

Settlement Abandonment **A Case Study of Walhachin**

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[See table of contents](#)

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Settlement Abandonment
A Case Study of Walhachin

Many settlements in Western Canada have failed. To date, most research has tended to ignore these urban failures and has concentrated on those centers which eventually evolved into thriving communities. Much has been written to explain the factors responsible for the growth of successful communities. But, failure factors are certainly as valid as success factors in attempting to understand the processes involved in urban development. The ethnic community of Walhachin, near Kamloops, British Columbia, was selected as a case study.

Walhachin was chosen for a number of reasons. It may be regarded as exemplifying a number of general themes relating to British Columbia settlement; sequent occupance, agriculture and the frontier, and the search for Utopia and, as a result, was an obvious topic for one interested primarily in settlement and in Western Canada. As a research topic, Walhachin was also chosen because of its distinctiveness (remnant orchards in sagebrush and elitist social structure) would pique the interest of any geographer. Also, time was becoming

critical. Although the site and historical records are readily accessible, a substantial part of the data for this inquiry was available only from informants, of whom the most useful were the original settlers. It was also felt that the existing hypothesis offered as an explanation for Walhachin's failure as a community was unacceptable.

It has commonly been assumed that Walhachin, settled by British aristocracy during the immigration boom at the turn of the century, was eventually abandoned consequent to most of its manpower being lost as casualties during World War I. (See, for example, M.A. Ormsby, British Columbia: A History, p. 402). With investigation it became evident that this explanation was simply not acceptable and a new thesis was formulated involving a multi-factor explanation with the casualties being only one relatively minor factor.

The research was concerned with the identification and examination of the less obvious and yet more critical variables associated with the settlement's abandonment and viewed these variables associated with the settlement's productivity and associated living standard. The results of the inquiry suggested that Walhachin never existed as a

viable community due to the interaction of a host of failure factors, the most important being the individual's inability to function effectively in a new physical and culture environment.

Since Walhachin may be regarded virtually as a microcosm of variables inherent in frontier abandonment, its failure variables may be considered applicable not only to other similar colonization or settlement schemes but to frontier regions generally.

In British Columbia, the role of the agricultural frontier has received little consideration. Although much of the province's original impetus for exploration was the fur and mining frontiers, which have received considerable attention, it was the agricultural frontier which added permanence to the new settlement patterns. Associated with the agricultural frontier is ethnic group settlement. With varying economic bases these types of settlements have been attempted throughout the province with notable successes such as the Mennonites in the Lower Fraser Valley and the Doukhobors in the Kootenays.

There appears to be an underlying theme in both agricultural frontier and ethnic group studies.

Often these people were searching for some form of Utopia such as political or religious freedom or perhaps a fundamental desire for land ownership. An interesting theme would be to study the settlement pattern and rise of urban centers as a manifestations of a utopian quest.

Research Sources and Techniques

Information for the Walhachin study was derived from a wide variety of sources, each common to the historical geographic approach. They may be considered within four major categories: archival research, oral research, photographic interpretation and field work.

Archival Research

Included in this area was a wide range of journalistic accounts varying from articles written during Walhachin's development to those written many years after its abandonment. During the settlement's inception and growth, local newspapers gave the scheme extensive coverage, while over the years the major provincial newspapers have featured extensive articles on the British aristocratic settlement. Perhaps the most useful source was the Walhachin Chronicle, published as a weekly during the community's period of prosperity. As well as the local and provincial newspapers, a number of British news-

papers were extremely useful, since many of the settlers were from families very much in the news in Great Britain. This source yielded information concerning the individual's background and included the entire societal heritage.

Two rather unusual sources were the C.B.C. and National Film Board files. Both contained material on the settlement used for broadcasts. Taped interviews with original settlers who have subsequently died were particularly important.

A number of unpublished manuscripts and various forms of promotional literature were available in archives and local museums, both in B.C. and in England and Wales. Many of the families in Britain had personal archives. However, as with many of the company files available in London, they proved to be the greatest source of bias through selective deposit and retention. Personal records were occasionally selected for my scrutiny while many had been selectively destroyed. This, however, was revealing in itself as this action was often explained as the research continued.

To study such topics as site conditions and property ownership there were numerous government reports and records pertaining to

Walhachin's development. These included B.C. sessional papers, water rights reports, land registry records, soil and water feasibility reports and court reports. Frequently the most valuable information was comments written on a sketch or in the margins of a report, referring to various observations and impressions the author had made of the settlers or some situation at Walhachin.

Original documents, such as the B.C. Horticultural Estates Limited Papers, were used primarily to assess the financial basis of the community through an analysis of the various contractual agreements and company constitutions. The documents were also useful in another sense. The backgrounds of members serving on the various company directorships and of major share-holders were important in assessing the quality of leadership and the process of decision-making in the community which was significant in explaining Walhachin's demise.

Oral Research

Interviews included the use of both open and closed questionnaire techniques depending upon the information desired. Factual data was usually elicited with a closed questionnaire; whereas the open-ended questionnaire and

focused interview provided greater flexibility in obtaining subjective information and for probing the sentiments that underlay certain opinions and attitudes.

This particular study required interviews rather than mailed questionnaires as the number of reliable informants was extremely limited. Due to the relative lack of written material, questionnaire credibility was important and during the interviews the interviewer had numerous opportunities to appraise the validity of the informant's responses. Every effort was made to complement personal interviews with informal group discussions made up usually of two or three informants from various categories. These often proved to be the most useful in terms of data collection as the individuals tended to jog one another's memories (very useful considering the mean age of the informants was 72 years) and would discuss questions freely with one another that had met reluctance in the personal interview. This aspect of the research, as well as the archival, included work in both British Columbia and Great Britain.

Photographic Interpretation

This technique was used primarily to obtain data pertaining to the physical characteristics of the site such as the relative location

of such structures as homes, shops, industrial plants and hotels; the extent and variety of crops, field patterns, communication systems and transport facilities; the community's physical amenities including swimming pools, polo grounds, cricket courts, and parade or fair grounds; and the size and form of various buildings and topographic features.

Since the study was essentially one of historical geography, the sequence of developments was critical and in this respect photographs were invaluable. The earliest aerial photographs were flown in 1928, followed by a number of subsequent flights, and these, combined with ground photographs taken at the time by individuals presented data on which to apply photographic interpretation and measurement techniques. Thus, it was possible to measure precisely the evolution of the settlement, using such variables as streets, homes, businesses and property lines. Also, since no adequate maps of the area existed, the aerial photographs provided data from which to construct a base map.

Photographs from both personal collections and early newspapers were used to augment demographic statistics. Many cultural events were extensively photographed which led to many generalizations about the community's life-style,

value system and social structure. Demographic data was determined largely through photographs of all fairs, major sporting events, military exercises and of various ceremonies and documents.

Field Work

This was one of the most rewarding research techniques. Various relics over the landscape were studied to obtain data for topics concerned with such areas as architectural styles, garden design, fence types and home furnishings in an effort to determine the extent of class and cultural retention once the aristocrats had settled on the frontier. Field work was also useful in checking the accuracy of the maps based on information from aerial photographs.

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