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BREAKING THE CODE OF SILENCE

Bralorne

STORY BY NATALIE LANGMAN | PHOTOS BY JEFF CORBETT

*A long, long time ago, a few friends and I went out exploring the hills and mountains in British Columbia on snowmobiles, looking for spots to film. Anyway, we somehow stumbled across Bralorne and Gold Bridge. For a whole season my shred bro Orion and I explored all the terrain around—and, holy f**k, is it endless. With Whistler a cross between Little Japan and Little Quebec, I'm sure people will want an alternative place to go, a spot where they actually feel like they're in British Columbia. I know I do. This place is sick. Make sure you stay in the hotel in Bralorne and get nice and pissed at the bar. Dev and I will thank you for it in our old age.* —Sean Kearns

Scott Serfas photo



Jeff Corbett photos



MORE THAN 5,000 MEN WERE ONCE EMPLOYED IN THE BRALORNE MINES. IF ANY OF THESE MINERS BRAGGED OF BRALORNE'S RICHES—GOLD NUGGETS THE SIZE OF A MAN'S FIST—MORE MEN WOULD COME BY THE DOZENS. IF TODAY I BRAG OF BRALORNE'S WHITE, SNOWY RICHES, WILL THE SAME THING HAPPEN?

I am traveling north through winding switchbacks from the town of Gold Bridge, population 43. The day began four hours earlier in Whistler. I drove through Pemberton, over the Duffy, out past Lillooet and onto the Bridge River Road. The dusty roads led me past a wide bend that juts out over the 55-metre-high Terzaghi Dam. After a turn on Carpenter Lake Road, I end up just below my destination of Bralorne, BC. Normally, in the middle of winter, a 45-minute snowmobile ride over the Pemberton Hurley logging road would have taken me to this remote shred land. But it's late in the season, and the snowboard scene is winding down. The sun has been out for weeks, and the usual Whistler zones are tracked out. When the Callaghan Valley starts looking like a pinball machine crossed with a skating rink, you know it's time to head north. The drive is long, but this trip will be the only way to find powder in the final days of the winter.

I think of what this area must have been like back in the '30s, when Bralorne was in its peak of gold production. Miners like Al Abott made their way from Lillooet, Seton Portage and Anderson Lake in Model-T Fords. Others came by train from Shalalth, enduring a one-week horse pack over the treacherously steep Mission Mountain. It would be quite an experience for those old mining men to see the lineup of monster trucks and sleds charging up the hill today, blowing dust and blasting dope beats.

In the early days, snowboard crews in search of BC zones untouched by professional athletes overlooked a spot just two hours north of Whistler, one with ranges huge enough to resemble the Matterhorn. It's ironic that Bralorne was thriving in the early 1900s, yet on the parallel side of the valley, Whistler wasn't even on the map yet. More than 5,000 men were once employed in the Bralorne mines. If any of these miners bragged of Bralorne's riches—gold nuggets the size of a man's fist—more men would come by the dozens. If today I brag of Bralorne's white, snowy riches, will the same thing happen?

As I pull into the old mining town, I check my watch. Strangely enough, the time is blinking 4:20 p.m. My watch has stopped working. I have to laugh, realizing I'm now officially on Bralorne time.

You can still see the gold-rush days clinging to every corner of Bralorne's old homes. Hidden among them are remnants of a jail cell, brothel, the old town hall, a hospital, a bank, a renovated old church, and a closed down ski hill named Sunshine.

Sunshine lies southeast of Bralorne, within the Cadwallader Range, and stands at 7,595 feet. It was once considered a prime location for ski hill development. On the lower slopes there was a rope tow and lodge which still stands, belonging to the

Bralorne Ski Club. Many Scandinavian skiers who became area locals still tell tales of riding the Bralorne rope tow all day for 50 cents. Unfortunately the majority of the town was torched when the mines shut down, in fear of hippies starting a commune in the valley. Thirty-three years later, Whistlerites in search of getaway cabins in the mountains moved in.

Traditionally, there existed a code of silence on the subject of Bralorne, but that's not how people here want their town portrayed. They're welcoming to visitors, media and photographers.

The crew joining me in Bralorne is solid: Shin and Shandy Campos, Mike Wilson and Jon Cartwright. Jeff Corbett comes along to shoot photos, Rick Johnson and Paul Watt to film for Brainwash Cinema.

Shin Campos and a trail of trucks drive to a prominent house that sits upon a terrace of stilts. A couple of snowskates linger at the staircase. The steps lead to a residence ripe with the history of two snowboard legends. Snowboards rest on a workbench, an old Superpipe tent sits in the corner, and photos from around the world (including a wall of Craig Kelly memorabilia) hang on the walls. If Scandinavian ski potential was discovered here, perhaps that explains why Johan Oloffson realized the value of Bralorne and bought this old lawyer's home. Then again, Bralorne not only has gnarly mountains, but also a bar within stumbling distance from Johan's front porch. And just like in Sweden, you can ride your snowmobile around Bralorne. Knowing Johan is back home recovering from knee surgery, Shin is in search of the home's other resident, Al Clark.

No one had seen much of Al in the past few years, but in that time he and Johan pioneered unmarked routes and dialed numerous first descents throughout the valley. They became part of the volunteer fire department, and Johan traded snowboards to a local named Lenny for a hand-carved bar made of pine logs. In turn, Al and Johan taught Lenny the fundamentals of snowboarding, and in his later years the tradesman became a backcountry guru. Just imagine Johan Oloffson and Al Clark teaching you to snowboard in your own backyard. The mind boggles.

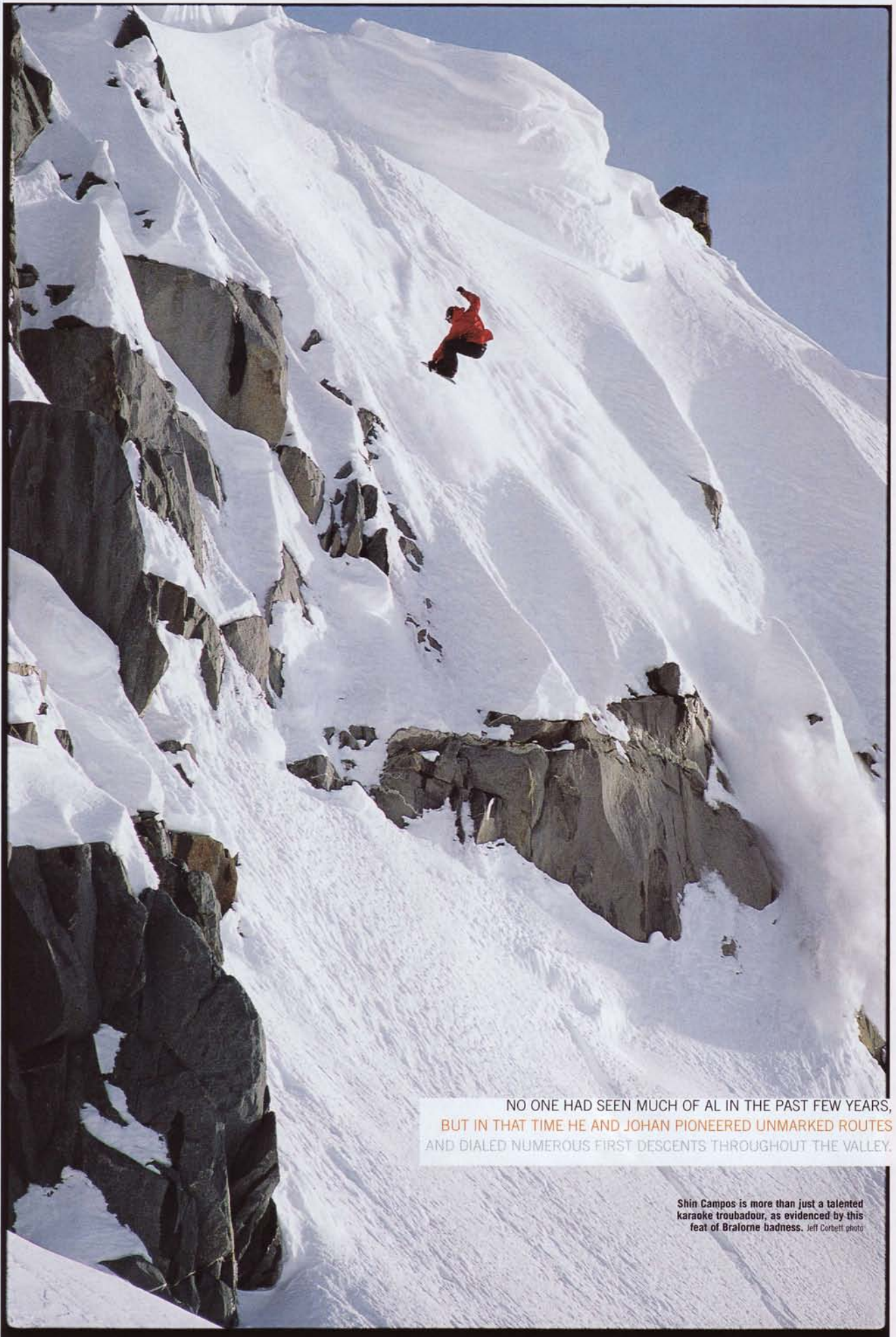
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Rube Goldberg adds extra flair to his Switch Backside 180. Not bad for a *Price Is Right*-obsessed youngster, eh? Scott Stryker photo



UNFORTUNATELY THE MAJORITY OF THE TOWN WAS TORCHED WHEN THE MINES SHUT DOWN. IN FEAR OF HIPPIES STARTING A COMMUNE IN THE VALLEY, THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER, WHISTLERITES IN SEARCH OF GETAWAY CABINS IN THE MOUNTAINS MOVED IN. UNFORTUNATELY THE MAJORITY OF THE TOWN WAS TORCHED WHEN THE MINES SHUT DOWN. IN FEAR OF HIPPIES STARTING A COMMUNE IN THE VALLEY, THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER, WHISTLERITES IN SEARCH OF GETAWAY CABINS IN THE MOUNTAINS MOVED IN.

When others doubt, Mike Wilson steps to the gnarliest line of the trip. This is not an average day in the park.



NO ONE HAD SEEN MUCH OF AL IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, BUT IN THAT TIME HE AND JOHAN PIONEERED UNMARKED ROUTES AND DIALED NUMEROUS FIRST DESCENTS THROUGHOUT THE VALLEY.

Shin Campos is more than just a talented karaoke troubadour, as evidenced by this feat of Bralorne badness. Jeff Corbett photo

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Al Clark only had to charge one line to make a lasting impression on the crew. Sometimes local status pays off. Scott Serfas photo



AS I DRIVE OUT OF THE VALLEY AMIDST A STORM OF DUSTBALLS, SOMETHING CATCHES THE CORNER OF MY EYE.

I REALIZE MY WATCH NOW READS 4:21 PM. THE DIGITS HAVE FINALLY CHANGED AFTER MY STINT ON BRALORNE TIME.



shot. Shin goes down in flames. Since the loser must sing karaoke—and doesn't get to pick his own song—Jon and Mike select a real crowd-pleaser for Shin. The bar of miners and locals howl as he belts out UB40's "Red, Red Wine." After rocking the bar, Shin is eager for an encore.

The trip's last day is spent on Lone Goat. For the majority of the winter you can drive your sled directly there from town. But since the spring weather has already melted the snow along the road, we must drive through Gold Bridge.

Lone Goat is not a secret—its inaccessibility keeps people away. Many riders know of the area, and the logbook in the solar-powered visitors' cabin has pages of comments to prove it. Matt Domanski and Sean Kearns are in the book, as are Dave Basterrechea, Eric Smith (rest in peace) and Kurtis Croy from the Adventurescope days. And this isn't the first time Jon and Jeff have been here. The logbook quotes Jon as say-

ing, "Lone Goat was the most fun you could have with your clothes on." Well put, Jon.

Lone Goat is sunbaked, and the terrain has turned to soup. The guys still dial in a few lines, but the sloppy conditions give them no reason to explore. The lines here have potential, and there is talk of returning next season for a rematch. On the way out, Mike's sled hits a rock and he breaks a ski. A good combination of MacGyver skills, zap straps and a shovel handle create a temporary replacement. Incidentally, the temporary fix breaks on our way out, serving as a reminder that the valley is miles away from mechanical or medical help.

As I drive out of the valley amidst a storm of dustballs, something catches the corner of my eye. I realize my watch now reads 4:21 p.m. The digits have finally changed after a stint on Bralorne time. My mind wanders through my memories of the past few days. I know that once I arrive in Whistler, everyone will ask how the conditions were and what went down.

What can I say? I saw Mike tear apart the 'Lorne like he's the next big thing. Al proved his skills had done nothing but sharpen since he drifted from Whistler. Jon was ultra stoked, and his riding proved it. The Campos brothers bounced off every cliff band they could find. The rumour mill ran rampant, hinting *Canadian Idol* scouting for Shin's singing talents, somebody filming a Bralorne spin-off to *The Trailer Park Boys*, and Jeff Corbett abandoning his Whistler lifestyle to move in full-time.

As for the conditions, I know that if I mention a foot of pow in mid-April, no one will believe me. Then again, I also know that what happens in Bralorne stays in Bralorne.

To book a room in Bralorne at The Mine's Motel, call Rockin' Rosie down at the Claim Jumper Bar and Grill. (250) 238-0150.