

Dogs of the Silvery Slocan¹

By Peter Smith



Arlington Mines, Springer Creek, Slocan c. 1898

Slocan Valley Historical Society

Look at many group photos from the Slocan silver rush of the 1890s and you will likely see at least one dog tucked off-centre, huddled by his or her master. Whether in the camps or accompanying a prospector, dogs were everywhere. Unlike some human partners, dogs were loyal and uncomplaining.

One writer explained of the typical prospector: “He can’t get along with a partner any more. And sometimes it is all he can do to get along with himself. So he goes out along with dog and cayuse.”¹

A dog could help ward off loneliness in the wilderness. In a land where bears, wolves, and cougars roamed the mountain slopes for prey, a dog might be the last line of defence between beast and prospector. There are more than a few tales of dogs taking on bears. The dogs didn’t always survive but their masters usually did.

B.R. Atkins tells the story of four Slocan men who set out on a prospecting journey in 1894. David Bremner, Horace Bucke, Ben Lee, and Billy Lynch were

¹ Earlier versions of this article appeared in *The Silver Standard*, 5 no. 1 (2020) , and *British Columbia History* Vol. 59 No. 3 Fall 2026.

all experienced, but ran out of food high in the mountains. According to Atkins, “Bremner’s dog had strayed away or else they would have eaten him.”²

Like cannibalism—which was not entirely unknown on the western mining frontier—killing and eating dogs was taboo. However, a story circulated in the Slocan a few years later, about a prospector who chopped off his dog’s tail, cooked it, and ate it to avoid starvation.³

In any event, Bremner’s dog Nipper survived the ordeal and soon had a new master, Slocan pioneer Sid Norman. Nipper was Norman’s constant companion for the next 10 years.⁴

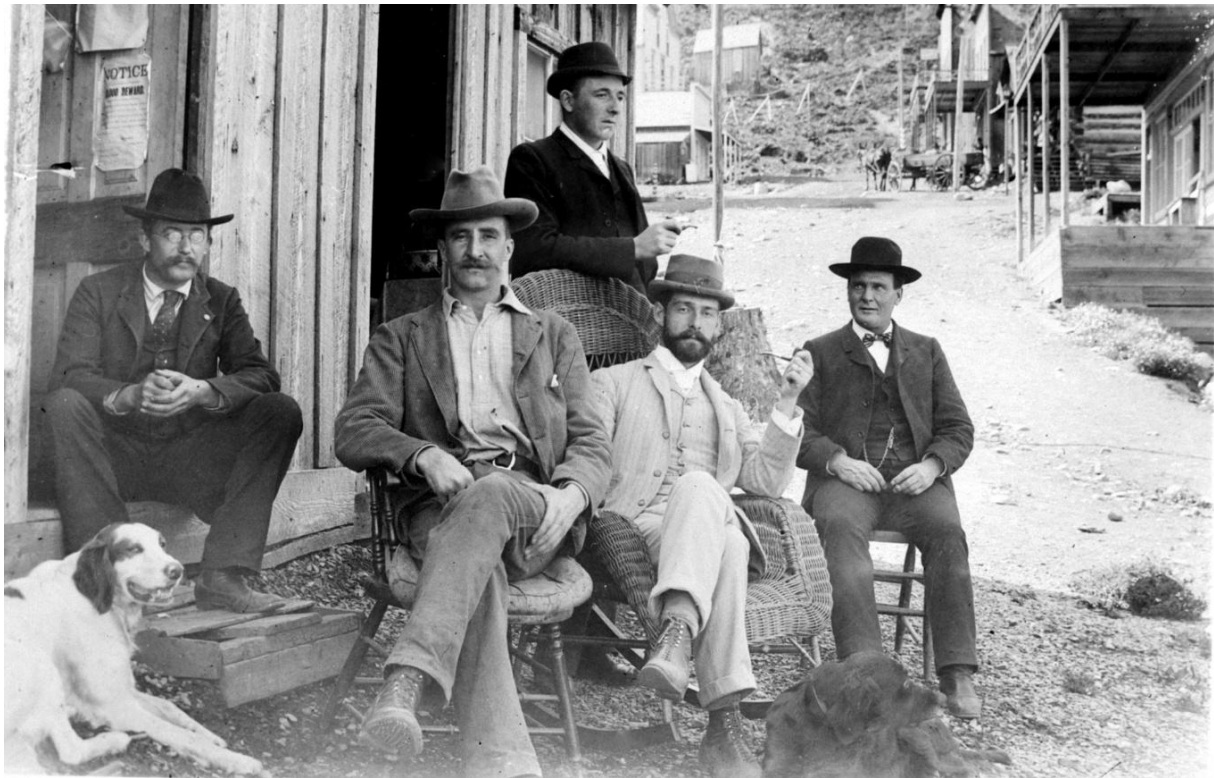
Prospectors had to economize on their packs and rarely carried enough food for their four-legged companions, but most dogs had it better in the bush than Nipper. George Hardy and the Coplen brothers took a dog with them when they left New Denver in 1893 to prospect along the north fork of Carpenter Creek. While the prospectors feasted on bear and marmot, the dog made do with roast porcupine.⁵

Some dogs were celebrated heroes. In a land of lakes and full-fed creeks and rivers, death by drowning was a constant worry. Some lives were lost, but there were dramatic rescues too. The spring freshets in 1896 dislodged a small bridge that crossed one of the creeks in Three Forks (a former mining camp). The McGregors’ little daughter stepped onto the bridge, not realizing the danger. She fell into the swift-moving water but was pulled to safety by the family’s dog, a fast-acting Newfoundland.⁶

Nelson Gullickson was not so lucky. His dog sprang to his rescue but was unable to save him as he floundered in Arrow Lake in 1897.⁷

Dogs were versatile as both companions and work animals. Apart from their prospecting role, they could earn their keep in other ways. One noted Slocan pioneer was a dog named “Old Bum.” In 1883, Old Bum carried the first mail into Idaho’s Coeur d’Alene district. Like many other Coeur d’Alene pioneers, Old Bum joined the rush to the Slocan in the 1890s, where he chewed his last bone in 1896.⁸

West Kootenay dogs were smart too. Slocan pioneer Charlie Chambers told the story of Charlie Olson’s dog. Olson was a saloonkeeper in Ainsworth. His dog Kroo [Krao] would cozy up with any man dressed in prospector’s garb but could not tolerate men in white shirts. One day Olson, for some reason, donned a white shirt. Being tired, he fell asleep on his bunk. He awoke “feeling his shirt being pulled over his head.” Kroo had unbuttoned the offending garment and was removing it.⁹



Half Day – Ainsworth c. 1894

Royal BC Museum and Archives

If we can believe the *Slocan Times*, dogs were also up on politics. There was a British Columbia provincial election in 1894. While there were no party politics at the time, the incumbent government of Premier Davie was facing off against a number of “oppositionists.” The opposition candidate in the West Kootenay South riding, which included the Slocan, was Nelson merchant J. F. Hume. Pat Gannon was a supporter of Hume, who won the riding for the opposition. However, Gannon lost his dog, who was disgusted with the way Gannon had voted: “He left the country and when last heard of had joined the Republican party in Spokane.”¹⁰

Dogs are noted for their loyalty and nowhere was this more evident than in the Slocan’s mountains. Snowslides were a common and deadly risk in late winter and spring as the snowpack was eroded by rain and warming weather, but it was thought that Sam Wharton’s Spokane dog, Penny, was buried and lost. Penny somehow managed to dig out from his snowy tomb and emerged four days later to the amazement of the other slide survivors: “Alive, unhurt, but with the liveliest appetite in the Slocan.” He had tunnelled ten feet through the snow to get out.¹¹

John McMillan was less fortunate. A slide came down at the Eureka mine and smothered him to death. McMillan’s dog, who had been with him when the

slide came down but was not caught in it, guarded the corpse until it left on its final journey back to Ontario.

In March 1897, Clark Bibbee, Alex Stansfield, Charlie Phillips, and superintendent Phillip Hickey were working on the Slocan Milling Company's tramway just below Three Forks when they heard the roar of a slide.

Bibbee, Stansfield, and Phillips ran to a snowshed close by. They were crushed to death. Hickey just kept running and managed to stay ahead of the slide. It was only three weeks since Charlie Phillips had married Maggie Harris of Sandon. He had just returned to the camp after visiting her in the Balmoral Hotel.

His dog survived the slide and helped with the grim task of recovering the bodies. Stansfield's dog didn't make it. He was found dead, cradled in the cold, stiff arms of his master.¹²

It's sad to note that there were occasional dogfights in the Slocan, on which money would be wagered. One much talked about fight took place in Three Forks in June 1897. E.H. Stubbs's young, powerful, 80-pound dog, Buck, was up against Pat Gannon's nine-year old 30-pound toothless warrior, Bob, who had presumably returned from Spokane. The two dogs went at it for half an hour in front of a large crowd. Bob came out on top when Buck fouled out.¹³

As early as the summer of 1892, dogs running loose in Nakusp were a problem; Growling, barking and fighting, they were apparently "unable to elect a boss."¹⁴

Things were much the same in New Denver. When a homesick Scot started squeezing out bagpipe tunes in 1897, it was reported that most of the dogs in the camp started howling in sympathy.¹⁵

The proliferation of dogs in West Kootenay, especially so-called "curs," (that we might today refer to as "mutts"), led to some very nasty behaviour from a few "dog poisoners." Poisoning was a problem at one time or another in Nelson, Revelstoke, Nakusp, and Kaslo. It was particularly bad in Nelson in 1894, when the *Nelson Miner* declared: "Enough! The proper way to be rid of a dog nuisance is to complain at once to the master of the offending cur, and if he pays no attention, there are other ways of obtaining redress. Poison is the weapon of a coward."¹⁶

Revelstoke's *Kootenay Star* recommended taxing dog owners as a more humane way of dealing with the dog explosion. This was the approach Kaslo took once it was incorporated as a city in 1893. It didn't work. In 1898 dog poisoners were working their evil schemes in Kaslo.

One American in the Slocan in 1893 said he could tell men with British backgrounds by the “bob-tailed” dogs that often accompanied them. Judging from surviving group photographs, it seems that “crosses” and larger breeds, such as setters, were generally favoured. St. Bernards and Newfoundlands were especially prized.¹⁷

There were smaller dogs too, of course, including Alex Sproat’s prized spaniel, Dick, and a scattering of terriers.¹⁸ Big Sandy McKay, who lived at the mouth of Mill Creek opposite New Denver, was a dog man too. While he had a claim named the Poodle Dog, his pal looks more like a spaniel.



Big Sandy McKay **Author’s Collection**

Perhaps the most famous of all Slocan dogs—whether it ever existed or not—was “Colonel” R.T. Lowery’s bulldog. In the 1890s and early twentieth century Lowery was the acerbic editor of New Denver’s *Ledge*. Beginning in July 1900 he included in each edition of the paper, a drawing of himself and his bulldog. The bulldog was pictured feasting on a delinquent newspaper subscriber.

Each edition included a unique and everchanging pithy statement tacked to the imagined office wall. But Lowery had been referring to his bulldog since at least 1895, when he wrote this:

Our bull-dog has grown very fat lately, and we have taken him to Spokane to train for the fall campaign. This dog has a history. We fed him for a long time on book agents, but their gall made him ill and we changed his diet to townsite boomers. He fattened for a while from them, but becoming troubled with wind colic, we switched again, and gave them [sic] nothing but delinquent subscribers for nearly a year. Now we are fitting him with a new set of teeth and giving him nerve cordials. When he is in proper condition we will try and collect a bill from the I.C.& D. Co. If we don’t succeed, the bulldog’s days are numbered.¹⁹



A cartoon showing Robert Lowery's bulldog devouring a delinquent subscriber ran in each issue of *The Ledge*. It's not known if Lowery really had a bulldog or not or if it was a product of his imagination
The Ledge, July 5, 1900.

Lowery was partial to dogs—bulldogs in particular. Silverton hotel-keeper Grant Thorburn had a bulldog “a twin to the one the fighting editor of this paper owns, and it is bad medicine for the human race.”²⁰

Lowery could also match the tall tales told by Charlie Chambers. Lowery told a story about Tom Henderson's dog, who would dress up in Tom's high collar and tie and appear at dinners in Tom's place. “Tom,” Lowery would declare, “yer dog's alright!”²¹

Lowery was a keen observer of dogs as well as their two-legged companions. He described itinerant typesetter Ricardo Fraser's setter as having “a pesticated and kicked appearance probably produced by living on Kaslo dingbats, or Nelson *Tribune* editorials.”²²

Lowery's bulldog lasted a few more years, following Lowery and the *Ledge* to Fernie, before the bulldog was retired in 1905.²³

¹ “The Prospector,” Will Raymond, *The Ledge*, May 27, 1897.

² “Lived on Bones,” *Nakusp Ledge*, August 30, 1894.

³ “A Prospector's Romance,” *Kaslo Kootenaiian*, March 26, 1897.

⁴ “Nipper' My Four Footed Friend,” *Victoria Daily Colonist*, July 17, 1917.

⁵ “Prospector's Hard Luck,” *Spokesman-Review* (Spokane), August 24, 1893.

⁶ “Saved by a Canine,” *The Ledge* (New Denver), June 11, 1896.

⁷ “Drowned in the Columbia,” *The Ledge*, (New Denver), July 14, 1898.

⁸ “Local Assays,” *The Ledge*, (New Denver), May 14, 1896.

⁹ A Dog With a Dislike for Dudes,” *Spokane Falls Review*, May 17, 1890. For a fascinating account of the dog Krao and for various links, see Greg Nesteroff, “Revealing the Missing Link in an Ainsworth Creek Name,” *Trail Daily Times*, September 14, 2018.

¹⁰ “Three Forks,” *Slocan Times* (New Denver), September 8, 1894.

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- ¹¹ "Buried Alive," *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, Jan. 23, 1895.
¹² "Killed in a Snowslide," *Sandon Paystreak*, April 10, 1897.
¹³ "Three Forks Sports," *Sandon Paystreak*, June 5, 1897.
¹⁴ "Nakusp Items," *Kootenay Star* (Revelstoke), August 6, 1892.
¹⁵ "A Fearful Visitation," *The Ledge*, (New Denver), August 19, 1897.
¹⁶ *Nelson Miner*, November 17, 1894. See also *Kootenay Star* (Revelstoke), September 16, 1893;
¹⁷ "An Impregnable Fortress," *Nakusp Ledge*, August 9, 1894.
¹⁸ *Nakusp Ledge*, January 4, 1894.
¹⁹ "Religion in Schools," *The Ledge*, (New Denver), July 4, 1895.
²⁰ "Ledge Croppings," *The Ledge*, (New Denver), May 14, 1896.
²¹ *The Ledge*, (New Denver), Jan. 16, 1896.
²² "Ledge Croppings," *Nakusp Ledge*, August 23, 1894.
²³ Editorial. *Fernie Ledge*, August 2, 1905.