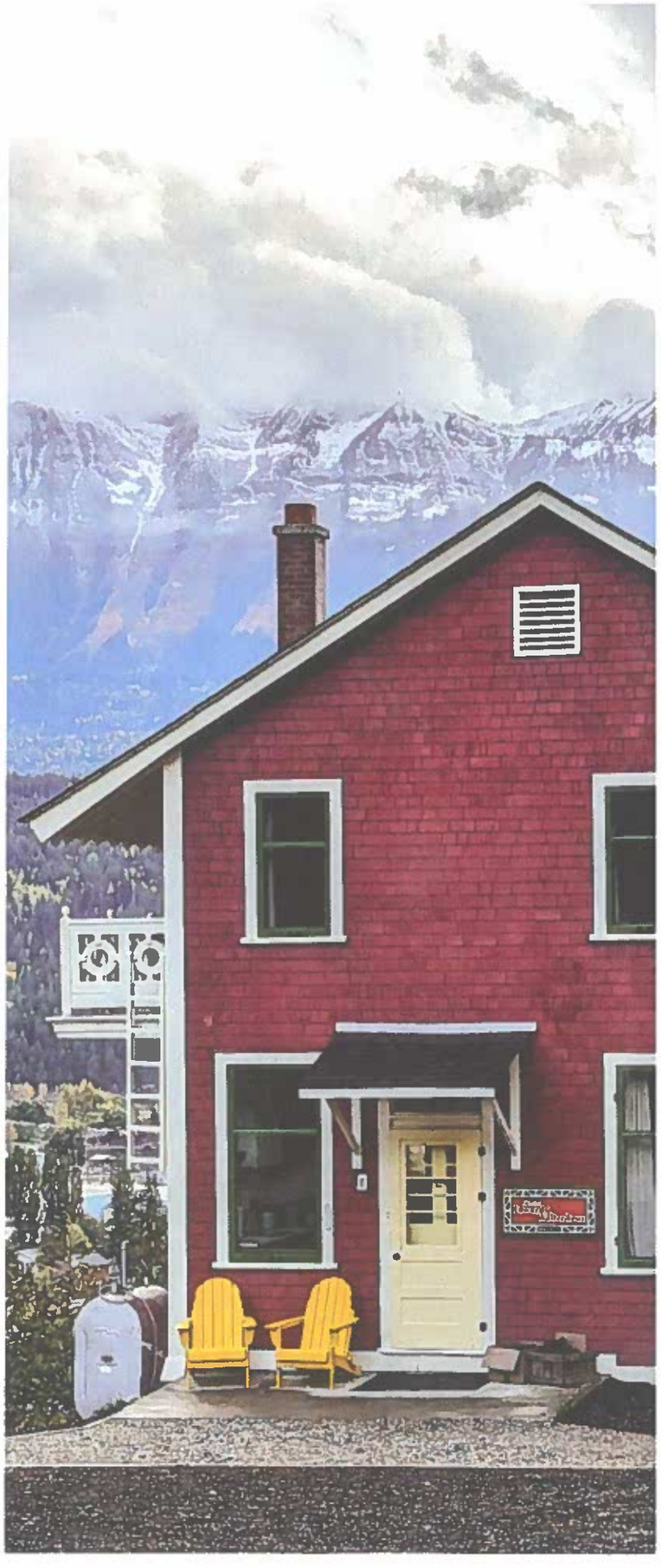
EDELWEISS REVIVED

Preserving Golden's mountain legacy

BY DIANE SELKIRK

Standing outside Chalet Edward and Walter Feuz, I admire its tidy shingled exterior and the sweeping view across the Columbia River Valley to the snow-dusted Purcell Mountains. Below, the Kicking Horse River tumbles its glacial-blue waters into the calm Columbia, while bright-red kokanee salmon swim past gold-leafed poplars to spawn in the shallows. Soon, this stunning scene will be cloaked in winter's soft white, and the region's hiking, biking and fishing will give way to skiing, snowshoeing and snowboarding.

In Golden, it's easy to imagine it has always been like this. Surrounded by some of Canada's most remarkable national parks—Yoho, Glacier, Banff, Jasper, Kootenay and Mount Revelstoke—this little mountain town sits in the heart of an adventurer's playground. It straddles the Rocky Mountain Trench, an ancient fault line stretch- ▸



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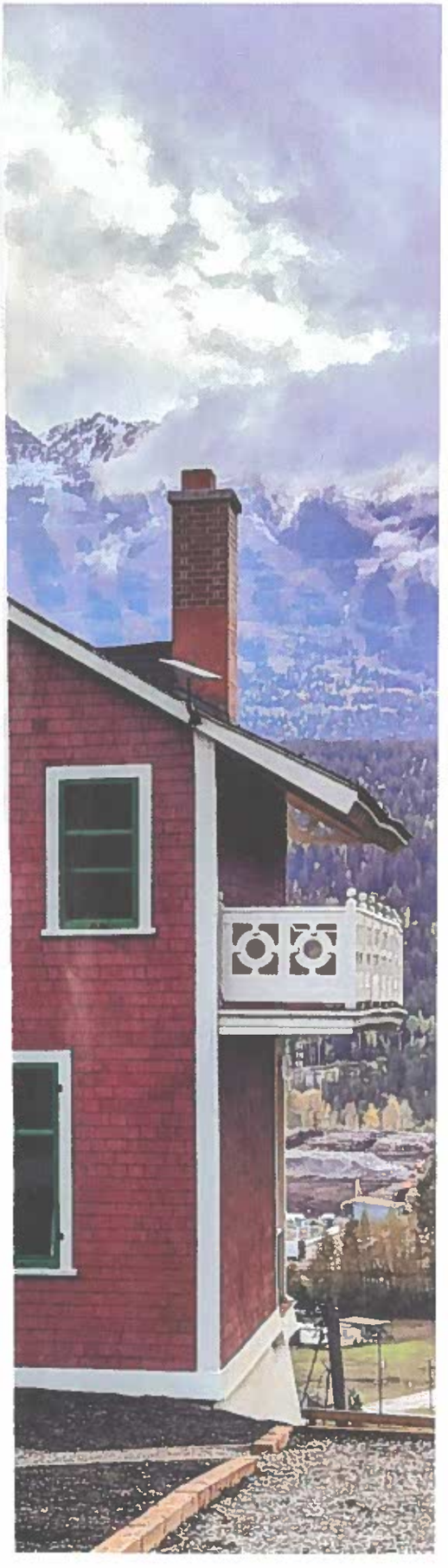
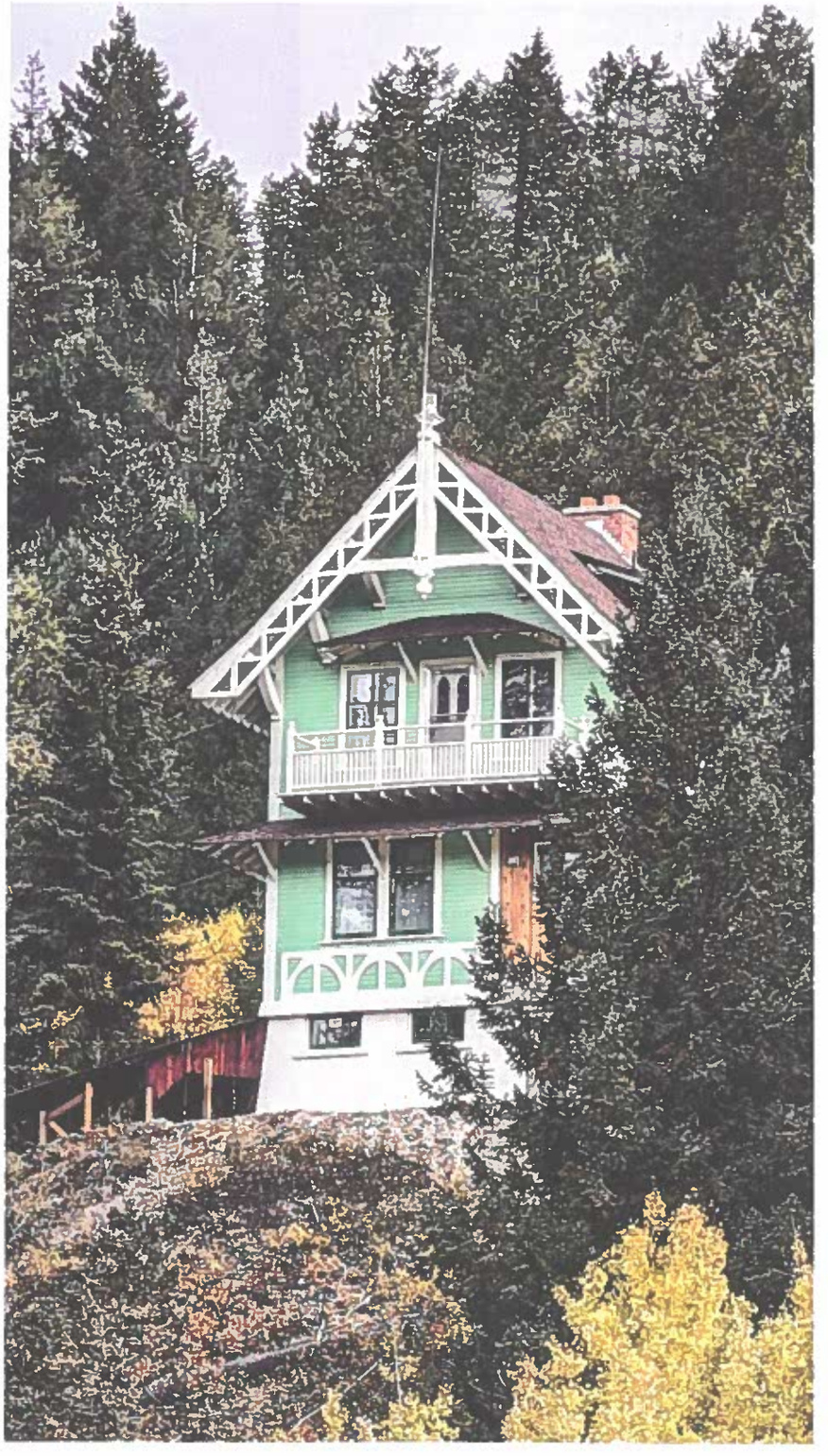


Left: Walter Feuz Chalet.
Below: Ernest Feuz Chalet.



ing 1,500 kilometres from BC's Yukon border in the north to Montana in the south, with thousands of towering peaks on either side and countless waterfalls tumbling from cliffs into wetlands and rivers below.

Oddly enough, despite the beauty, I wasn't in Golden for the landscape. I had come for the grand opening of the Feuz chalet and its sister cottages at Edelweiss Village and Resort. Just before turning onto Ottoson Road to drive up to the village, I couldn't resist pulling over for a photo.

The six chalets, with their whimsical charm and gingerbread-fairy-tale vibe, peeked out from the forest like something straight out of a storybook. Seeing them colourfully painted and newly welcoming brought back memories. Over the years, I had caught glimpses of the village—sometimes from the highway, other times from the train—but as the decades passed and the forest thickened, the houses had started to look more tumbled and worn, like they were slowly vanishing, taking their history with them.

AS UNLIKELY AS it seems, Edelweiss Village was one of the birthplaces of Canadian mountain culture. In the late 1800s, BC's alpine scene first gained traction thanks to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), which promoted the Rockies and Selkirks as the new Alps—"50 Switzerlands in One," they called it. They promised wealthy alpinists from Canada, the US and Europe both luxurious accommodations and the thrill of conquering new, untouched summits. The Swiss-themed campaign succeeded in attracting visitors, but without experienced guides to navigate the forests, glaciers and rugged peaks, some feared disaster was inevitable. Their concerns were confirmed when climber Philip Stanley Abbot tragically fell to his death on Mount Lefroy in 1896.

In response, the Appalachian Mountain Club hired Peter Sarbach, a Swiss guide, who led the next successful climb of Lefroy in 1897. The CPR took notice,

Above: The six ginger bread style chalets were buit in 1912. **Below:** These Swiss guides were part of the crew who led hundreds of first ascents in BC.

and soon began hiring their own Swiss guides, bringing Eduard Feuz Sr. and Christian Haesler to Canada in 1899 and dozens more in the following years.

At first, the Swiss guides worked seasonally, staying at Mount Stephen House in Field or Glacier House in Rogers Pass and making the long trip back to Switzerland for the winters. But by 1910, the success and popularity of the guides made the CPR realize they needed a more permanent solution. They hired Calgary architects George S. Rees and James L. Wilson to design a Swiss village for the guides and their families. Even though Rees and Wilson had never seen a Swiss chalet, they came up with their own loose interpretation and designed six, three-story houses with gingerbread trim, picture windows, and wraparound balconies. The houses that opened in 1912 had little in common with the original Swiss-style, and even the inscription on the doors was off; rather than reading *Willkommen* (meaning welcome), the carvings said *Lebe Wohl* (farewell).

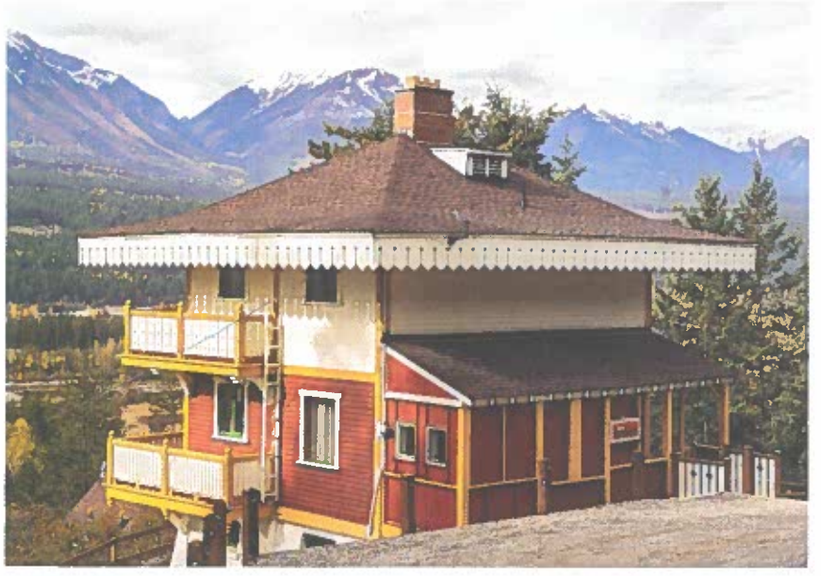
"Can you imagine if it were to disappear?" asked Ilona Spaar, Swiss-Canadian historian and author of *Swiss Guides: Shaping Mountain Culture in Western Canada*, as we discussed the village's unusual architecture. (I'd been curious about a weathervane topped with a prancing goat.) Spaar was also in town for the official opening of Edelweiss Village and Resort and to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the arrival of the Swiss guides. As one of the founders of the Swiss Edelweiss Village Foundation, an organization that was formed out of the concern that without heritage protection the village could vanish, Spaar wants to see the Swiss village protected for future generations.

While Edelweiss is a quirky remnant of the Swiss-Canadian connections that helped shape Western Canada's mountaineering culture, Spaar emphasized its significance as a physical place. "The only other tangible remnant, the Abbot Pass Hut (built by Swiss guides in 1922 and named in memory of Philip Stanley Abbot), had to be removed because of climate change," she said. Without a physical anchor like a building, she explained, the stories of the original 35 Swiss guides—who led hundreds of first ascents, taught safe climbing techniques to thousands through tourism and alpine clubs, and produced the films and photographs that sparked interest in the mountains—are more likely to fade into obscurity.

THE NEXT MORNING, I was up early to walk along Golden's new River Walk and grab a coffee at Ethos Café. But first, I explore my Swiss chalet. Named after guide Rudolph Aemmer, the square house with two tiers of balconies resembles a pagoda more than a chalet. Inside, with its mix of modern comforts, historic photos and heritage touches like an antique ice axe and skis, it was hard to imagine the house had stood empty for decades. Walter Feuz, the last Swiss guide to live in the village, bought the property from the CPR in 1959. Though he briefly rented out some of the chalets, the upkeep eventually became too much for his descendants. In 2021, the village was listed for $2.3 million.

When it went on the market I joked with friends about pooling our money to buy Edelweiss and turn it into a co-housing project. But Canmore-based Davin MacIntosh had a better idea. He got together a group of investors who saw an opportunity to "revive the buildings and their story" and give visitors to Golden the chance to stay somewhere special and "become part of the history of the region." The group formed Montayne, bought the land, and—with guidance from Spaar and the Swiss Village Foundation—invested $3 million in restoring, renovating and improving the chalets and landscape. "We wanted to give back," MacIntosh said, "Edelweiss means so much to so many people."

Above: Bruno Engler Archives; Top Museum of the Canadian Rockies



Aemmer Chalet is named for Rudolph Aemmer, one of the pioneering guides hired by the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Right: Christian Haesler Chalet is named for the renowned Swiss mountaineer who brought European-style hiking and mountaineering to the Canadian Rockies.

After following the Kicking Horse River to where it merges with the Columbia, I walk back to town to visit the Golden Museum. Traditionally home to the Ktunaxa people, Golden grew out of the arrival of the railway. But unlike nearby towns like Banff or Jasper, Golden was an industry town and forestry base—it only recently became an outdoor adventure destination. The Kicking Horse Mountain Resort, 10 minutes from town up White Tooth Mountain, didn't open until 2000, and the Golden Skybridge and adventure park, with its record-breaking 426-foot-high suspension bridge and (not as scary as I feared) Mountain Coaster, opened in 2021.

AS I HEADED to the civic centre for the afternoon's 125th Swiss guide anniversary event, I found myself imagining what those original Swiss guides—dressed in wool knickers, field boots and using stiff manila-fibre ropes—might think of our modern, high-tech mountain amusements. Listening to the speakers, I learned that the Swiss impact didn't end in 1954 with the CPR's last Swiss guide. Their influence continued, shaping western mountain culture in profound ways. From developing search-and-rescue programs and avalanche management techniques to popularizing heli-skiing and raising the standards of professional guiding, the Swiss-Canadian connection became so deeply rooted, it became inseparable from the culture itself.

Speaking to Olaf Kjelsen, Ambassador of Switzerland to Canada, I asked about the current state of this Swiss-Canadian bond. Actually, I asked why an Ontario-based diplomat travelled to a small BC town to witness the remodel of six quirky houses, but he answered by telling me how like-minded Swiss and Canadian people are. His theory is that our similar landscapes of majestic and humbling mountains have taught us to care more deeply about nature and each other—and we've gone on to influence the Swiss as much as they have influenced us.

His words stayed with me on my final hike, along the Cedar Lake Trail just outside town. Midway through, I ran into a Swiss student from the event who was studying in Canada. She had scrambled off the path to pick up some old litter, and I offered her a hand. "I couldn't leave it," she told me, "I felt responsible to make it better. It's just so beautiful here."

If You Go

Sleep:

Edelweiss Village and Resort: Stay in one of the original Swiss Guide Cabins. The six historic chalets can sleep from four to seven guests and include well-appointed kitchens, comfortable living spaces and lots of character. edelweissvillage.ca

Eat:

Rumoured to have the best coffee in Golden, **Ethos** also serves up great options for breakfast, brunch or lunch. 612 7th Street North, Golden

Reposados Tacos combines really good tacos with an impressive range of tequila-based cocktails in a fun setting. 429 Unit 102 9th Ave North Golden

The Island Restaurant has the perfect patio and a diverse menu that's been dubbed 'Rocky Mountain fusion'. Be sure to check out the daily specials. Gould's Island (beside the bridge)

Do:

Kicking Horse Mountain Resort has the usual year-round options, but if you happen to arrive before the snow flies, go discover how Boo the grizzly has helped science. The Ranger Assist Program takes you behind the scenes at the Kicking Horse Grizzly Bear Refuge. You'll learn how caring for Boo has helped ensure orphaned grizzly bear cubs get the best chance possible to return to the wild. 1500 Kicking Horse Trail, Golden

Whether you want to cross Canada's highest suspension bridge, zipline over a canyon, or ride a roller coaster down a mountain, **Golden Skybridge** and adventure park has something for everyone. 503 Golden Donald Upper Rd, Golden

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