

# 1. THE TULAMEEN GHOST TOWN TRAIL.

This is one of a series of ten Happy Trails tours published by Home Oil Distributors Limited. They are adapted from articles by Liz Bryan which were originally published in Western Living magazine. Photographs, except where noted, are by Jack Bryan.

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**T**he Tulameen Ghost Town Trail — #1 in a series of ten Happy Trails driving adventure tours published by Home Oil Distributors Limited.

The valley of the Tulameen is largely forgotten now, bypassed in favour of easier and faster ways between Princeton and Merritt. But these 75 miles, though dusty ones, will take you through an area with a continuous and interesting history. Indian tribes traded here for rare “red earth”, the fur brigades and gold miners came in the 18th and 19th centuries, then the coalminers of the 20th.

Four “ghost towns” along the route, plus a chance to find a long lost cache of platinum worth about \$40,000, give the afternoon drive an extra sense of excitement.

The route begins at Princeton, a little town at the confluence of the Similkameen and Tulameen rivers. Renamed for the Prince of Wales who visited Canada in 1860, the town once went by the prettier name of Vermilion Forks. Long before Europeans came, the Forks was an Indian trading centre; tribes came from as far away as the Great Plains to barter for red or vermilion ochre. This ochre, which was used for paint, was found up the Tulameen Valley. Appropriately, Tulameen is Indian for “red earth”.

Drive down Princeton’s main street (Bridge Street) and cross the river on the old wooden one-way bridge. Turn sharp left and head up the “Red Earth” valley. The road is mostly paved all the way to Tulameen except for some initial stretches along the river bluffs. These are very narrow, winding and rocky and can be intimidating. Drive with extra care. After navigating the rock bluffs, the road swoops down through forests to the valley floor which it follows to the settlement of Coalmont, 11 miles from Princeton.

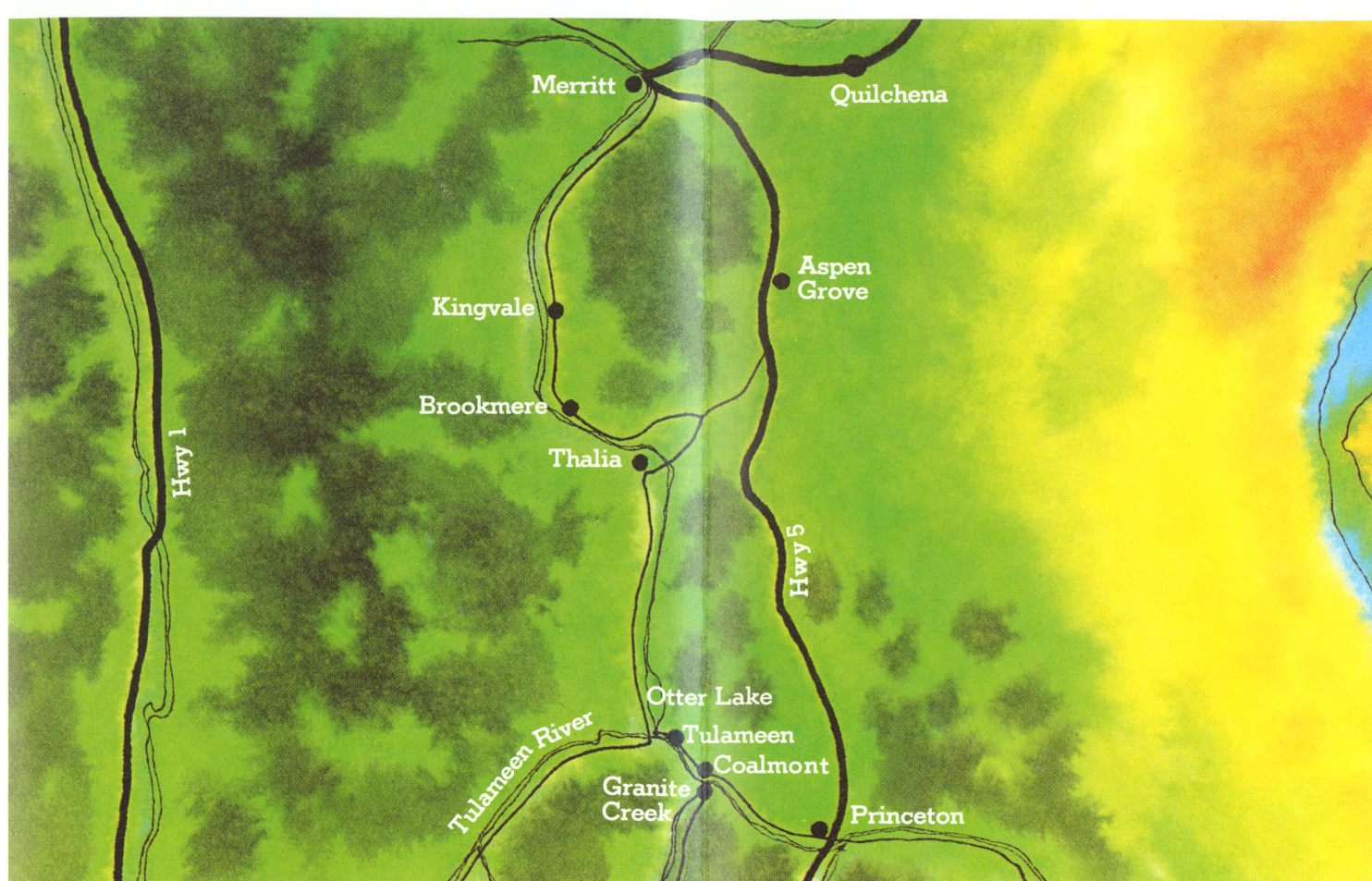
Coalmont was founded around the turn of the century by the Coalmont Coal & Coke Company which mined the rich outcrops of this “mountain of coal”. In the optimism of the day, it was believed that the coal would last forever and Coalmont would become a large and prosperous industrial town. But the easily extracted surface coal seams were soon exhausted and it proved uneconomical to mine the deeper seams. Coalmont



became a derelict, though never quite a ghost town. Today the old hotel is still open for business but most of the other wooden stores have closed.

The highway makes a right-angled bend at the hotel; keep straight on down a side road signposted to Granite Creek and Blakeburn and cross over the Tulameen River. A mile up this side road is the ghost town of Granite Creek, once the third largest settle-

ment in B.C. Gold on the creek was discovered in 1885 by cowboy Johnny Chance who was driving cattle over the Tulameen Trail to Hope. The placer gold drew miners like a magnet. On the clearing beside the creek the settlement grew to a lusty, flamboyant town of 2,000, boasting 13 saloons, ten stores, two



blacksmiths and two jewellers. In its heyday, over 200 buildings covered the grassy flat.

The creek was extraordinarily rich — \$90,000 in gold was recovered in its first year — and, for a placer creek, it was long-lived. The boom lasted for three glorious years until all the gold was gone. The creek and the town were abandoned to nature.

The Granite Creek gold was intermixed with another mineral, lighter in colour but equal in weight, so the two were hard to separate. This “white gold” was a nuisance; the miners, once they had isolated it from the gold, threw it away. One miner, however, stored his worthless “white gold” in a bucket. At the end of two years, the bucket was full — at least 20 lbs. When the miner left the creek, he buried the bucket and its load near his cabin. He never returned; there was no reason why he should.

Years later, mining men discovered that the white mineral was platinum, worth far more than gold! Old claims were feverishly reworked; garbage dumps searched; many of the old miners’ cabins were burned down so the platinum could be recovered from the ashes. But no one ever found the buried bucket. It lies there still, so old-timers say.

Today, there’s little trace beside Granite Creek of the brave old

mining days. The waterwheels that once lined the creek banks are all gone, and only three or four buildings remain to mark the townsite. Bottle hunters have made the ground hillocky with their diggings — or perhaps they were searching for the lost platinum cache, worth today about \$40,000. It’s a popular, though unofficial campsite; there’s fishing in the river and you can still pan out traces of gold from the creek. A government concrete cairn commemorates the site, though vandals have stolen its bronze plaque.

Five miles further along the road, which climbs high above the west bank of the creek, is the townsite of Blakeburn. Only one collapsing building remains here of a town remembered most for its “Black Wednesday” of August, 1930. On that day an explosion at No. 4 mine killed all but one of the 46 miners. The mine is also thought of with gratitude as being the only one to keep going through the Depression Years. It closed for good in 1940. Retrace your route from Blakeburn to Granite Creek and back to Coalmont. Turn left at the hotel and continue along the valley of the Tulameen to the settlement of the same name, formerly Otter Flats. The men of the fur brigade passed through here on their way to Nicola; their camp site near Otter Lake was called Campement des Femmes, and occupied the spot where Indian

tribes left their wives and children when they went hunting. A mining camp sprang up here in the gold rush days of the 1880s, but like Granite Creek it faded. Twenty five years later the town was revived as a coal mining centre. Again the mines closed and the town faded once more. Today it’s coming back to life in a quiet sort of way as a summer settlement. Otter Lake nearby provides good swimming and other water sports, and rockhounds find good hunting in the area. The lake was restocked in 1973 with rainbow, kokanee and whitefish.

At this point the route leaves the Tulameen Valley and heads north up the lake into the Otter Valley, flanked by a railway that has been following the road from Princeton. Now the CP, this line was formerly the Vancouver, Victoria and Eastern, later the Kettle Valley Line. It, too, strikes north up the Otter Valley on the far side of the lake. The road, on the lake’s western edge, passes by summer cabins, a government campsite three miles north of Tulameen, and on to meadows at the head of the lake. If you like old barns, there are some fine specimens here.



At Frembd Lake (fly and troll for small rainbows), the railway crosses the valley and runs beside the road, often squeezing it against mountain slopes which are scree-covered in places.

The valley widens out again for the meadows of the old Thynne Ranch in its graceful grove of cottonwoods, and then the road plunges into the forests of Otter Canyon. Suddenly, round a sharp corner, where Spearing Creek comes in from the left, there are rich meadows and the railway passes over the road on a high trestle. This spot is marked on the map as Thalia, but

it is merely a whistle stop on the railway, with no trace of settlement. The railway follows Spearing Creek over to the Coldwater Valley and Merritt. But our road keeps to the narrow canyon of the Otter for another six miles, climbing gradually into more open woods, bright with dandelions in summer.

Soon you’re into a stretch of open meadowland. Here the road forks. The left branch, signposted to Brookmere, straggles over to follow the railway to Merritt, about another 35 miles. Unless you have extra time, turn right for the more direct return to “civilization”. As you head northeast, the drab evergreens give way to aspens, gloriously golden in fall, with meadow clearings and one or two ranches along the way.

Six miles from the forks, you reach the pavement of Highway 5, just south of Aspen Grove. Merritt is to your left, Princeton to your right. Behind you lies hundreds of years of history painted in the colours of ochre, gold, coal, and platinum.