

The Fernie Court House

The first Court House was simply a shack that used for less than one year. Then in April, 1899, the courts moved to a "grander" building which measured 28 feet square. This modest 784 square foot building described as "the merest makeshift" housed a courtroom, a guardroom, a constable's room, a magistrate's chamber and four jail cells. This building served the community for 8 years until 1907 when it was then determined that the building was inadequate.

In 1907 construction began on a large two-story building which was to contain the Court and Provincial Government offices. It was designed by a Glasgow native - J.J. Honeyman and constructed by a Vancouver contracting firm - Cornish & Cooper. Mr. Honeyman had previously designed the Rossland Court House in 1898 and improved on his design for the Fernie Court House. This courthouse possessed ornamental gables and roofing, wooden exterior, elaborate front and rear entrances and a beautiful west window.

This, the third of Fernie's courthouses, was completed in the spring of 1908 at a cost of \$26,359.50. On March 19, 1908 the first sitting of the County Court took place with His Honour Judge Wilson - a fine opening for a solid building.

The glory was short lived. On August 1st, Fernie Fire of 1908 destroyed the building along with most of the community.

To guard against further destruction by fire, construction of future buildings in the commercial district was to be of "fire resistant" materials such as brick and stone. Immediately, our citizens and the government of British Columbia set out to rebuild Fernie and of course a new Court House. Within two months - October 1908 - the Provincial Government had accepted and approved new courthouse plans. The site of the new building was a centrally located lot facing Howland Avenue (now 4th). George Stanley Rees, again of Honeyman and Curtis, did the architectural plans and James A. Broley of Fernie was awarded the construction contract in May 1909.

The architect's plans called for the use of locally produced bricks, for the general work, red pressed bricks for the pilasters on the front facade. The basement walls were to be made of concrete, but faced with British Columbia granite. The trim on the upper level wall was to be Calgary sandstone. The steep pitched roof made of British Columbia slate was to be trimmed with copper on all cornices. In the late 1940's a copper roof was put on but this was once again replaced by slate in 1992.

While the building's exterior is spectacular, the interior is equally magnificent. Upon entering the main doors of the building, one finds oneself in a spacious vestibule of oak and stained glass. The floor here is a fret-like pattern of tile. At the rear of the main floor there is a private entryway and stairs which lead to the Judge's chamber on the second floor. The public must use the wide slate and steel stairs to the left. The balustrade or railing is made of figured metal and a golden oak handrail with hand-carved wooden dogwood emblems in the upper part of the stair posts.

The second floor contains the courtroom, jury room, barrister's room and Judge's chambers. Many say this courtroom is the most majestic in the entire province. Six lofty stained glass windows light the room. Each of these six windows bears a coat of arms significant to the history of British

Columbia including the insignia of our first governor Sir James Douglas and British Columbia's first judge, Mathew Baillie Begbie. West Coast cedar provides the finishing in this room and the paneled dome ceiling leaves all the beautifully grained timber exposed.

The arrangement of Judge's bench, jury box etc. is the usual arrangement in British courtrooms. When the Judge leaves the bench he or she retires into a private chamber through a door immediately behind the judge's chair. The small stairway leading into the judge's chamber contains carved hearts in the woodwork and a tiled fireplace surmounted by a natural fir mantel is the prominent feature of this room. The fireplace is no longer useable but it makes a nice feature accompanying spectacular views from the windows.

The cost of the new Court House was enormous. The Free Press of June 18, 1909 reported that "while the winning bid was slightly in excess of \$70,000.00 some changes in the plans and other expenses will probably bring the cost close to the \$100,000 mark" - a very costly project in 1909!

Since its completion, the Fernie Court House has undergone a few alterations, none of which have detracted from its original character.

Fernie can be proud of its Courthouse. It has few equals and no superiors in cities even twice its size.