

History 216

Castlegar: Settlement and Development  
to 1930.

for: Craig Andrews

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by Catherine Harrison

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CASTLEGAR, B. C.

Castlegar, situated at the convergence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers, was slow in developing as a community in comparison to other interior towns, although today it is seen as one of the key communities in the Kootenays.

The first white man known to have seen this area was David Thompson, who travelled down the Columbia River in 1811. It would be difficult to say that he may have imagined that one day there would be a community there, for Castlegar at that time was nothing but forest.

The area around Castlegar started opening up in the late 1880's. In the year 1888, Gilbert Sproat, a gold commissioner in the Kootenays, had a house built in the area known as "Sproat's Landing." Although no one knows for sure where Sproat's Landing actually was, it seems quite likely that it was at the convergence of the two rivers, on the same side as Hadikin's Lumber Mill, but closer to where the rivers meet.

In an unpublished manuscript by Edward Alexander Picard, who worked in the area at the time, he mentions building a warehouse at Sproat's Landing, as well as a bridge across a back channel. He also mentions a saloon (which was a tent) and a hotel, owned by George Gilpin, both situated about a mile below Sproat's Landing, on the bank just above Kootenay Rapids. There was a pack-trail from Robson to Nelson at that time and one can imagine the weary travelers stopping in at the saloon for a break.

Robson was also briefly mentioned in the account and at that time it was a loading - unloading area for the steamers. The boats could not travel up the Kootenay River due to the rapids, therefore the freight going to Nelson had to be shipped

from Robson to Nelson by pack-horse. This situation was eased considerably by the construction of the railway from Nelson to Robson in 1892.

From evidence in a journal by a man named Laing, it appears that Robson wasn't always in its present day location, but that it was first located on the east side of Pass Creek. This seems to be supported by Picard's manuscript, for although he doesn't actually say that Robson was in a different place, it is often spoken of as being much closer to Sproat's Landing than it would be now. The former location would have been ideal for docking purposes because it was partially sheltered, and the water there would not have been swift.

Although I do not know the date that Robson was moved to its present position, it is likely that it was before 1890, for at that time, West Robson came into being as a transportation terminal, and it is directly across from present day Robson. A possible cause for the move is that the area farther up-river, where Robson is now, was a more convenient location for the Arrow Lakes Steamers to pull in. It would appear that the old Robson dock would have been kept, probably under the name of Sproat's Landing, as a dock for the steamers coming up the Columbia River from Trail, and that this disappeared after water travel dwindled off in that section of the Columbia River by the time that the railway was constructed to Robson in 1898.

In approximately 1888, a Scotchman, James McClary, got a charter for a ferry across the river near Robson. It seems likely that this would be old Robson, and the fe

likely that this would be old Robson and the ferry probably went across just west of the old Robson dock. The Picard article states that McClary staked a homestead on the west side of the river and had built a log cabin. If all other calculations are correct, this would place the homestead somewhere in the vicinity of main street and eighth avenue in present day Castlegar. It can be safely assumed that this was the first home, or building of any sort, in Castlegar.

The ferry was a large one for that period, and could carry eight horses with their packs in one trip. The boat was propelled by twenty-foot sweeps, and if the ferryman did not make the landing in a quarter of a mile, he and the boat would be swept into the Kootenay Rapids, where he would have had little chance of getting out.

In 1889, the Sessional Papers record the building of a trail connecting the trail coming up from Colville with Toad Mountain Camp, a camp on the east side of the Kootenay River, upstream from Shoreacres. During the construction of the trail, a bridge was built near Sproat's Landing. In all probability, this is the same bridge mentioned in Picard's account. The bridge was 396 feet long and went across a back channel. This was probably over the low land in the area just upriver from Sproat's Landing, just before the bend in the river. This road would have facilitated travel by pack-horse from Robson to Nelson.

Little else is known of Sproat's Landing. In the 1890 Voter's List in the B.C. Sessional Papers, three men from Sproat's Landing were listed as being eligible to vote. These

were Thomas Duncan Dunlop, a labourer, John Ayton Gibson, a miner, and Albert McCleary, ferryman. The ferryman in Picard's account was listed as James McClary, so it is quite possible that they are either the same person or that they are related.

In the next few years, there was slow progress in the way of more and improved trails and railways. Several trails are mentioned in the Sessional Paper, although most of them are not explicit enough to be pinned down. In 1891 the Columbia-Nelson trail was built, and it is quite possible that this came from Nelson to the meeting of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers, then perhaps travelled down towards Trail. That same year a trail was cleared from Sproat to Trail Creek. There was already a trail in that approximate area, coming from as far as Colville, so it is likely that this was an improvement of the old trail. The next year, 1892, records the construction of the Sproat Cattle trail, which connected with a trail to Nelson. Also in this year, the Columbia and Kootenay railway was built, connecting Robson and Nelson. This would have been a major breakthrough in the transportation in this area, as freight could now be shipped by train instead of by packhorse to and from Nelson.

In the next two years, railway lines were built connecting Nakusp and the Slocan Lake, and connecting Slocan City and Slocan junction. The latter line connected with the Nelson-Robson line. At this time, the area was opening up for transportation, and this no doubt played a large role in the growth in the Kootenays.

In 1895, another settlement in the area sprang up. This was Waterloo, directly across the river from 1st avenue in Kinnaird. Waterloo was first settled in 1895 by Hiram Landis, who discovered iron ore cappings there. Soon the word spread and by 1896 there were about 40 houses there. At the peak of Waterloo's existence, it boasted 3 hotels, a blacksmith shop, a general store and post office, a large stable, an Opera House, a hospital, a Methodist Church, and a school. The Waterloo school, which opened in 1897, was the first school to be opened in the Castlegar vicinity. However, in the Sessional Papers, the Waterloo school is only mentioned for two years, having 15 pupils the first year, then 14. The closing of the school was probably due to the dwindling population of the community.

By the turn of the century, Waterloo was beginning to die away. This may have been because of insufficient quantities of ore, or lack of transportation for the ore, or perhaps it was because the Klondike gold-rush of 1898 drew the miners away. Most likely it was a combination of the three causes.

Another community which began at approximately the same time as Waterloo was Montgomery, which was located about a mile upriver, probably on the land where the Doukhobor village is now located. I was unable to find out anything about this settlement.

In 1898 the Waterloo - North Fork Salmon River trail was built from Waterloo to the Nelson and Fort Sheppard Railway, across the divide. Three years later, in 1901, the Waterloo trail was built by Onandaga Mines, connecting Waterloo with the Salmo region. These two trails are approximately in the

area of the Castlegar - Salmo highway that is presently being constructed.

By 1898, the Trail - Robson division of the Columbia and Western Railway was finished. The total distance of the railway was 19 3/10 miles, from the Smelter Hill Station in Trail to a point opposite the CPR Station at Robson. From this time until the CPR bridge was built in 1902, rail traffic had to be barged across the Columbia River at West Robson. By the year 1900, the Columbia and Western line was built, linking Deadwood, Midway, Phoenix, and Grand Forks with West Robson, then with Trail and Rossland.

Even in 1900, Castlegar was still not established, although Robson appeared to be slowly growing. According to the 1899 voter's list, there were 23 men in Robson eligible to vote, and their occupations give a good indication of what Robson was at that time. Going by the occupations listed, one could surmise that Robson had at least one hotel, one or more stores, and a stable. Other residents of Robson included farmers, miners, woodmen, railroadmen, and labourers. Most of the residents at that time were French and Scottish.

In an article by T.L. Bloomer, he mentions that in 1898, the year he arrived in Castlegar, a brickyard was set up near the west end of where the ferry is now situated on the Castlegar side. However, in Harold Webber's book, "People and Places", the Castlegar Brick Works is said to have been moved from Rossland in 1903. It is most likely that Webber's account is the factual one, as Bloomer's article was from personal reminiscence.



In 1902, when the CPR bridge was built, Castlegar began its slow settlement in earnest. A CPR station was built, as well as a boarding house and section houses. According to the Bloomer article a small store and a frame building used as a boarding house were both present during the building of the railway cut and the bridge, but both disappeared soon afterwards.

In 1909 William Gage, the Station Agent in Castlegar, built the Castlegar Hotel, which is still standing. At that time, the CPR boarding house was closed. Around the same time, W.J. Farmer opened a small store and post office which was located where the present-day West's Department Store now stands.

The first school was opened in 1909; as far as can be determined, on the location where the Castlegar News office now stands. The first school teacher, as recorded in the Sessional Papers, was a Miss V.J. Clyde. According to Tom Bloomer, the first teacher was Miss Clara Barclay, but there was no record of a Miss Barclay, teaching in any of the local schools.

The Robson school, which was opened in the same year, had 18 pupils, the same as the Castlegar school. The first teacher in Robson was Mrs. G. M. Mitchell. At this time, the school was housed in the church, as the Robson school was not built until 1914.

By 1910, the area around Castlegar was also starting to build up. In 1908, a ferry had been built from Waterloo to "West Waterloo", which is now the Dumont subdivision of South Castlegar. The Doukhobors had arrived and were settling on



the river flats at Waterloo and the old Montgomery townsite, in what is now Ooteschenia.

In 1907 the flats from Castlegar to Blueberry Creek had been cleared by loggers, and soon afterwards a camp was set up at the railway siding of Stewartsville, which is situated at the present location of the Castlegar Plaza.

More roads had been built since 1907, further opening up the area, beginning with the Grand Forks - Pass Creek Road, which extended on the North Fork of the Kettle River. In 1909, the Sessional Papers mention a Robson Creek Road, but I was unable to find the location of this road. The Trail - Castlegar road was first mentioned as such in 1910, and the notation in the Sessional Papers tells us that the road was 20 miles long and passable. At this time, a bridge was built at Murphy Creek.

By 1913, the suspension bridge at Brilliant had just been built, and more roads had been constructed. Now Robson was connected with Syringa Creek, and the road from Pass Creek through to the Doukhobor settlement at Krestova had been completed. Bridges had been installed at Pass Creek and at Shoreacres, over the Slocan River, as well as at Blueberry Creek, China Creek and Syringa Creek.

At this time, the enrollment at the Castlegar and Robson schools was 14 and 22 pupils respectively, and schools were also operating at Thrums, Deer Park, Syringa Creek and Brilliant.

Another major factor in the development of the area came in 1917, when the Castlegar ferry began service. The ferry crossed the Columbia River at Castlegar to Robson, and the original

wharves are slightly west to where they are today.

Also in 1917, a mill was opened up on Merry Creek (near the Plaza Junction) by C.J. Sahlstrom, B. Anderson, and D.B. Merry. This mill was later sold to Milestone Lumber Company, from Saskatchewan, who set the mill up about 1 mile up Milestone Road, probably near where the ballpark is today. This mill was later enlarged and moved downhill, then closed down in 1920.

An article by Helen Dunlop states that the school in Kinnaird was built in 1917, but the Sessional Papers show that the Kinnaird school did not open until 1919, with 19 pupils. This school operated until 1930, then enrollment dropped off and the school amalgamated with Castlegar. A school in Blueberry Creek was open from 1918 to 1929, starting with 9 pupils and ending with 16. That the school in Blueberry Creek closed in 1929 is not conclusive, as several volumes of the Sessional Papers were missing.

Other schools operating in the near vicinity were at Shoreacres in 1917, Glade in 1918, and at Champion Creek in 1921 and 1934. There were no records of a school at Champion Creek in any other years.

A high school was recorded in the Sessional Papers under Robson for the years 1924 and 1925 only. Up until 1934, there had been no further mention of it.

In the year 1925, Castlegar is said to have had, beside the other establishments already mentioned, Eremenko's general store, a dance pavilion, a garage, tourist cabins, and a

slaughter house.

Since that time, Castlegar has been gradually growing into the small city of today. One theory explaining the slow growth in Castlegar, was stated in an article by Lillian Killough, who had been a resident of Castlegar since 1913. She said that Castlegar experienced a slow growth until about 1934 or 1935 because the land comprising the town site was held by a company, and not made available to the public until that time. Other factors of growth were the improvement of the roads and the installment of an adequate water supply.

Castlegar in the 1930's was still far from being a big community. Celgar was not yet established (until 1952), so Castlegar had no major industry to encourage people to settle there.

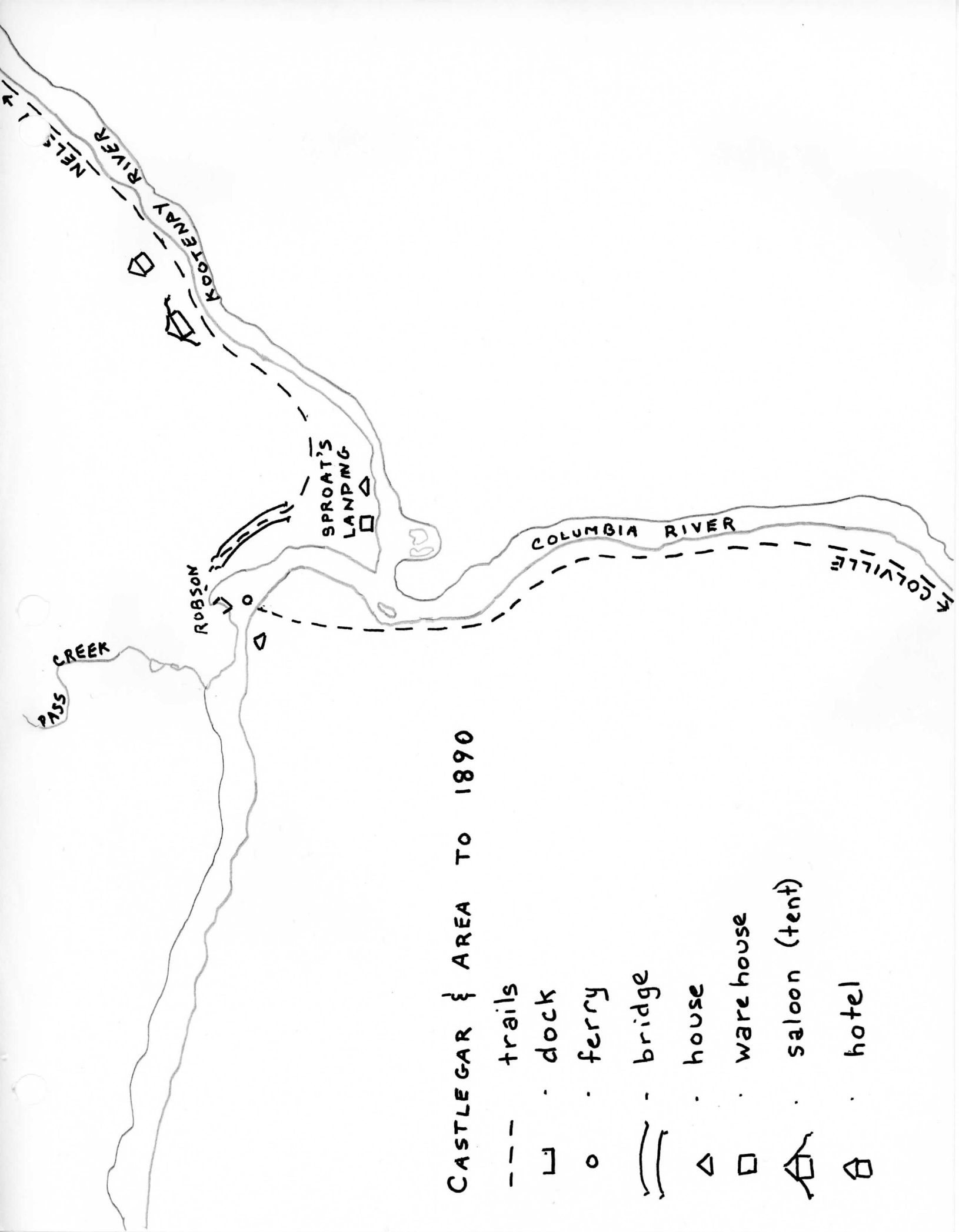
Castlegar was first settled because of its transportation facilities, and today this is still a major factor in the growth of the area. Castlegar, settled almost half-way between the two communities of Nelson and Trail is the "Crossroads of the Kootenays."



W. J. Farmer's General Store  
and Post Office built in 1909,  
on the site where West's  
Department Store now stands.

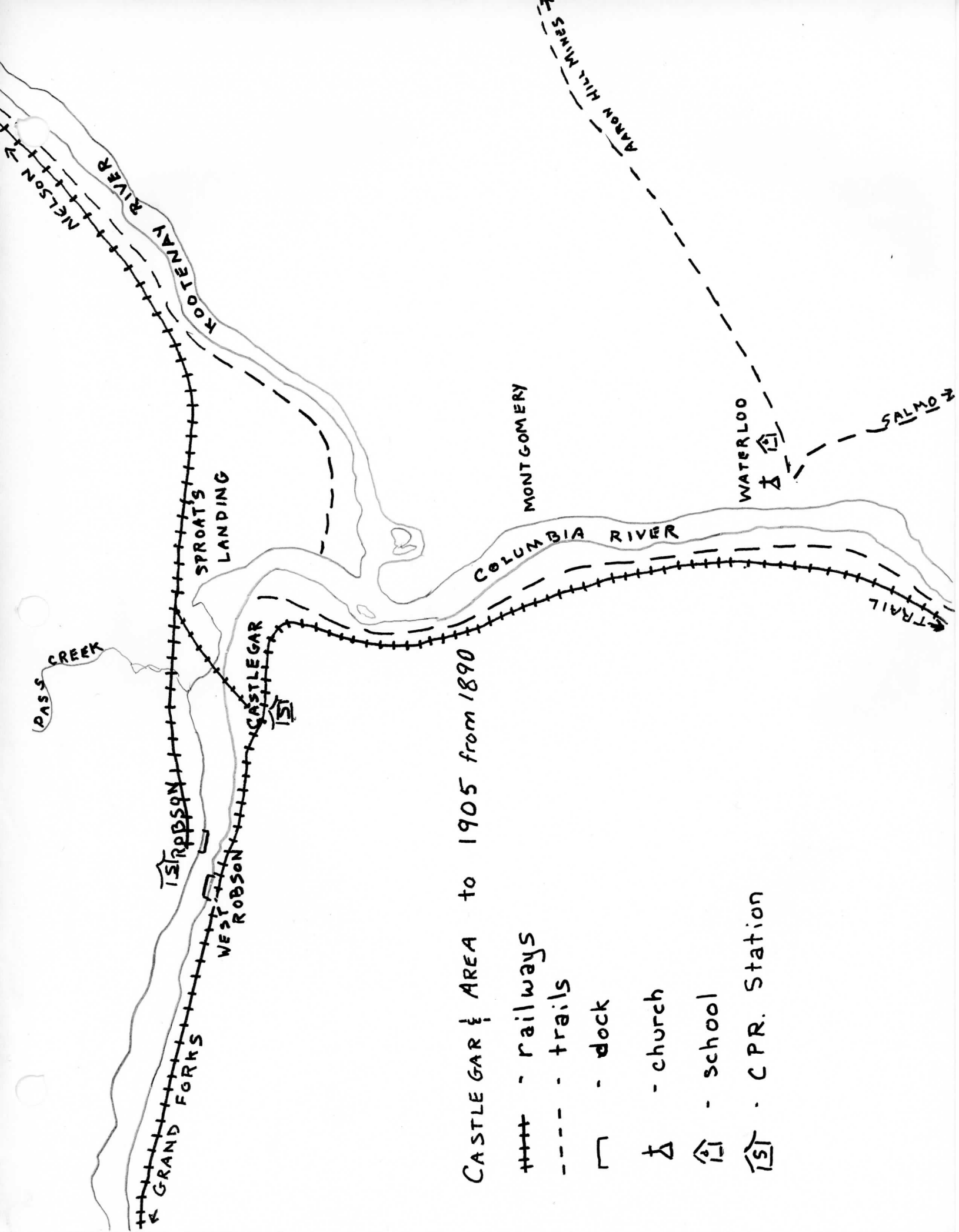


Castlegar's first school, built in 1909, is situated where the Castlegar News Office now stands. The teacher in this picture is probably Miss Violet Clyde.



# CASTLEGAR & AREA TO 1890

- trails
- └ dock
- o ferry
- ≡ bridge
- △ house
- warehouse
- ⌂ saloon (tent)
- ⌂ hotel





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