

Byron Harmon's Banff

Information sheet B2

When Byron Harmon arrived in Banff in 1903, he found the small town at the centre of a growing industry. This industry was tourism. From its creation in 1885, the Canadian government billed Banff National Park, at that time called Rocky Mountains Park, as a “public park and pleasure ground”. Working along side the recently completed Canadian Pacific Railway, the government embarked on an advertising campaign to draw the affluent and adventurous to Canada’s Rocky Mountains.

This campaign worked. Word of the healing power in Banff’s hot springs, the beauty of its mountains and its picturesque situation in the Bow Valley brought many wealthy travellers to the magnificent Rocky Mountains. The advertising campaign was also directed at sportsmen, who would find ample hunting and fishing in the Rockies, and to mountaineers who may have already explored the Alps and were excited by the prospect of unclimbed peaks. The Alpine Club of Canada was formed in 1906 and organized annual summer expeditions into the Rocky and Selkirk Mountains. Harmon was an original member.

Upon arrival in Banff, visitors required services. Mountaineers and scientists needed experienced guides, packhorses and equipment to explore the backcountry. Banff became home to guides, outfitters, wranglers and shopkeepers. Many of these residents were colourful characters and provided a welcome dimension to the emerging community. Hotels, shops, stables and homes were built around Banff Avenue, the town’s main street, where Harmon’s studio occupied a prominent location.

Special local events became added attractions. Established in 1889, Banff Indian Days became a festival of First Nations dancing, singing and rodeo activities. The Banff Winter Carnival developed into an annual celebration of ski jumping, skating sports and ice carving, starting in 1917. By the late 1920s ski areas were pioneered in the mountains near Banff.

Venturing into this active environment provided many opportunities for an entrepreneurial man like Byron Harmon. He assembled a selection of views and postcards for “newsies” to sell on the Canadian Pacific Railway passenger trains. He became official photographer for the Alpine Club of Canada and accompanied many ACC excursions during his lifetime. His various businesses became places to exhibit his growing collection of photographs.

Harmon thrived in Banff as the town continued to grow and Banff provided Harmon with many exciting opportunities and friendships.