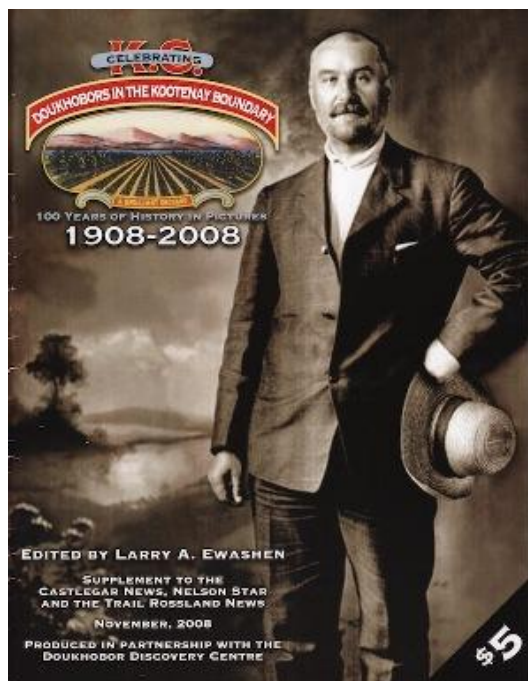




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Review:

BC Doukhobors in Pictures

Celebrating Doukhobors in the Kootenay Boundary: 100 Years of History in Pictures 1908-2008.

32 page booklet edited by Larry A. Ewashen. November 2008. \$5. Published by Black Press. Produced in Partnership with the [Doukhobor Discovery Centre](#). Supplement to the *Castlegar News*, *Nelson Star* and the *Trail Rossland News*.

Reviewed by Koozma J. Tarasoff, November 25, 2008. All rights reserved.

'Photos can tell a thousand words' is an old saying that continues to resonate today. Larry Ewashen, Curator of the [Doukhobor Discovery Centre](#), knows this well as he used around 50 historic photos (many from the [Auto Chrome exhibit](#) of the Museum collection and others from local people). It was Colin Seed, Publisher of Black Press, who invited Larry to be part of a team entrusted to produce an illustrated booklet celebrating 100 years of Doukhobors in British Columbia.

Overall, this is a beautiful visual work that is worthy of honouring the 5,000 Doukhobors that moved from Saskatchewan to British Columbia between 1908 and 1913 following the cancellation of over 2,500 homestead entries representing over 300,000 acres of improved land. It was on June 1, 1907 that action began on a broken promise of the new Minister of the Interior Frank Oliver to disallow the new migrants the right to own land communally. This resulted in the loss of some \$11 million (\$350 million in today's terms) of improved land, houses in over 60 villages, cattle, horses and farm implements.

As this land loss was taking place, the leader of the day Peter V. Verigin saw trouble ahead as a number of his brethren were going off on their own and taking out homesteads by 'affirming' (instead of swearing allegiance to

the crown). These independent-minded people saw no need for a spiritual leader and struck out on their own and became Independent Doukhobors. They remained pacifist like their communal brethren as both recalled stories of the June 28, 1895 arms burning event in Tsarist Russia.

For the Communal-minded who were loyal to the leader Peter V. Verigin their fate was different. They relied on him to take them to the promised land. Fearing assimilation, many believed that Verigin was on his way to some warmer area such as Oregon or California. Abruptly he stopped in the interior of British Columbia. In Nelson, Verigin was persuaded by a real estate group owned by Claude Laing Fisher [see [note](#) and [article](#) below] to purchase heavily-wooded land on the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers. In this way, [Brilliant and Ooteshenie](#) colonies were founded, and his followers began to settle.

The resulting Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood Ltd. flourished as a co-operative, commercial enterprise under the motto 'Toil and Peaceful Life'. With its fruit growing industry (producing the 'best jam in the West'), lumber works, brick factories, at least 74 double-storied village units, as well as roads and one bridge, this enterprise not only prospered but became the most successful communal enterprise in North America. However, the sudden violent death of Peter V. Verigin in October 1924 in a still unsolved train explosion was followed by the great economic depression as well as reversals in government policies. With these setbacks, it became difficult to maintain their high ideals in a communal structure resulting in the collapse of their unique lifestyle.

The illustrated booklet ends with a thumbnail summary of the present situation in British Columbia:

'Today Doukhobors actively maintain a social structure, centering on peace and featuring activities such as Sunday Prayer meetings, Russian language classes, publications and Internet sites, youth activity groups and festivals such as the annual Youth Festival now held for over fifty years; Peter's Day [[Doukhobor Peace Day](#)] commemoration observed annually for 107 years and the Day of Love as well as other special events such as talent shows, fund raisers for worthy causes, special dinners and active participation in peace groups and other benevolent endeavors.'

The booklet was largely financed by local and area businesses and institutions such as the [Columbia Basin Trust](#) whose advertisements praise the unique achievements of these people. Although its size is small, the

striking historical images tell the story of sturdy pioneers from Russia who were determined to build a peaceful society in Canada. Their sheer massive physical efforts meant breaking up virgin prairie soil on the Canadian prairies with oxen (sometimes by women hitching themselves to the plow), building houses with their own hands, establishing brick factories and bountiful orchards, designing and making their own clothes, quickly adopting modern technology in their work and homes, and educating their youth for a multicultural future. Their ancestral values of hard work, nonviolence, hospitality, and respect for others were noticed by others and they are now being passed on to another generation in the form of text and pictures. The troubled world awaits these values as providing hope for the creation of a nonkilling society.

Koozma Tarasoff's Note:

Claude Laing Fisher was a man of all trades, lawyer, teacher, real estate speculator, inventor, scientist, and author, who sold the first land in British Columbia to the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood. In his unpublished manuscript, 'The Real Story of the Doukhobors' (c. 1962), he gives a candid view of his lifetime dealings with the Doukhobors until the first trouble in BC and then deals with government actions, leaders' personalities, and 'a balance sheet after 50 years'.

Fisher was a fifth generation Canadian of Dutch, English and Scottish lineage. He was an Honour Graduate of the University of Toronto in Economics and Political Science. He was trained for the law but early followed the lure of Scientific Research in chemistry and physics — especially as to the 'behaviour of the hydrocarbons of petroleum and coal tar' and later 'thermodynamics and electronic energy'. Pursuing his investigations he lived in England for some twenty years, during which time he traveled extensively on the continent and elsewhere. In 1914 he built what was then the largest private laboratory in the British Empire on the banks of the Thames in London, England. This he immediately turned over to the government when the war was declared. At the request of the British Government, Mr. Fisher and his associate spent the war years in the search for the raw material for high explosives.

In the early twenties, working with Dr. M. Benson, formerly of Czecho-Slovakia but later a naturalized American citizen, Mr. Fisher developed an entirely new method of steam generation, 'Steam Without Boiling'. Many plants using this system were erected in Europe. At various times Mr. Fisher has been commissioned by Governments and other

institutions in confidential missions and surveys — economic and otherwise.

I first corresponded with Mr. Fisher in 1956 when he was working on his Doukhobor manuscript. He enjoyed seeing two copies of [The Inquirer](#) that I sent him and requested to use several paragraphs from it in his book. In the fall of 1959 I personally met him in Toronto, Ontario. He sent me a copy of his manuscript when he learned that I was beginning to prepare a comprehensive history of the Doukhobors. In a January 18th, 1960 letter, he wrote that he once taught at the Smithville School near Saskatoon across from the field where my father once farmed a quarter section of land. He stated:

'I was very much interested in the Doukhobors right from the beginning as I taught school at Smithville, some six miles west of Saskatoon from midsummer 1899 until June 1900. I was conversant with Tolstoy's works and the part that he played in the movement to Canada. As you know, one of the areas set aside for exclusive Doukhobor settlement was near Rosthern and during that first summer (harvest time) many Doukhobor laborers were employed by the farmers in and around Smithville and Saskatoon and I have very vivid and pleasant memories of the behavior of those with whom I came in contact, not only in the fields but in the homes where they were employed. I was struck by their evident sincerity and courtesy at table, the saying of their own grace both before and after the meal and the invariable thanks to Mrs Lusk (I boarded with Mr. and Mrs Lusk) whose husband availed himself of the help for his harvesting.'

In 1965 I wrote to Mr. Fisher in Toronto, but the letter came back as 'unknown'. I did not hear from him again. However, I did have his manuscript and correspondence and both provided valuable insights into the Doukhobor movement. Below is Claude Laing Fisher's revised Chapter XIV (1960: pp. 69-77) on "Migration to British Columbia", from his unpublished manuscript, 'The Real Story of the Doukhobors' (c. 1962).

Migration to British Columbia by Claude Laing Fisher (1960)

'It was at the stage related in the previous Chapter (No. XIII, re confiscation of prairie lands) that the writer of this narrative came into the Doukhobor picture as a factor in the movement to British Columbia. The Kootenay Valley in that Province was at that time beginning to come into its own as a fruit-growing country with a favourable conducive to health salubrious climate. About twenty-five miles west of the City of Nelson,

there was an area of absolutely virgin land all by itself that was specially adapted for the group that could use it all and wished to live by themselves. It was at the junction of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers. The swift precipitous Kootenay constituted the northern boundary; the mighty slow-moving Columbia into which the Kootenay flowed was the western boundary, while mountains in the form of an arc towered several thousand feet high to round out and enclose the area on the eastern and southern sides.

'It was a picturesque setting. Mountains are a comfort [p.70] to the harassed for they symbolize grandeur, solidity, calm, aspiration. The great poetry of Greece was written amidst the mountains of that country. The psalmist was aware of the majesty of mountains when he said, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from which cometh my strength'.

But to revert to the secluded area in British Columbia at the junction of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers. The banks of the rivers were sufficiently high that there would never be any danger of the water overflowing on to the land. Beyond the banks, the land first presented a level area which was succeeded by gentle slopes and terraces well up the mountain sides. The writer of this narrative already owned part of this secluded area. Then, by purchase and option, he obtained control of all the arable lands — several thousand acres in all — between the rivers and the mountains and well up the mountain slopes right to the end of the timber lines where vegetation ceased. He also acquired from the Provincial Government the water rights from the watershed of the mountains.

'Before presenting this picture to Peter Verigin the First — who was back on the prairies grappling with the problem following the confiscation of community lands, this writer prepared a brochure of this Kootenay Valley area. This brochure contained not only a full description but a detailed survey and contour map of the entire tract with the various levels of the flat area next to the rivers and the terraces further up the slope of [p.71] the mountain. The brochure also included a detailed plan or diagram for irrigation ditches or flumes that would be fed by the rains from the mountain slopes and the melting snows from the mountain tops. The water would be distributed by gravity flow to the land and growing crops so that no pumping was necessary.

'When this was presented to Peter Verigin, he literally grabbed it. It was an immediate answer to his then urgent problem as to where he could take his dispossessed Community followers. An accord with this author was soon reached, an agreement was signed and the first installment of the purchase

price was paid over. The balance was extended over a term of years. The total purchase price was approximately \$150,000. Peter at once started to move some of his Community members from the prairies to this "purchased" area where no homestead obligations were necessary. An advance contingent of about eight hundred arrived to erect temporary buildings, plant garden crops and get ready for more that would soon be on the way.

'The "Brilliant Colony" — as it was afterwards called — flourished as a green bay tree. Under Doukhobor development, it later become one of the show places of both Canada and the United States as a fruit-growing area. It was a self-contained unit that soon had within its confines thousands and thousands of vines and fruit trees, sawmills to cut timber from the trees of the mountain sides, its own jam factory, and also later an electric [p.72] plan that was fed by the waters of the Kootenay River that was tapped higher up than its most precipitous flow of waters. Other Doukhobors arrived from the prairies from time to time in train loads as fast as they could be absorbed. Those, of the Community persuasion, that still remained on the prairies, were awaiting the time when they, too, could go to his delightful valley of which such glowing accounts were sent back to them.

'This writer can still vividly recall many different scenes — but all of the same pattern — as every fresh contingent from the prairies disembarked at Nelson, BC from the lake boat to be greeted by delegates from Brilliant composed of groups that had preceded the newcomers. There was no boisterous or unseemly frivolity but a quietness and dignity that was inherent. The grace of the bows to each other might well have been envied in the drawing rooms of the most polished, yes, even of the Royal levees of London, England.

And now we come to the crux of the situation in British Columbia. This Kootenay haven, under the direction of Peter Verigin, the Lordly, was conducted on the Community plan — and Peter was determined that it should continue that way. He was going to entrench himself in such a way that there could be no defections from the Community idea such as had occurred on the prairies with the breaking away of the Independent Doukhobors and their individual ownership of lands, a la the Quaker method.

'In this Kootenay area, Peter Verigin wanted to have the title to [p.73] this "Brilliant Area" in his own name as soon as possible. With this end in view, he sought from the author of this narrative who — as already noted — was

the vendor — a change in the purchase agreement. The unpaid balance — as per the original agreement — was spread over a term of five years, at the end of which time, upon all payments being made, title would pass to Verigin. Peter now asked this vendor to have the title placed in his name immediately with his executing concurrently a mortgage for the unpaid balance.

'The usual method in those days was that lands were sold on what was termed "Agreement of Sale", and title was not to pass until the final payment had been made, especially if only a nominal payment had been made in the first instance. In fact, the usual practice of Mortgage Companies was not to pass the title over to the purchaser and take a mortgage back for the balance until at least half of the purchase price had been paid.

'However, the credit of the Doukhobor Community people, as personified in Peter Verigin, the Lordly, was good and this vendor had no exception to Peter's suggestion, except that he, the vendor, had himself acquired part of this property on time payments — as was the custom as already noted — and he, the vendor, did not feel like anticipating those payments for Peter's convenience — even if it was to solidify his position as absolute leader of his Community people. This writer did suggest, however, that probably he could arrange with a Trust or Mortgage Company to take on such mortgage in which case he, as vendor, would be [p. 74] paid out in full forthwith, and Peter would get his desire of immediate registered title in his own name — subject, of course, to the mortgage to the Trust or Mortgage Company. Peter Verigin approved and the writer, as the original vendor, was able to make the necessary arrangements with one of the Trust Companies of Canada. As already noted, the credit of the Doukhobor people, as personified in Peter Verigin, the Lordly was good.

Thereupon arose a snag — but it was purely a legal one, namely whether Peter Verigin had the right to mortgage Community property without the express consent or authorization in writing — properly notarized — of every man, woman and child in the Community for him to do so. Of course, such a valid consent or power-of-attorney could not be obtained from minors and, even if otherwise feasible, it would be too cumbersome to handle with the hundreds and hundreds of adults. The Trust Company, however, was quite willing to go on with the mortgage deal upon which their solicitors suggested a *modus operandi* that would meet the situation.

'It was that Peter Verigin should incorporate his Community under a charter, then have the title to the lands registered in the name of the

Company instead of in Peter's name, and concurrently have the proper officers of the Company execute the mortgage under the seal of the incorporated Company.

'Of course, it was expected that Peter would be the real head of the incorporated Company and not merely the nominal head and [p. 75] that his co-directors would be more or less "yes-men. But this did not suit Peter's book. Even if his co-directors of the proposed Company were dummies, he would no longer be able to do things on his own 'say-so" and his sole signature. Such arrangements would be the entering wedge by which his absolutism might later be challenged or inspired.

'It was at this point that the Lordly Peter ostensibly lost his ability to speak English and converse with this author in that language as he had been doing. He wrapped himself into a committee of one while he tackled out a solution by which he could maintain his sole authority. Soon — through an interpreter — he came up with a practical suggestion which this author, as vendor, accepted, and which was put into effect. Under this arrangement, there was no mortgage at all.

'It was quite simple and feasible. Back on the prairies, Peter, as head of the continuing Community members, had several thousand followers. Amongst those were about six hundred men who were working on railroad construction. They were paid twice a month, and their wages were sure. Faithfully they turned over their entire earnings into the Community fund. Peter's suggested plan was this: if this writer, as vendor, would place all the titles in escrow with the Trust Company or Bank of the vendor's selection, together with a transfer for each individual parcel of land in the entire Brilliant area, as covered by the original agreement, transfers to be in the name of Peter Verigin, then he, Verigin, would [p. 76] pay into the designated Bank or Trust Company to the credit of this writer, as vendor, the total pay checks of some six hundred men every two weeks.

'This was the arrangement suggested and it was accepted by this writer, as vendor, and carried into effect. One the strength of this contract, this writer was able to borrow enough money from his Bank to pay off all that he owed on any parcel of land in the Brilliant area and turn over the title in escrow as suggested. Peter Verigin carried out his obligations punctiliously when this arrangement was suggested to the vendor and accepted by him. By this means Peter paid off the entire unpaid balance of the purchase price of approximately \$150,000 in a little less than eighteen months instead of taking the five years as stipulated in the original agreement.

'It was an arrangement agreeable to both sides and it was a tribute to Peter's ingenuity and business acumen that he had worked out such a plan. When all the documents were signed and the titles placed in escrow, Peter miraculously recovered his ability to speak English and converse with this writer in that language. At no time was there ever an undertaking to this writer by Peter Verigin the First that was not fulfilled to the letter.

'The Brilliant area at the junction of the Kootenay and the Columbia Rivers became a real Garden of Eden, not the fanciful Garden of Eden that Peter had written about in Siberia to [p. 77] outdo Plato's "Republic" or Sir Thomas More's "Utopia", or the writing of Tolstoy.

'As more and more Community Doukhobors were brought from the prairies, the Brilliant area became too crowded; more land was necessary. In the first three years after the first exodus to British Columbia about five thousand of Peter's Community people were transferred to British Columbia and that was more than four thousand acre Brilliant Colony could comfortably and profitably accommodate. The first extra land acquired was near Grand Forks on the other side of the Columbia River but further south towards the United States boundary. Other areas were added from time to time as more and more came from the prairies. Today there are about twelve thousand Doukhobors in British Columbia. This writer did not sell any more land to the Doukhobors other than the Brilliant area despite the importunity's of real estate men and private individuals to present their holdings for Doukhobor consideration. This writer thought that the conception of the Brilliant area as he presented it could not be duplicated and he refused to present any other.

'He has, however, followed closely the history of those people who left their dispossessed homes on the prairies to make new homes in the Kootenay District of British Columbia.'

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