In 1903, the International Coal and Coke Company acquired 5,300 acres of land that included the future site of Coleman. A townsite was surveyed, lots were quickly purchased and by the end of 1904 the village had a growing population of almost 300. The village was quickly shaped by the coal and coke mining industry and quickly became a hub for the developing coal Mining Industry. The townsite was incorporated as a town, with Alex Cameron as mayor. Coleman suffered a severe economic blow in 1918 when the collapse of the coke market caused the International Coal and Coke Company to shut down all 216 coke ovens. Only half of the ovens reopened in 1932 when the market turned more favourable. Despite the boom and busts of the coal industry, Coleman continued to expand.

During the heyday of this coal mining era, the townsite was home to prominent manse Stephen Lawson who brought unwanted attention to the town. Coleman suffered a major flood in 1923 and the Great Depression (1929-1939) before the demand for coal during World War II revived the town's sagging economic fortunes. In the immediate post-war period, the ever-increasing cost of underground mining forced a reorganization of coal mining in the Crosswinds Pass. One of the results was the formation of Coleman Collieries, Helicon Mines and Indian River Mines. In 1983, Coleman Collieries would be the last mine to close its operations in the Crosswinds Pass. Edmund Dysie and Richard Wesley “West” Johnston were Coleman's most prominent early builders and contractors. Both Dysie and Johnson were contracted by the mine companies to build offices, workers' cottages and offices. Their work was notable for its use of local stone and residential structures. Their prolific work can still be seen in many of the buildings in Coleman today.

Ethnic Diversity

The Crosswinds Pass in general, and Coleman in particular, was a venerable melting pot of cultures in the early years. Immigrants from eastern Canada and the United States, the Ukraine, the Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Italy, the Balkans, Scandinavia, and Belgium and France all opened businesses in the coal mines. Coleman had its ethnic enclaves of Bush Town (Ukrainian and Polish), Italian Town, and Slav Town (West Coleman) where the rich and diverse cultures of Chinese, Dutch, Hungarian and Japanese arrived, adding to the fascinating and unique ethnic mosaic that makes up the Crosswinds Pass of today.

Lawson’s Murder

On September 21, 1922, during the prohibition era, Steve Piicicallri, son of famed Riga, Latvia, had a liquor run in from B.C. Steve’s run was tpped off, and he was forced to make his escape from Blairmore back to the B.C. border. He then met up with a fellow Latvian man, Constable Steve Lawson, attempted to stop the young Piicicallri, and ended up shooting at the vehicle as it was passing, wounding Steve Piicicallri. Steve Piicicallri eventually died from his wounds. Steve Piicicallri learned of the shooting, and drove from Blairmore to Coleman to confront Lawson. Emperor Pick took a bullet and was killed. Piicicallri and Lawson died. The witnesses were all killed. Steve, the wife of his business partner, with him. Outside the A.P. barracks, Lawson argued with the elder Piicicallri. A point in the argument, shots were fired and Lawson fell to the ground dead. Piicicallri made their escape but were apprehended by the following day, a term that captivated the nation, both Piicicallri and Lawson were found guilty of murder and both were hanged.

Downtown Coleman, circa 1920

In 2002, historic downtown Coleman was designated a National Historic Site. The plaque commemorating the site states: "Coleman played a vital role in making the Crosswinds Pass one of Canada’s most productive coalfields until the 1950s. Between 1903 and 1913, the International and McCullin Mines helped to fuel the boom towns of the region. These operations relied on sophisticated preparation techniques and huge equipment to produce large quantities of coal. Coleman is one of the few Canadian sites where substantial physical evidence exists of the surface plant, where mine, where mine, mine, and mine, and mine.

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