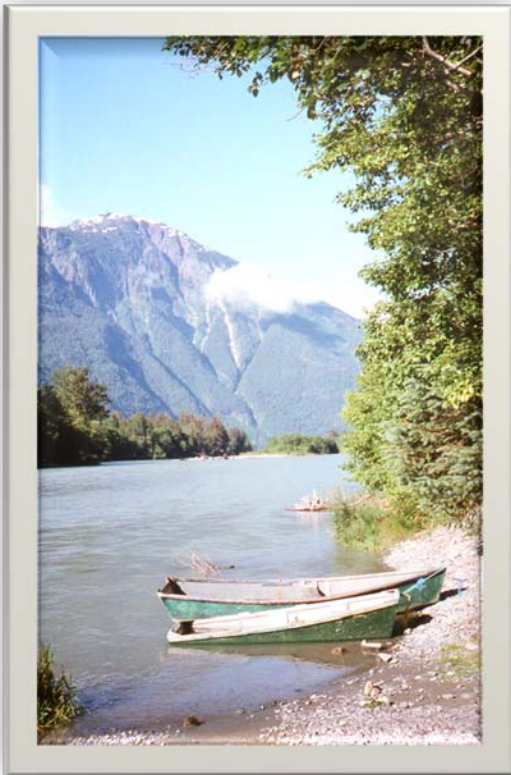


The Deluge

Einar Olsen was 12 when the flood of '34 struck, "My parents moved to Bella Coola because it reminded them of the fjords in Norway," he said in a 1998 interview. The Olsens lived on an island linked with bridges to Hagensborg and Saloompt.



Set amid towering mountains, surrounded by thick forest, and shaped by a river that refuses to be tamed, the Bella Coola Valley is an isolated paradise located deep within British Columbia's rugged central coast.

Photo by Rick James

"The valley was a grand place, very picturesque, but you needed presence of mind and to be resourceful in order to survive there. I remember really cold winters. My mother would hang the washing out and bring it in all frozen stiff. Sometimes the windows had ice on them – inside and out."

"We had an unbelievable amount of fish and a big root house on the bank filled with bins of produce. That was our grocery store. There was no such thing as going shopping. I was 13 years old before I ever saw money."

The Olsens lost everything in the flood of 1934.

"It rained for four days and four nights," Olsen recalled. "The river pulled big trees down and the first night of the storm it swept away 11 acres of our land. When you live beside a river you learn to listen to it. Pretty soon you can tell, just by listening, what it's doing. We could hear what it was doing all right, but the only thing we could do is watch the water come closer and closer."

"From where we were, it seemed like the whole valley was filling up with water. Dad and my two older brothers were out commercial fishing, so it was just Mother, me and the six younger kids at home. The baby was five weeks old. We heard the two bridges go out in the middle of the night. Mother was terrified, as that was our only way out of there."

“We didn’t know what to do,” Olsen continued, “then I told Mother ‘There’s a log coming with people on it.’ Dr. McLean got some Indians in a big spoon canoe to rescue us. They went way upriver and then headed down to our place. There were six Indians in the canoe, Clayton Mack and some others. When they loaded us in the canoes, I sat in front of a big Indian who kept saying, ‘Sit still! Sit still!’ I was so scared and excited I almost wet my pants!”

“My dad was one of those who went to check on the people in Saloompt,” Herb Edgar Sr. remembered. “He told me they evacuated eight people from one house, just in time. They got the people out and the house started to drift down the river – just the weight of the people had been holding it down.”

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