shovels, hand drills, wheelbarrows, and their bare hands. They blasted and hauled rock, leveled the railbed, dug trestle foundations, and drove spikes that fastened steel to wood. Horses and mules pulled small bucket cars along temporary rails, carrying stone from the heights to fill the voids below. Every foot of track was paid for in sweat — and built by men whose strength held the railway together.

Working in a rock cut

The work crew in front of the cook tent

1 MYRA STATION

As you entered the parking lot, you will have passed by what was the location of Myra Station on the Kettle Valley Railway. Three KVR stations were named for daughters of railway men. Myra station honours Myra Newman, daughter of track foreman “Doc” Newman, though little is known of her. Today the remains of Myra Station have long disappeared into the mists of history.

Today the remains of Myra Station have long disappeared into the mists of history.

In the late 1920s Myra Station became a bustling transshipment point for a logging operation. The large parking lot you arrived in is present today because of this activity. The accompanying photo from 1929 shows logs waiting to be loaded and shipped to the Penticton Sawmill Company. There are two rail lines visible, one is the mainline and the other is a passing track.

Logs waiting to be loaded

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2 ROCK CUT

The Tunnel that Became a Rock Cut

The first major rock formation you encounter was originally intended to be a complete tunnel. Under the direction of contractor George Chew, construction began in January, 1913 with crews painstakingly carving through the mountainside. Chief Engineer Andrew McCulloch, however, inspected the site and deemed the overhead rock dangerously unstable. To ensure the safety of the line, he ordered the roof blown out in July, 1913, transforming the tunnel into the dramatic open rock cut you see today.

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3 TRESTLE 18

Prefabricated Giants

This is the first of 18 trestles that once spanned Myra Canyon. Once concrete foundations were completed, the wooden trestles were built in roughly one week. Imagine 100 carpenters in Beaverdell, 60 kilometers away, carefully crafting each trestle from measurements taken at the site. The vertical supports, or bents, stood 15 feet apart, like wooden soldiers ready to hold the weight of steel and timber. Once built, the trestles were disassembled, shipped by rail, and reassembled high above the canyon floor. Decades later, the Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society returned to the canyon—but unaware of the original numbering, they reversed the order, giving the trestles a new story to tell.

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3 TRESTLE SAFETY

Foremen relied on this language of timber to keep the railway – and its passengers – safe.

Section foremen had a critical ritual: inspecting every trestle along their stretch of railway. They would station themselves beneath the bridge as a train rumbled overhead. “We would listen to what the trestle had to say,” one recalled. “A wooden trestle is like your wife. If she nags and groans, all is normal. But if she goes silent… you’re in trouble.”

Wood, after all, is alive in its own way. As the train’s weight pressed down, the timbers would creak and moan, speaking their strength. When the bridge went silent, it was a warning: the wood was rotting, and danger was near. Foremen relied on this language of timber to keep the railway — and its passengers — safe.

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4 TRESTLE 17

This is the first of six trestles in the “continuous bridges” section. In the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park fire, 12 of the 16 wooden trestles burned; only numbers 1, 12, 16 and 17 survived. During the railway’s operation, trestles were replaced every 15 years, often while trains still ran, rebuilt timber by timber from the inside out. When creosote, a wood preservative, became available trestles were replaced roughly every 30 years. The 2003 replacements echo the originals, though bents now stand 30 feet apart, no longer needing to carry heavy locomotives.

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5 FIRE SUPPRESSION

on Trestles

Notice the platforms built out from the middle of the longer trestles. They look like viewpoints which is how we use them today. Steam locomotives emitted sparks from their smoke stacks that could ignite the trestle timbers. These platforms used to hold water barrels. After each train passed, the maintenance men used water from the barrels to extinguish smoldering embers. On some trestles metal cladding provided extra protection. These safety measures were essential for preserving the wooden spans during the steam locomotive era.

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6 COMMUNICATION

Along the KVR

Telegraph cable was strung along the entirety of the railway so that section masters, railway engineers and maintenance crews could remain in contact during railway operations. Messages were sent using Morse code as a series of electrical impulses Keep a sharp eye out as you explore: there are still several places along the trail where the remains of these telegraph lines are still visible.

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7 RIBBONS OF STEEL

Rails on the KVR

Rails used on the KVR came from Algoma Steel in Ontario and Dominion Iron and Steel in Nova Scotia.

The original rails on the KVR were 75 pound rails. These were upgraded at least twice to accommodate heavier loads and heavier equipment. The last upgrade took place circa 1950 to 100 pound rails, comparable to the Canadian Pacific Railway mainline rails at that time. The original rail that you are viewing at this point was cast in 1947. Its length is 13 yards and its weight is 1,300 pounds. Rails are classified by weight per yard (3 feet).

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8 ROCK WALLS

Notice the rock wall to the left of the trestle. It has survived for over 100 years without shifting, crumbling or falling apart. What you are looking at is a dry rock wall - no mortar, no glue. Every rock was carefully shaped to fit tightly and snuggly into the wall by the sheer skill of the men who built it. Those men, primarily Italian, were brought to Myra Canyon because of their skills in stone masonry. They were among the best in the world at what they did.

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9 FIRST TUNNEL

Trestle Number 12 and the First Tunnel

Building KVR tunnels was grueling manual work. Three-man crews, known as “moles,” labored exclusively by hand using “double jacking.” While one man held a rock drill, two others, taking turns, struck it with 8-pound sledgehammers, rotating the bit after every strike. To protect the rock’s integrity, explosives were avoided, limiting progress to five feet per day. Under George Chew, crews worked from both ends to meet in the middle, using horses to haul away debris.

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10

TRESTLE 11

You are standing at Trestle 11, the highest point of the entire Kettle Valley Railway at 1,274 meters (4,180 feet) above sea level. This structure is a masterpiece of mountain engineering; notice how the deck is both curved and banked. The left side sits slightly higher than the right, a design feature called “superelevation.” This allowed heavy steam locomotives to navigate safely the sharp canyon turn without losing momentum or risking derailment at this dizzying altitude.

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11

ROCK DRILL

and Concrete Abutment

This site is a reminder of the men who built this railway.

Look up to your right if you are traveling from Myra Station. **Scan the top of the rock cut carefully and you will see an iron bar sticking straight up out of the rock.** That is a rock drill which has been stuck there for over 100 years. In these open rock cuts, the drill hole was packed with blasting powder to bring down the rock to be removed. Black powder was generally used on the KVR although dynamite was occasionally employed in various locations.

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12 SECOND TUNNEL

This tunnel, Anderson's tunnel, holds a wartime secret. The year stamped above the entrance — 1941 — hints at its role. During WWII, rail lines were vital, and the Canadian Pacific Railway, the parent company of the KVR, shored up this tunnel against weak rock and possible sabotage by enemy sympathizers. Beyond ordinary freight, it carried materials for a top-secret Allied undertaking: the Manhattan Project. Heavy water from Cominco in Trail, along with lead and zinc for British ammunition, passed through here, making this quiet tunnel a crucial artery in the war effort.

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13 WATER & STEAM

Trestle Number 8 and Water

This trestle crosses what is now KLO Creek and tells another story of steam locomotives: the importance of water. A few hundred meters upstream, a dam fed a flume that carried water to the tower near trestle 8 (inset photo). Since steam engines couldn't stop on the trestles due to their immense weight, they halted at the water tower near trestle 8. The tower's foundation still stands just past trestle 8 on the uphill side, a reminder of the careful engineering that kept the KVR running through the canyon. Trestle 8 is an excellent place for photos of the canyon and trestles on the East side.

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14 TRESTLE 7

Trestle 7 is the only S-shaped (double curve) trestle on the KVR. Why? Trains can't make sharp turns. The double curve was needed for alignment of the track; each gentle curve was 12 degrees going in opposite directions. This is a tribute to the engineering genius of Andrew McCulloch.

On July 18, 1923, a boxcar derailed and tumbled over the side of trestle 7. It's still down there. Scattered in the wreckage there were 8 boxes of dynamite. This trestle had the greatest risk catching fire due to the increased rocking of the train which caused more sparks to occur. The solution was to cover the timbers with sheet metal thus preventing fires.

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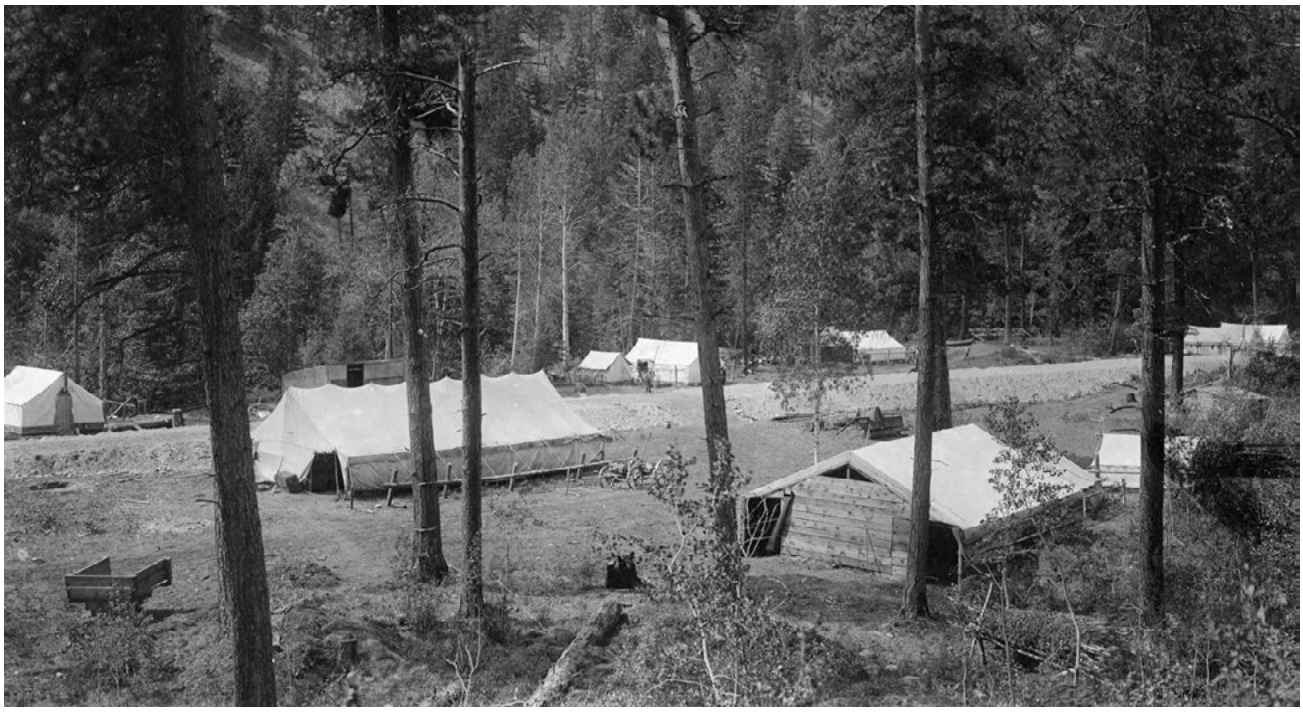
15 THE TOTE ROAD

and the Chew Camp



George Chew, an American from Spokane, was responsible for the rail bed up to trestle 6. He built 12 construction camps on the KVR. You are standing at the beginning of the camp trail and below a scree slope and rock face, Camp 12 itself was around the corner and behind the rock face above. The photo is an example of what a work camp would have looked like. The photo is not the actual camp that would have existed above the KVR at this point but is an example of what a camp would have looked like.

Supplies were brought up to Myra Canyon on tote roads built prior to the actual railway construction. Those provisions came either by horse-drawn wagons or by pack trains.

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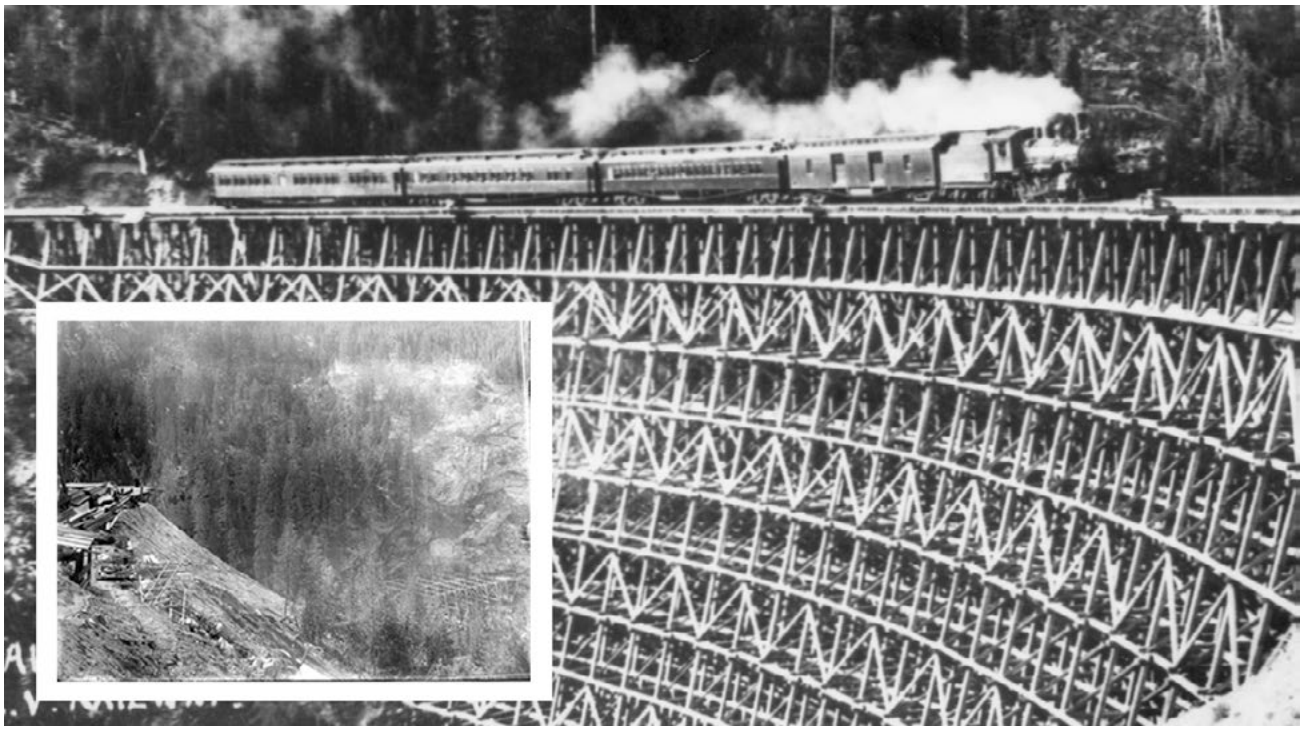
TRESTLE 6



Trestle number 6 is the largest of the trestles in Myra Canyon, one of two that are now steel. Originally built as a wooden trestle (inset photo shows the wooden trestle under construction), in late 1931 the wooden bents were replaced by the Canadian Bridge Company with steel supports that you see today. Amazingly, workers replaced the wooden components with steel while the trains continued to pass over the trestle. After the attack on Pearl Harbour in Dec, 1941, some accounts record that sentries were placed at either end of this trestle to guard against sabotage. Company 100 of the Pacific Coastal Militia Rangers was likely responsible to guard this trestle and section of the railway.

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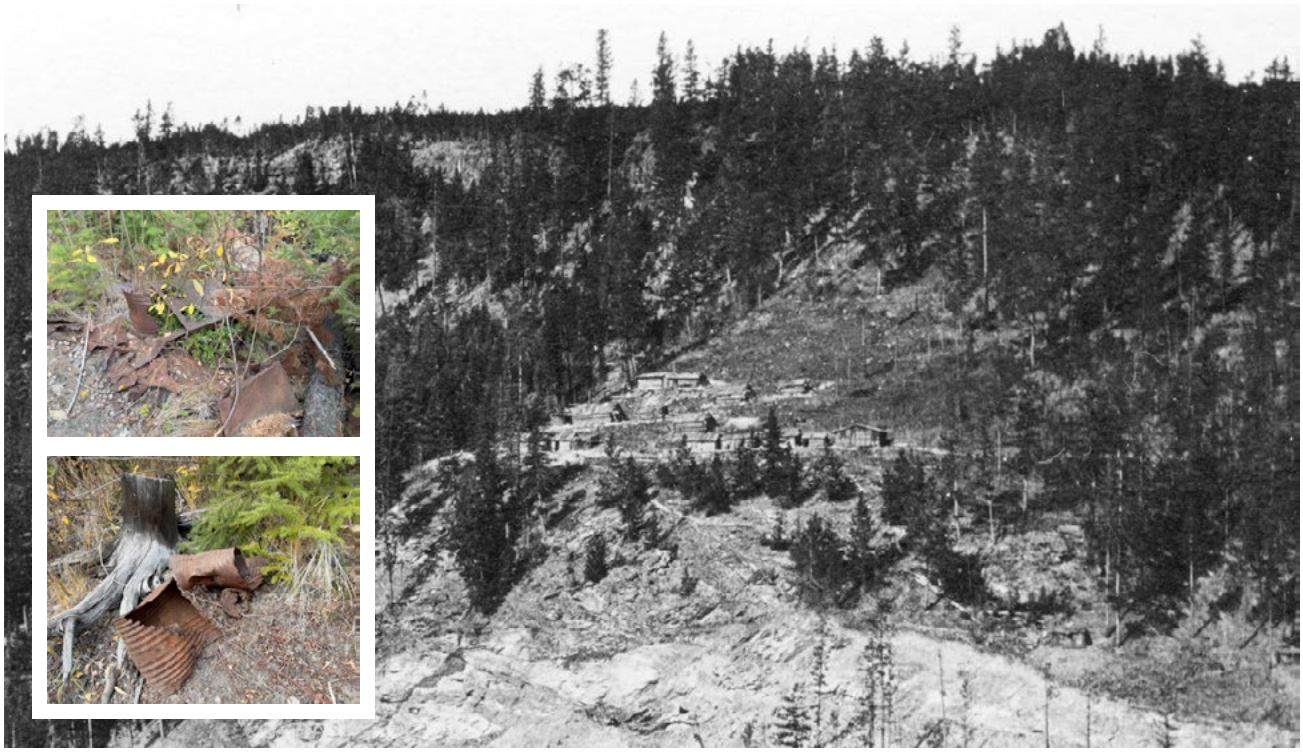
17 HUISSI'S CAMP



Huissi's camp can be found at the midpoint of a tote road that exits above the rail bed just before trestle 4. Little is known about the subcontractor Huissi but his firm apparently specialized in trestle construction. This camp likely housed skilled labourers like engineers and those with an expertise. This camp was used again in 1931 when the wooden components of trestle 6 were replaced by steel members. The trail to the camp is roughly 1.3 km in length and provides a commanding view of trestles 4 and 6 and the canyon itself. Much debris from the days of an active camp remains on site. Very close to Ruth Station at km 12 is a second work camp, Morrissey's camp number 2, where you will find more information about the workers and how they lived in the camp.

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18

TRESTLE 3

The Continuous Bridges

From this vantage point, look directly across the canyon to witness the largest concentration of trestles. This spectacular section is famously known as the “continuous bridges,” where the railway clings to the sheer rock face in a series of tightly linked spans. To the left of these trestles, just around the corner lies Myra Station, where you began this tour. This scene is the perfect spot to appreciate the sheer scale of McCulloch’s vision.

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FEEDING

the Workers

Rock ovens were very important and common along the KVR. They were built by Italian stonemasons. Thousands of men worked along the railway, and feeding them was a massive undertaking. Each labourer burned 5,000–6,000 calories a day, so cooks laboured from dawn to dusk, preparing breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Supplies arrived constantly by wagons or pack horses: salted pork, bacon, beans, flour, vegetables, cheese, coffee, and canned goods. Since there was no refrigeration, fresh meat was eaten quickly. Bread was a staple — men often devoured entire loaves at meals. Rock ovens could bake up to 100 loaves a day.

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20 RUTH STATION

Ruth station commemorates Ruth Eloise McCulloch (1910–1981), daughter of chief engineer Andrew McCulloch; she graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1932 and worked as a librarian at McGill University, Montreal. Walk around the foundations of the station and imagine the sights of sounds of railway workers and steam locomotives during the heyday of the KVR.

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MORRISSEY'S

Camp

Morrissey's camp is located just past the Ruth Station and a very short distance past the yellow gate. Although this site was hidden for almost 100 years, overgrown with underbrush, the same fire that destroyed the trestles in 2003, did us one favour: it revealed this camp. Fire fighters mopping up the fire discovered the rock ovens. They contacted the Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society (MCTRS) which had long had an interest in anything associated with the Kettle Valley Railway (KVR) in Myra Canyon. As a result MCTRS joined with the University of British Columbia Okanagan in 2007 and sponsored an historical archeological dig here.

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21 MORRISSEY'S

Camp

The information panels you see detail what life was like in the camp, one of seven construction camps in the Myra Canyon area. Typically named for the railway contractors responsible for the work, this one took its name from E. A. Morrissey, a Spokane, Washington–based contractor. The camp itself was likely established in September or October 1912 and remained active into 1914. Many of its workers were Italian, well known for skilled, mortarless stonework, work reflected in the many rock walls that support the railbed and trestle abutments as well as the several baking ovens found in camps. Men worked year-round in all weather. Theirs' was a life of hard manual labour, minimal pay, and isolation in distant locations like Myra Canyon.

Imagine this site 100 years ago compared to this moment. There were no trees, tents were scattered about, wood smoke was omnipresent and you would have heard the sounds made by the 70 to 90 men who lived here.

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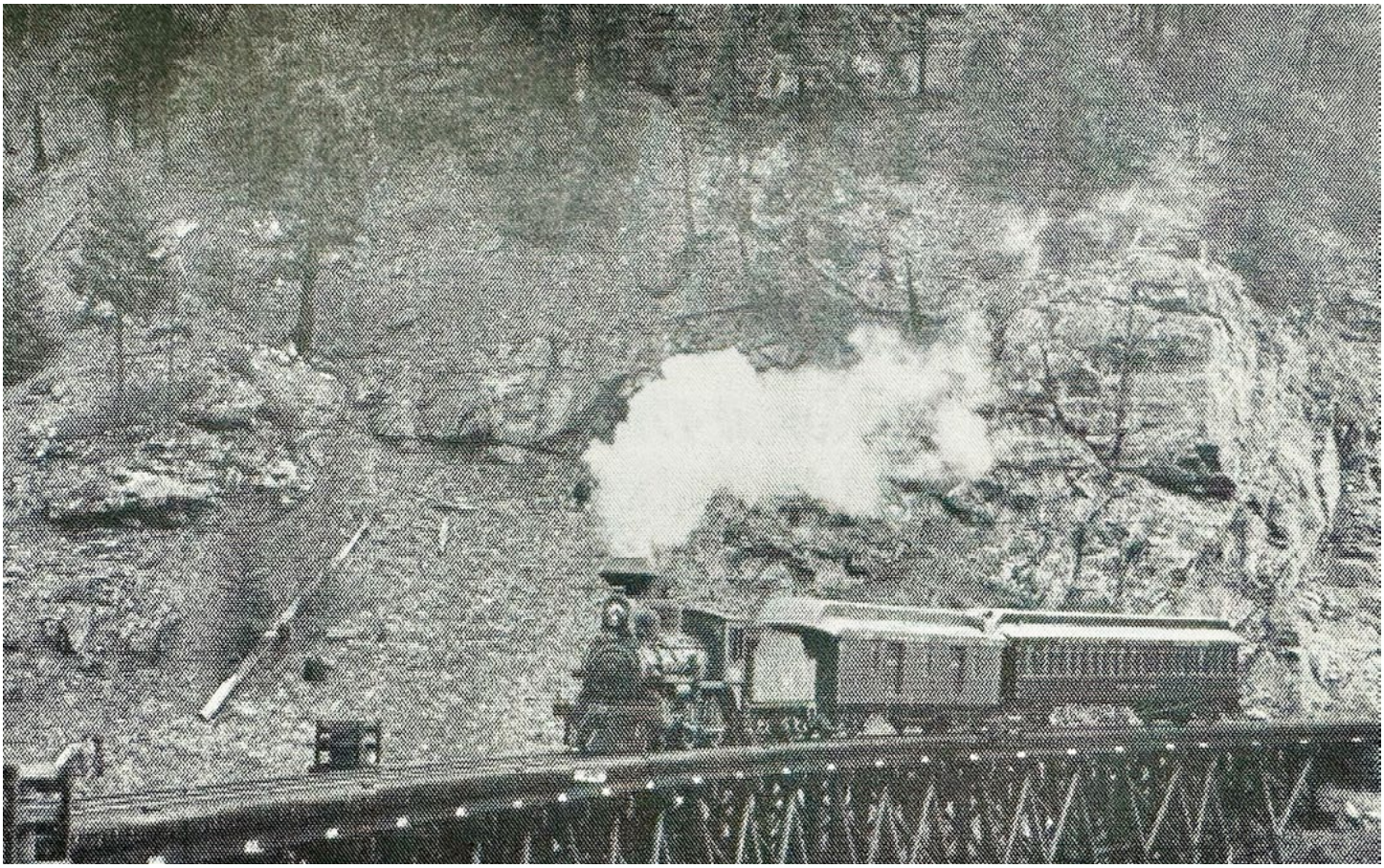
WHEN AND WHY

Was the KVR Abandoned?



In November 1959, heavy rains in the Coquihalla section west of Myra Canyon caused washouts, landslides, and rockfalls, severely damaging the track. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), which had taken charge of the KVR in 1931, chose to abandon the section rather than repair it, diverting traffic east through the Kootenays and then to the CPR mainline. Passenger service soon collapsed, and on January 17, 1964, the last KVR passenger train ran, ending the direct rail link from BC's Interior to the coast.

In May 1973, the final train operated by the KVR passed through Myra Canyon. Later that June, the CBC filmed Pierre Berton's The National Dream here, capturing the trestles, tunnels, and dramatic mountain terrain for posterity. In this instance, Myra Canyon acted as a surrogate for the CPR's passage through the Rocky Mountains. Above is an image of that final train.

THE GREAT CANADIAN TRAIL

The Myra Canyon section of the Kettle Valley Rail Trail, often called Kelowna's "Stanley Park," is now the Central Okanagan's most visited attraction, drawing 100,000 visitors a year and earning recognition as one of the world's top 50 bike rides.

After the KVR ceased operation in the 1970s, the trail fell into neglect.

Trestle 13 on fire, 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park Fire

Rebuilding Trestle 11 after the fire

In 1993, the Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society (MCTRS) was formed to make the railbed safe again for visitors. Soliciting donations and using volunteers to construct boardwalks across trestles, the Society also built benches, storm shelters, and placed interpretive signage.

Continued advocacy by MCTRS led to Myra Canyon becoming part of Myra Bellevue Provincial Park and, in 2003, a National Historic Site. Tragically, a major forest fire in 2003 destroyed 12 of the 16 wooden trestles plus the wooden super structures of the two steel trestles. Undeterred, MCTRS successfully lobbied for rebuilding the trestles with the help of both provincial and federal funding. The Society continued its work until 2023 when it dissolved and transitioned its work and assets to Friends of the South Slopes. The Kettle Valley Railbed, including Myra Canyon, is now an important part of the Trans Canada Trail.

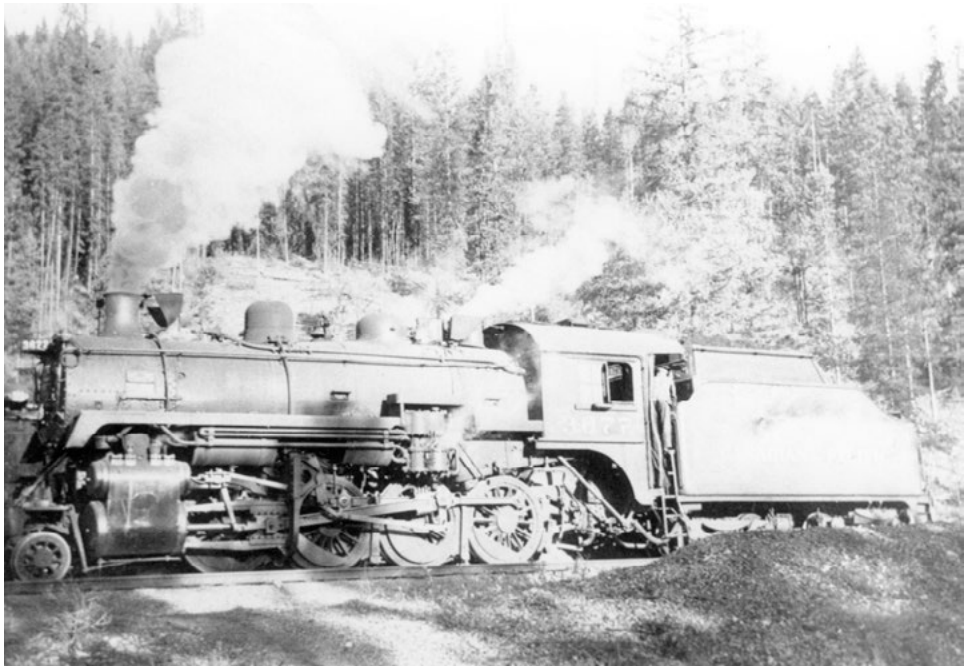
What's in a Name? Railway Jargon

Getting up Steam
Steam Locomotive - *Hog*
Derailed
Locomotive Engineer - *Hogger*

Asleep at the Switch
In the Hole - *A train in a siding*
Throw the Switch
Sidetracked

One-Track Mind
Shunted Aside
Train Wreck
End of the Line

Gandy Dancers - Many of the tools used by sectionmen on the KVR were made in Chicago by the Gandy Manufacturing Company. The sight of dozens of men using Gandy pry bars in closely synchronized movement resembled a dance line on a stage, thereby resulting in workers being nicknamed Gandy Dancers



The Locomotive Crew

Wiper - the man who cleaned and maintained the locomotives in the roundhouse.

Hostler - the man responsible for getting a steam locomotive ready for the rails.

Brakeman - the man responsible for manually controlling train speed, coupling/uncoupling cars, and protecting the train via signals.

Locomotive Fireman - the man responsible for maintaining the firebox and boiler pressure, feeding fuel (coal, wood, or oil) into the furnace, and managing water levels to ensure safe, consistent power.

Locomotive Engineer - the man operating the locomotive from the right-hand seat of the cab, controlling speed, direction, and braking.

Road Foreman of Engines - a railroad management supervisor responsible for training, instructing, and evaluating locomotive engineers, serving as their direct boss

For more information...

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Contributors:

Acknowledgement: Photos on page 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 18, 22, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 33 provided by Penticton Museum Archives, Penticton, BC

Gord Hotchkiss. *Myra Canyon: Steel Rails and Iron Will;* Audio Tour of the KVR through Myra Canyon.

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FOSS (Friends Of the South Slopes Society) volunteers are responsible for maintaining safe access to the 12km Myra Canyon.

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Trans Canada Trail is the organization that advocates, stewards and champions Canada's nationwide trail system, providing leadership and guidance, funding and resources, outreach and engagement.

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