Getting the Word Out

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Intro

I am going to present a couple of examples of historical stories from BC that I’ve had a hand in that received good publicity. And then talk a bit about why they worked well, and how you might be able to get similar attention.

These case studies are of feature stories, as opposed to news stories, which are about things that have just happened or about to happen. Features are usually less timely, although they may bear some relation to something that is going on.
Karloff

The first example involved a story that I wrote in 2006 for *British Columbia History* magazine about actor Boris Karloff’s time in this province before he became a movie star as Frankenstein’s monster.

He immigrated from England to Canada in 1909, then known by his birth name of William Henry Pratt, and made his way across the country. He arrived in Vancouver starving and broke. He wanted to be an actor but had no experience, so he took jobs digging ditches and selling real estate.
Karloff

I made a few discoveries. First that the 1910 Vancouver directory listed William Henry Pratt living at the Hornby Mansions apartments and working as a broker with Ward, Burmester, and Von Graevenitz.

Head office at 319 Pender, branch office at 443 Lonsdale in North Vancouver.

According to Karloff he was a glorified office boy, although during this time he did try to buy property in the Cariboo.
This legal ad, dated May 18, 1910, says “William Henry Pratt, broker of Vancouver, intends to apply to purchase the lands as described at the west end of Big Lake,” which is about 45 kilometers from Williams Lake.

I have no idea whether he followed through on it, or what’s on that spot today.
Now when I started looking into Karloff, one of the first things I did was go to the BC Archives website ...
B.C. Archives websearch

... and plunk in his name.
B.C. Archives websearch

Came back with nothing.
B.C. Archives websearch

So I tried William Henry Pratt.
And it came up with several things including a list of marriages.
This one that happened in 1910 between a man by that name and Grace Harding caught my eye.
Wedding Registration

So I looked up the marriage registration. The age, birthplace, and parents names, all matched Karloff’s. But this wedding wasn’t mentioned in any of his biographies, which by this time I had scoured. Rev. Anthony Madden conducted the ceremony on Feb. 23, 1910 in Holy Rosary Cathedral in Vancouver. The groom was 22, the bride wrote she was 23 and born in New Zealand, but I later learned her birth certificate indicates she was actually 24 and born in Croydon, England. Grace was the daughter of Harry and Mary Harding, and the family apparently came to Canada in 1904 and to BC two years later. Her father was an accountant and spent 15 years as a clerk with the BC Department of Finance. The best man was Charles Burmester, one of the partners in the real estate firm Karloff worked for.
Critical Mass

The same month that I made this discovery — April 2005 — a Karloff biographer in England did as well. I’m not sure which of us was first, but it’s almost like something reaches critical mass that two people working independently make the same discovery at the same moment.

The marriage registration became public in 1985, but most of the Karloff biographies were published before then, which explains why nobody would’ve found it, even if they looked. But for 20 years it was available, and still nobody looked. Then finally two people did at the same time.
Jeanne Russell

In September 1911, Karloff was hired by a traveling theatre troupe, the Jeanne Russell Company. This is Jeanne Russell herself.

There’s been a lot debate and confusion over where he made his stage debut. It’s frequently stated as Kamloops, which is where he joined the company, but Karloff said he didn’t actually get on stage until the next stop. In another interview, he said it was Nelson, but they didn’t get there until November. I think it’s more likely that he actually debuted in Vernon or Salmon Arm, which were the next two stops after Kamloops.
In any case, his new career helped destroy his first marriage. In 1913, he and Grace Harding divorced.

She alleged adultery on his part and named his paramour as Helene Russell, who was Jeanne Russell’s sister and a member of the theatre company. Ten days after the divorce was finalized, Grace married another man.
British Columbia History

So while there’s more to the Karloff story in BC, these were the key discoveries and were going to be the hook to my story. I knew it was something that had not just local significance, but provincial, and even national and international. It would be interesting to anyone who cared about Boris Karloff or to movie buffs in general.

The key of course being prominence – Karloff is still well known. So once it was published in British Columbia History magazine, I thought it was a good opportunity to promote the magazine.
Newspapers

I sent notes to John Mackie at the *Vancouver Sun* who often writes about BC history and Randy Boswell, then of the *Ottawa Citizen*, who had a national history beat for Canwest Global News. It might have been smarter to have actually written a news release and sent it to many different media outlets, but I didn’t. I just sent it to the both of them.
I didn’t hear from John, but Randy was very interested and a few days later wrote a story about it, which played up the angle of discovering the original Bride of Frankenstein, or Frankenstein’s monster.
Vancouver Sun

It appeared in the Vancouver Sun, the Victoria Times Colonist, Montreal Gazette, and several other papers, plus I did a couple of interviews with CBC Radio – one of which was with Mark Forsythe on BC Almanac.

Although I don’t know if it sold any extra copies of British Columbia History or increased its circulation at all.
The second story that I’m going to share with you is one that was submitted to the *Nelson Star* while I was the editor of that newspaper. It was by a former journalist from Castlegar named Sam McBride. Among other things, Sam has been involved with the Trail Historical Society and West Kootenay Family Historians. He’s also the author of *The Bravest Canadian, the story of Fritz Peters*, a hero of two wars.
In 2015, Sam offered us a story that we eventually called “The Nelson woman who hated being famous.” It was about Marion McPhail, who survived one of Canada’s deadliest disasters but greatly disliked the notoriety it brought her. She was Sam’s piano teacher when he was growing up in Nelson in the early 1960s. But he was admonished by his mother never to ask Mrs. McPhail about the Frank slide. He received similar warnings from his father and grandmother.
Frank slide

I’m sure most of you are familiar with the Frank slide, which occurred in the Crows Nest Pass town in 1903 and saw 82 million tones of rock fall, claiming somewhere between 70 and 90 lives. The most famous legend the slide spawned was that the sole survivor was a baby girl, who miraculously escaped harm. There were in fact many survivors and a couple were girls under the age of two. But the myth seems to have been primarily based on Marion Leitch — who became Marion McPhail, and later moved to Nelson.
Marion

At the time of the slide, she was 27 months old, and she and her older sister were found unhurt because an iron bed frame shielded them from the debris. Another sister survived, however, their parents and four brothers were killed. Marion and her siblings were then raised by relatives. She grew up in Cranbrook.

Although she was probably too young to remember the slide itself, Marion did not enjoy being part of folklore or fake news. She was particularly annoyed by a poem called The Ballad of Frankie Slide. In the 1940s and ‘50s did talk to a couple of writers in an effort to set the record straight, but through gritted teeth.
Exercise books

Here’s her signature on one of her exercise books.

Sam McBride says as a piano teacher she was a tough, no-nonsense taskmaster, prone to sighs and extreme eye rolls when her students displeased her. She took the piano extremely seriously and expected her students to do so as well. Those students who did take it seriously remember her as an excellent teacher.
So Sam wrote a wonderful first-person account of his memories of Marion, supplemented with what he was able to learn from archival sources and the Frank Interpretive Centre. He offered to us at the newspaper and I of course said yes. I don’t think we changed anything really.

It had several things going for it. First and foremost, of course, it had a Nelson angle which very few people living there would be aware of. Secondly, it had prominence, due to a famous incident, along with the folklore associated with it. And on top of that, Sam was able to add his personal memories and several photos that he unearthed. And it was unusual, perhaps, in the way that we presented it as a woman who famous but didn’t want that fame.
Front Page

We waited a few weeks to run it, until we could actually make it a front page feature.

And I liked the story so much that I submitted it to the Ma Murray Awards, which are the BC and Yukon community newspaper awards. They have a category known as the Neville Shanks Award for Historical Writing.
Sam and the award

And it won. That’s Sam with the award at the gala ceremony in Richmond.
Historical Stories

So those are a couple of examples of historical stories that I felt had pretty broad interest.

Of course not every story is like that, but it’s a matter of recognizing the ones that are and deserve greater attention or prominence.

Of course, in the case of Sam’s story, I was in a direct position to do something about that and I’m partial to local history anyway.
But the biggest thing is the news hook.

Why should anybody care?

It might be obvious, but if it’s not, you need to make that clear upfront.

If this story has already been told elsewhere, what is the new information that makes it worth recounting?

The two examples I’ve given — Boris Karloff and the Frank slide — were subjects that had already been written about extensively. But they were being presented from a fresh angle, with details that were not well known.

So the way you shape a story is important.
Goal?

And then it’s a question of are you the one writing it?
Or are you trying to interest someone else in writing it?
And then who are you pitching it to?
Are you sending out a news release to many outlets and just hoping someone bites?
Or targeting a specific outlet?
Local Media

My experience is mainly with local media and I can say, at least from a print perspective, we welcome ideas and submissions.

In Sam’s case, he gave us a completed story off the bat, but it’s probably best to have a discussion it first with the local editor. If you’re writing it, they can tell you what they want, how many words, how many images, that sort of thing. Or assign someone if one of their reporters is going to be writing it.
Broader

There are other, bigger, broader outlets to consider as well, *British Columbia History* magazine being foremost among them. There’s also *Canada’s History*, former *The Beaver*.

And a variety of niche publications and newsletters, geared at postal history, numismatic history, and other specialized areas of interest.
Other Ways

And, of course, there are other ways of getting your stories out, through your own websites, newsletters, broadcast media, and social media, which we can discuss, and which John will discuss in much greater detail this afternoon.