

Ghosts of Comaplix

"There are ghosts in Comaplix, and you can feel them. I always felt I had to leave before the sun set." —Marion James

By GREG NESTEROFF

The Comaplix cemetery on the northeast arm of Upper Arrow Lake is perhaps the most isolated burial ground in West Kootenay, accessible only by boat, and only if you know where to look.

Its very existence is an anomaly. Although Comaplix was a thriving sawmill town from 1898 to 1915, neighboring communities such as Beaton and Camborne didn't have their own cemeteries, nor did they bury their dead at Comaplix.

Usually bodies were sent to Revelstoke or Arrowhead, even though it was farther. (The Comaplix cemetery actually predates the one at Arrowhead by about four years.)

The cemetery is up a steep hill, past what used to be a schoolhouse, and at one point had a white fence around it.

The earliest burials appear to have been a pair of siblings who died of malignant scarlet fever on 12 Mar 1903. On their death certificates, they are called **Lillian** and **William Hamell**, ages eight and three. However, their wooden headboards, written in French, called them Adèlia Annee Lilly and Willy Joseph Alphonse Hamell, ages nine and six.

Further confusing matters is that according to the 1901 census, Lilly was born in Steveston on 19 May 1894, which would have made her eight, while Willy was born in Revelstoke on 10 Jul 1898, making him four.

Their parents, **Alphonse** and **Frediline Hamell**, also lost a stillborn child in Steveston in 1896. Otherwise, not much is known about them. The *Revelstoke Herald* of 21 Aug 1901 reported:

Mr. Hamell had quite a little excitement at his ranche [sic] the other day. A brown bear came down to the ranche [sic] and carried one of his best pigs.

Mr. Hammil [sic] offered \$10 to any person who would shoot the bear. **Mr. Devebro** of Comaplix accepted the offer and succeeded in killing the bear. Mr. Hamill's [sic] ranch, which is situated about three miles from Comaplix, is the popular stopping place between Comaplix and Camborne. The ranch produces an excellent variety of vegetables with which Mr. Hamill [sic] supplies the local market.

The Hamells sold their 160 acre farm to **John de Rose** in August 1904 for \$3,000, but it's not known where they went after that.

The children's twin gravemarkers bore the poignant epitaph "Quand on est pur comme a son age le dernier jour est le plus beau." Translated, "When one's life is pure, the last day is the most beautiful."

Unfortunately, young people were all too often taken before their time in Comaplix. At least nine people died there under the age of 30, including two infants.

Naomi Burr told **Milton Parent** in 1983, "I remember my mother telling me about a woman who lived in a row of houses down where the mill workers lived. She had a baby who died in the night. She was a strong woman and must have broken the baby's neck ... I remember going over and seeing the baby in a box. It was said that it was an accident ..."

Four-year-old **Theodore Deslaurier** died of a dreaded ailment.

"Theodore and I were the same age," **Irene Rennie** recalled. "He got a bad cold and got very sick. He had diphtheria and I got it but not as bad. We had no doctor and he was running a terrible temperature. By the time we got a doctor from Arrowhead, he gave him some stuff to put in his throat. Had he lived, he would not be able to speak. His voice box would have been burned because of this medicine ..."

"Mom and Dad went down to sit up with the boy's body. I was laying in bed and I can remember my dad making the casket for the Deslauriers. It was lined with white silk."

Theodore's body could not be sent elsewhere, so he was buried in Comaplix. His grave was marked with a white cross.

There were some strange deaths at Comaplix, including that of **Sigvart Theodor Tollefson**, who passed away mysteriously on 21 Nov 1903. One of his sawmill co-workers remarked that he simply “dropped dead” – and that’s what was entered on his death certificate.

According to the 1901 census, Tollefson was born on 22 Apr 1869 in Norway, which would have made him 34 at his death, but his wooden gravemarker said he was 38. He came to Canada in 1899 and boarded in Comaplix with another Norwegian, **Carl Thobiason**.

Then there was **George Blainey** (or Blaney), who succumbed to parsnip poisoning. According to the *Camborne Miner* of 4 May 1905:

George Blaney and his family were poisoned this week at Comaplix through eating parsnip that had been in the ground for several years. **Drs. Newcombe** and **Robinson** of Ferguson and Trout Lake were called and succeeded in bringing the family through safely, but Mr. Blaney succumbed to the effects of the poison.

But the most common cause of death was drowning. There were at least five separate incidents, including that of **Sigurd Birgh**, 32, whose death was reported in the same issue of the *Miner*:

Birgh was drowned at Comaplix on Tuesday, April 25th, through falling off the steamer *Piper* into the lake while under the influence of alcohol. No one witnessed the accident as it occurred after dark. The body was recovered the following Friday by police constable **Summer** by the use of grappling irons. A jury was empanelled which returned a verdict of accidental drowning.

Two months later, a well-respected sawmill worker named **William Sheldon** vanished. He was presumed to have drowned also, but his body was never found.

A visit to Comaplix by siblings **Tom** and **Florence Allard** to see relatives ended in tragedy. According to the *Revelstoke Mail Herald* of 26 Jun 1909:

Miss Florence Allard drowned in Comaplix on Sunday evening by the capsizing of the canoe in which she and her brother rode. **Miss Banfield** and **Mr. Campbell** were taking a pleasure ride. They were rowing at the mouth of Deep Creek when the current caught the little boat, upset it, and threw them into the water. The brother caught his sister’s dress and for a second thought he could save her but her clothing tore and the current carried her away beyond help. Mr. Campbell managed to get Miss Banfield to shore although she was terribly exhausted.

Irene Rennie talked about the incident in 1984: “I can remember my dad walking up and saying to my mother ‘There has been a terrible accident.’ It upset him so much. They never found her and Tom would go looking for her and calling her. He was never the same after that. It affected his mind because he blamed himself. She was a beautiful girl.”

Della Parent indicated the body was recovered, but it must have been months later, for the funeral was held in winter: “She is buried up in the graveyard there. When they held the funeral the teacher didn’t have school that day, and to keep the kids from seeing the proceedings took us on a toboggan up the north road.”

A sawmill worker named **Victor Sergeant** drowned at Comaplix on 21 Jul 1913, but the details aren’t known. He was 46, born in France, and had been working at the sawmill for ten months.

The fifth drowning involved an Arrowhead boy named **Erik Gustafson**. According to the *Nelson Daily News* of 8 Jun 1914:

The 12-year-old son of J.A. Gustafson was drowned yesterday [June 6] at Comaplix. The boy with some companions was playing in the loose logs outside the mill boom. A storm came up and the boy became unable to control the log boom which he was riding in the rough water. The body was recovered with some difficulty.

There may be others buried at Comaplix for whom there were no death certificates. The most noteworthy is **Fanny St. Clair** (or Sinclair), the local prostitute. According to Milt Parent in *Silent Shores & Sunken Ships*, 1997, p. 117-18, she

is said to have served the Beaton Arm and Arrowhead as well. Her house was well out of town which allowed her customers to arrive from all points and yet was virtually out of sight of the community, which was most agreeable with all concerned. However, poor **Willard [Gibson]** had to deliver the newspaper to her. To avoid any embarrassment or a situation that might be misinterpreted, he would pin the newspaper to a clothesline and send it in and the payment would be returned via the same route.

Irene Rennie recalled: "In the summer, she would bring some gals out there. We saw them sitting on the steps. It was a necessary evil because there were so many men there ... [Fanny] would come into town once in a while. She would talk really nice to us and give us a dime or a quarter. We thought she was all right."

No pictures of Fanny are known to exist, but according to Della Parent, "I was told Fanny was a pretty classy looking woman. [She] had lots of silks and satins."

On the afternoon of 4 Dec 1910, Tom Allard and **F.J. Goldsmith** noted she hadn't been seen in several days, so they decided to investigate. They found the doors to her house locked, and when they looked through the window, they saw her lying on the floor with a table on top of her. They went to **G.A. Graham**, Justice of the Peace, for help, who in turn telephoned **Const. Dodd** at Arrowhead. He arrived two hours later along with **Dr. Elliott**, the Arrowhead coroner, and **Dr. Macpherson**.

The *Nelson Daily News* described the gruesome scene that greeted them upon entering the house:

She had been cut across the face and head with a beer bottle and one large piece of glass was imbedded in her skull so deeply that it was difficult to remove it. She had also been struck twice with a hammer. It had sunk in an inch and a half into the skull. It was later found on a shelf in the cupboard covered with hair and blood. Her throat was cut from ear to ear and she had gashes on both sides of her hands, and her arms were bruised, which shows the desperate fight she put up for defense. A handkerchief later was found near the house beside the road covered with blood with apparently had

been used to wipe the blood from the murderer's hands ...

The crime had evidently been committed during the daytime as the lamps were clean, the blinds were up, and the housework done. There were also signs of the preparation of a meal. The doors were locked but the locks were spring locks. On the walls were found hand prints covered with blood where she had tried to save herself. She was robbed of all the money known to be near \$450. This was all missing except \$1 which was found. No clue has yet been discovered.

Subsequently, **Chief Const. Colin Cameron** of Golden was dispatched to investigate the murder. His six-page report, unearthed at the B.C. Provincial Archives, contains a number of revelations, including Fanny's real name: **Elizabeth Howard Crandall**. But there's no indication how they determined this.

The report notes she was about 50, and had lived in Comaplix the last seven years, with the exception of the previous summer at Silverton.

Medical evidence showed she had been dead four or five days. She was last seen on the 28th, and **Capt. Johnson** of the Str. *Piper* noted there had been no light from her house on the 30th – it was normally used in setting course from Beaton to the Comaplix dock. So she must have been killed between those dates, most likely on the afternoon of the 29th.

The police report confirms the identity of the prime suspect, something locals were aware of, although no charges were laid. He was a well-known and highly respected steamboat captain:

Capt. Johnson relieved **Capt. William Selby Soules** on the 30th November at Arrowhead, Capt. Soules having brought the *Piper* out from Comaplix and on which date he left, presumably, for his father's home at Sutton West, Ont. This Capt. Soules owns the house and furniture where deceased lived. He was also the paramour of the deceased and until about a year and a half ago had no other bedroom than at the house.

The suspicion that Soules committed the murder was based on hearsay. **Jane Henderson**, a

housekeeper at the Queen's Hotel said Fanny had come up to the hotel two weeks earlier:

Soules ... discovered [Fanny's] whereabouts and tried to persuade her to go home. She refused. After Soules left deceased informed Mrs. Henderson that she ... did not wish to be mauled about by him and that she was afraid of him. That a couple of days before he had beaten her ... She also said that when he went East she intended coming up and sleeping at the hotel every night as she was afraid to stay down at her house alone, there being no other houses near it. Mrs. Henderson also states that deceased told her she was afraid Soules would kill her.

The police couldn't establish where Soules was during the late afternoon and evening of the 29th. That morning he ordered a bank draft at Arrowhead for \$410, then arrived at Comaplix on his boat several hours earlier than usual. He drew his \$90 in wages for the month, and paid a debt at the Bowman Lumber Co. store. He was not seen again until 10 p.m. when the store manager went upstairs, where Soules had a room, and found him packing for his trip.

Police searched the room, but found nothing incriminating. In his report, Chief Cameron concluded:

It hardly seems probable that he would go away for several months ... without paying a farewell visit to deceased, considering his relations with her, but we cannot find any evidence other than that they were the best of friends and everyone speaks well of him.

In a letter to the Attorney General accompanying the report, Provincial Police **Supt. F.S. Hussey** said he had given instructions that Soules be located and questioned, but there is no record of any further follow-up.

According to **Roy Jacobson**, "Selby Sr. was brought back for questioning, but never charged. He was on his way to Ontario to get married. I don't know where they intercepted him. His father had a farm in Ontario. The engineer on the boat *Piper*, by the name of **Wilson**, said Selby did it. That's what he told another engineer."

Soules came back to Comaplix the following year and married **Maggie Belt**. Their sons **Selby Jr.** and **Calder** were born there. After the mill burned in 1915, the family moved to Vancouver, but eventually returned to the West Kootenay.

Years later, locals identified a second suspect, "**Red Eye**" **Rennie**. **George Evans** said: "Soules was accused of the murder. Red Eye was supposed to have been with him. They couldn't prove it, though ... It sounded to me like Red Eye was accused of being the watchman. Not really involved in the action itself."

Rennie apparently had his own theory about the crime. As **Andy Craig** remembered, "He said it was a laid-off policeman and another man from Arrowhead that went to visit the prostitute in Comaplix. They got drunk and somehow or other she ended up dead ... She was supposedly robbed. Red Eye told me never to tell the story otherwise they would be coming after me."

According to Irene Rennie, "Selby had something to do with old Fanny's death. My brother-in-law did too. My sister had two big pictures in gold frames hanging on the wall. They came from Fanny's house. My dad knew what the connection was but he would never say." (As we have seen, Soules owned Fanny's house and furniture.)

Rennie was not mentioned in the police report, although there was a second suspect named **Pete Cameron**. He and another fellow sank a well at Fanny's place the previous October, and the report describes Cameron's movements leading up to the murder. However, it doesn't explain what his role may have been.

The report was confident of only a few things:

The murder was clearly committed by a white man as the deceased was well known to have a strict aversion to Orientals. She would not even employ them to put away her wood. The fact of her having beer on the tray showed that it was not an Oriental. It was moreover committed by a powerful man as deceased was a very strong woman ... The motive was undoubtedly robbery and it appears as though the murderer must have been known to the deceased ...

Chief Cameron's investigation was frustrated by the fact the sawmill closed the week the murder took place, and many workers left town.

The murder left a chill over Comaplix.

Irene Rennie's mother, who had acted as something of a bank for East Indian mill workers, feared a robbery, so she gave the men their money back.

Meanwhile, Naomi Burr never forgot about Fanny: "Whenever I got giggling and couldn't stop I would think of her and it would sober me up."

It's not certain Fanny was buried in Comaplix, but Irene and Naomi both thought so. According to the police report, "It was necessary for the deceased to be buried at the expense of the government," but doesn't say where.

Her house stood for decades after the murder, possibly right up to the flooding of the Arrow Lakes. Some claimed it was haunted.

"Old Fanny's ghost is supposed to be walking around there," Roy Jacobson said. "Went through the buildings at night and blew out candles. Old loggers that stayed there would say that with no draft, no windows open or doors, all of a sudden the candle would go out."

Marion James's father was a camp cook at Comaplix, and the two of them lived in Fanny's house. "It was beautiful with wild roses and little creeks with crystal pools," she said. "But there are ghosts in Comaplix and you can feel them. I always felt I had to leave before the sun set."

Della Parent stayed there while her husband **Joe** logged with **Ed Munn**. "When I found out about Fanny being murdered there, I couldn't stand it. I hated it."

But she soon found another presence that was even more unwanted. "We caught 24 mice in one night. The mice came down through the partitions and they set the traps right at the bottom. Empty one and then catch another. We slept in the bigger part of the house. The kitchen was smaller. Joe had a rat run over his face one night. He woke up and saw it running across the floor ... After that I said I was going back to Nakusp."

Two graves at Comaplix were dug prematurely, if the following stories are to be believed.

According to **Osborne Sutherland**, "There was a hole in the graveyard that was prepared for a lady that had died. On the way to the burial, she woke up and sat up in the coffin." No word on her reaction, or that of the pallbearers, but he recalled seeing the still-empty grave years later.

Meanwhile, Roy Jacobson told of **Johnny Desrosier**, who wanted to be buried at Comaplix. "So he dug the hole and every year he would go and check to see if it was all right. One day an old Swede died and they put him in Desrosier's hole. So Johnny never went back there again." (The identity of the 'old Swede' is unknown.)

There might have been more burials at Comaplix, but for the fact many workers at the sawmill were East Indians, who preferred cremation. Irene Rennie recalled seeing one man's funeral pyre: "He was quite young. They said he had consumption, which was TB. He was in Revelstoke hospital for quite a long while. He couldn't get proper care and died. They brought him back to Comaplix for his funeral. His casket was placed on the beach and they piled driftwood and lumber around the casket. We got out of school to see this." (Oddly, they were allowed to witness this funeral, but prevented from attending Florence Allard's.)

The final burial appears to have been in 1925, by which time the place was more or less deserted. **Peter Lind**, 73, died of natural causes. He was born in the U.S., and lived in Comaplix for two years, working as a laborer.

After that, not much attention seems to have been paid to maintaining the cemetery.

Calder Soules, whose cousin Theodore Deslaurier is buried there, recalled: "I hauled logs right down past that graveyard." George Evans went further: "They peeled poles right in the graveyard."

In the fall of 1965, prior to the flooding of the Arrow Lakes, **D.W. Barcham** of B.C. Hydro went looking for the Comaplix cemetery, using directions supplied by a **Mr. Crawford**. He

thought he found it “on a flat bench about 200 yards north of the old school site.”

He only saw one decaying marker, “lying on the ground and covered with leaves. Several nails are evident and although part of the cross-member is missing, there is evidence of a short decayed section on the left ... The lower end of the cross is still buried in the ground. Furthermore, it was made from dressed lumber.”

Crawford recalled an open, unused grave, and Barcham photographed “what could be a very shallow grave; viz., a depression with mounds of earth on either side. If not a shallow grave, it could be one of regular depth which has caved in over the years.”

He found a second depression that could also have been the remains of an open grave, “particularly if open graves were shored up pending use. This particular hole has been shored at one time or another. If shoring was not a practise, then it’s probably an old privy pit.”

Barcham noted the site “was the only appreciable clearing in the area ... this particular site is the only sensible place above the school where one might locate a graveyard ... As coffins would probably have been carried by hand, a more distant or steeper location would not be likely. The site also has a pleasant view of the lake, which may have been a factor in its location.”

Barcham listed a few items that cast doubt on whether it really was the cemetery, including “a considerable amount of refuse (pots, pans, bottles, etc.) scattered about the clearing. This, however, could have been dumped there since the last burial. (1928?)”

He was “quite certain that this site is indeed the old cemetery,” and noted it was 75 to 100 feet above the projected floodline. One woman, however, claimed that two graves slid into the lake in the early 1970s.

In fact, Barcham may not have been in the right place, for in 1973, Della Parent’s sons Milton and **Leonard** visited Comaplix and found four wooden markers. Two belonged to the Hamell children, another was unreadable, and the final one said: “In Memory of Theodor Tollefson/Died November 21, 1903/Aged 38 years.”

In 1982, B.C. cemeteries officer **S.I. MacLean** visited Nakusp, and tried to learn more about the Comaplix cemetery, but didn’t get very far. All she could gather was that **Avery Gunterman** of Camborne believed it was around Town Creek (in fact, it’s on Comaplix Creek), and had six or seven graves. He said B.C. Hydro asked him to help locate it before the flooding. He couldn’t find it, but thought one of their surveyors did, and mapped it. MacLean checked with the Hydro office in Nakusp, but was told there was no such map.

In the mid-1980s, Milt Parent, now president of the Arrow Lakes Historical Society, went back to Comaplix with his wife **Rosemarie** and removed the gravemarkers of the Hamell children, which were fallen over and decaying. They were taken to Nakusp, where the epitaphs were retouched. They were also translated by the local high school French teacher.

The markers were returned to the cemetery in June 1994, along with a sign that reads: “Comaplix was the home of the Bowman Lumber Co. This mill had a capacity of one million board feet per week. A great downturn occurred during the first Great War and on April 4, Easter Sunday, 1915, the mill, town, and the S.S. *Revelstoke* all burned in a mysterious conflagration. All that is now left is this little graveyard. Please respect it.”

The sign and three remaining gravemarkers were affixed to trees.

In all, the cemetery probably has about a dozen burials. Unfortunately, pre-1912 death certificates rarely indicated place of interment.

Seventeen deaths are listed in the B.C. vital events database for Comaplix, but only five of these individuals are known for certain to have been buried there as well: the Hamell children, Theodor Tollefson, Victor Sargeant, and Peter Lind. Theodore Deslaurier can be added to the list as well, even though he had no death certificate.

A seventh person, **Eliza Frizzell**, died in 1906 of inflamed kidneys at age 26, and was buried at Comaplix. However, her body was exhumed and taken to Hillier, Ont. to be interred in the same plot as her parents and siblings.

Four others, including Florence Allard and Fanny St. Clair, are most likely buried at Comaplix, but there is no official record. And there are another eight who may be buried there, but it is equally likely they were taken to Arrowhead or elsewhere.

There are also two people who died at Comaplix that we know for sure are not buried there: **George Belt** passed away in 1909 at age 73, and his body was sent to Ontario. **Lewis Ezra Steeves**, 24, died in 1907 of "shock," and according to the death certificate, his body was "sent east."

On 29 Apr 2005, about 15 members of the Arrow Lakes Historical Society visited the Comaplix cemetery. We took three boats, two of which launched from Galena Bay, and a third from Nakusp. The weather was spectacular.

Upon landing at Comaplix, we walked down the beach to where the creek enters the lake, and followed a fairly good road uphill. No one could quite remember where the cemetery was, so we bushwhacked a bit, first discovering a log cabin that was in good shape, at least on the outside. On one of the logs was written the name of a family who stayed there in 1981.

We continued on a little ways, and as the road curved around a knoll, Bill Barrow, a long-time Arrow Lakes tugboat captain, called to us from above that he had found it.

"Straight up," he said. Noting how steep the hillside was, we looked for a path. No luck. So we scrambled to the top, where we were immediately met with the Hamell children's twin graves, and the remains of the fence.

The group posed for several pictures, and it wasn't for a little while longer that we discovered Theodor Tollefson's gravemarker, slightly hidden in the trees.

Judging from the mounds, there were perhaps nine or ten other graves, one of which was sunken in, and two of which bore crosses made from twigs. There was also a rusted shovel nailed to a tree.

It seemed a funny place for a cemetery; inconvenient to pall bearers (the idea that graves could have been washed away was preposterous)

and without much of a view. The lake was not visible at all.

We spent perhaps half an hour in this obscure and extraordinary place, taking GPS readings so that we can one day find our way back, and also ensuring that if the wooden markers eventually disappear, the ghosts of Comaplix will still have a place to haunt.

COMAPLIX CEMETERY

Registration No. 15139

GPS co-ordinates:

11u 0445027

utm 5622631

Elev. 509m

LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

Part of Lot 1141

First burial: 1903

Last burial: 1925

Total burials: 12 (est.)

KNOWN (6)

Theodore Deslaurier

Lilly Hamell, 1903

Willy Hamell, 1903

Theodor Tollefson, 1903

Victor Sergeant, 1913

Peter Lind, 1925

PROBABLE (4)

Baby Girrard, 1903

Joseph Ouimet, 1905

Florence Allard, 1909

Elizabeth Crandall, 1910

POSSIBLE (8)

Unknown woman

Sigurd Birgh, 1905

George Blainey, 1905

Samuel Clarke, 1907

James Edwards, 1907

Sarah Ferguson, 1907

Mary Stromberg, 1910

Erik Gustafson, 1914

DEFINITELY NOT (2)

Lewis Steeves, 1907

George Belt, 1909

EXHUMED (1)

Eliza Frizzell, 1906

SOURCES

Milton Parent interviews, all on file at Arrow
Lakes archives in Nakusp

Naomi Burr, Jul 1983

Andy Craig, 6 Jan 1978

George Evans, Nov 1984

Willard Gibson, Dec 1977

Willard Gibson, Mar 1978

Roy Jacobson, Jul 1983

Marion James, Jan 1984

Alice McKissock, 1985

Alice McKissock, 1986

Della Parent, Dec 1995

Irene Rennie, 1978

Irene Rennie, Mar 1984

Harding Rudd, Nov 1984

Calder Soules, Mar 1984

Osborne Sutherland, Jul 1978

Comaplix cemetery file 1965-82, received from BC
Business Practices and Consumer Protection
Authority

Revelstoke Herald, 21 Aug 1901

Revelstoke Herald, 25 Aug 1904

Kootenay Mail, 27 Aug 1904

Camborne Miner, 4 May 1905

Camborne Miner, 11 Jul 1905

Revelstoke Mail Herald, 26 Jun 1909

Nelson Daily News, 5 Dec 1910

Nelson Daily News, 10 Dec 1910

Nelson Daily News, 8 Jun 1914

Silent Shores & Sunken Ships, Milton Parent, 1997,
p. 56, 117-18, 121, 126, 132, 137, 147-48, 206

Report on the murder of Fanny Sinclair at
Comaplix, BC Provincial Archives, GR-0429, 18/4,
7373/10

1901 census for Comaplix

BC death certificates, available at Nelson library