

Wilderness theatre preserves 'pure gold' of music hall

By Michael Leech

The Cariboo — it has the ring of a magic word. A wild, untouched world, sparkling blue and green in hot summer, snow blanketed and still in winter. Mountains, lakes, cloud-piled skies — and gold. Yes, most of all gold, for in the 19th century the word 'Cariboo' ran like a yellow flame among men hungry for riches, and in their thousands they trundled north to the inhospitable hills where solid stone enclosed the hoped-for millions. Few of them made it, and many came back with only tales to tell of their time in British Columbia's interior. Yet some people made money without prospecting or panning the chill mountain streams. Miners, many of them amateurs, needed food and equipment, so all along the wild country of the West wherever the bright gold was found, little towns sprang into being to service the hordes of new customers. Some of them became big centres in no time at all, swollen in a few short months with thousands of new citizens, but only a few maintained their position once the greed for gold ran out, after the seams declined and a few sharp-minded men had bought up the worthwhile claims.

Most of the new settlements tumbled into decay. By the end of the 19th century the Cariboo, and the Yukon further North, were filled with timber frame towns falling into the forest, rotting and empty, almost dead. Fire destroyed many, for the buildings were of wood from the plentiful pine forests, and were an invitation to conflagration. Others simply faded away, crumbling into the ghost towns of the present century. With them went a whole way of life that Western movies can only approximate — to get the flavour of the mining towns of the West of Canada (and of the US too) one has to see films like those made by Pierre Berton, clipped together from contemporary prints, photographs and posters, old film and occasional live reminiscences — very valuable these, for the Gold Rush days are slipping away from human memory and old timers must be very old indeed now to recall those crowded, exciting times.

Berton's film relives the toil and despair, the excitement and eroded hopes of city men looking for a fortune, the sleazy saloon scenes and the camp followers in their over-decorated cots behind Main Street. A life that's gone — and yet a life one can still glimpse in such towns as Barkerville, British Columbia — which

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The cast aboard their stage coach, outside the Theatre Royal, with Louise Glennie (top, left) and Fran Dowie (standing,) in white top hat.

before 1885 was a hurly-burly of a place, a one-street town ballooning with citizens crowded into more than 120 new buildings — shops and saloons, bars and rooming houses. For a time, life in Barkerville was fever-pitched. Then the collapse came and the place dwindled away. In 1958 only 15 buildings were still lived in, amazingly, by a tiny population. Unlike many other towns, Barkerville never quite died.

During the last decade Barkerville has made a recovery as a tourist spot. Two people who helped to make it the popular place it is today are Fran Dowie and his wife Louise Glennie. They did so by importing an unusual, and yet very fitting entertainment into the town — music-hall. In its time, the town attracted some leading vaudeville lights. Fran, a theatrical entrepreneur and actor with a flair for history and old-time music-hall, thought up the idea of making it ring again with Cariboo lustiness by presenting the

songs and dances of the last century.

Louise, one of Canada's leading comedien-nes and indeed one of the funniest women to be seen onstage anywhere, designed the show as well as writing material and working in it. Fran produced and directed, also wrote material, and acted as jovial ringmaster to the whole caboodle. Together they worked with the British Columbia Parks Branch of the Department of Recreation and Conservation in bringing to life this miniature capital of the Cariboo.

"I remember the first time I went to Barkerville," says red-haired Louise, wrinkling her nose in pleasure at the memory. "There was a bakery that still made the old original sourdough bread and you could smell it all along Main Street. Somehow it evoked the place and you could feel history living and breathing around you."

"You could only get to Barkerville on a

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