



LINDSAY ELMS PHOTO

Flooded mineshaft is marked with an old bucket, above, at site of Della Mine. Below, a view of Big Interior Mountain in winter, from Bedwell Lake.



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THE MOUNTAIN AND THE MINERS

By Lindsay Elms

SHIMMERING in the afternoon sun above Bedwell Lake in Strathcona Provincial Park is Big Interior Mountain.

Although not one of the highest on Vancouver Island, this mountain vies with the clouds to fill up the sky. Its remote slopes and valleys have for the last century seen a flurry of human activity, from prospectors and mountaineers to men and women from all walks of life. It is the association of these people that give the mountain a unique and interesting history.

Big Interior is not a very inspiring name for a

mountain but it is aptly descriptive. On an 1896 map drawn by the exploring rector Rev. William Bolton, the mountain was named Laing's Neck Range in honor of his companion John Laing. This interesting name was never taken seriously and Laing's association has been long forgotten. It is possible that the mountain received its present name in 1899 when its rocky summit was first reached by Joe Drinkwater, an Alberni Valley resident.

A geologist remarked to Joe Drinkwater that to travel overland from Bedwell Sound to Alberni, via Great Central Lake, was probably an impossible undertaking. Drinkwater, accustomed to the tough rigors of outdoor life, accepted the geologist's challenge. Taking a boat from Tofino, he paddled up to the head of Bedwell Sound and from there hiked up the Bear (Bedwell) River. In the mid 1860s, after explorers had found gold in the Bear River, prospectors swarmed into the valley and built a trail that was maintained until the mid 1880s. That's when the Chinese placer miners finally left the area, blaming superstitious occurrences that they never elaborated on to the public.

In the upper reaches of the Bear River the valley forks. This right branch is called You Creek. Drinkwater followed You Creek to Bear Pass, a low point on the ridge between Big Interior Mountain and the neighboring Nine Peaks, and stopped for a well-deserved rest.

Drinkwater was a typical pioneer, a jack-of-all-trades. He had dabbled in mineral prospecting and to him the color in the rocks near the summit of Big Interior Mountain looked interesting, requiring further investigation. Arriving on the summit, Drinkwater found enough copper to make it worth staking a claim, thus proving his intuition correct. In the late afternoon he returned to his camp on Bear Pass and watched the last of the sun's rays dip behind the mountain.

Below the pass he could see a beautiful lake nestled in a basin but to get to it required some steep

down-climbing. Carefully he made his way down making sure of every hold as a slip would be fatal. While hiking around the lake he took note of the minerals in the rock and found that this time it contained gold.

Again he took the time to stake another claim and then he cautiously made his way to the outlet of the lake. Echoing up from over the edge could be heard a thunderous roar. There below him was a dizzying drop; the river cascaded over the edge and dropped 440 metres to the valley floor, not in one big leap but in a series of three falls. Finding a route down the cliff was time consuming but he eventually reached the bottom safely. Now all he had to do was hike out to Great Central Lake and then paddle down the lake to Alberni.

Knowing that he would have to return via the waterfall and the lake to the two claims that he had staked, he decided to give them names. To both features he gave the name Della, in honor of his wife. Over the years Della often visited these places with her husband while he worked the claims.

Drinkwater teamed up with Alvin Engvik of Vancouver and between 1900 and 1915 considerable work was undertaken at the Della Lake mine site. A good pack-trail was built up the Drinkwater Valley and an aerial cable-way was constructed from the valley floor to the top of Della Falls.

On the west shore of Della Lake along the vein of gold-bearing quartz, a water driven arrastra was built. This was a crude ore-crushing device used to

When Joe Drinkwater scrambled over Big Interior Mountain, he knew just enough about prospecting to stake two claims. One became a copper mine, the other a gold mine.



Old wheelbarrow and abandoned dynamite still lie in mine adit near summit, at left.

Della Mine workers, at right, were photographed in about 1910



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extract free gold from the quartz samples. The gold was then transported down the cable-way in large buckets, one of which can still be seen lying next to an open-pit shaft beside the lake. The gold was then taken down to Great Central Lake by pack horse.

In 1915, the property was bonded by a Vancouver company that proposed starting systematic development work. The plan was to build a cyanide concentrating plant to extract the gold, but due to the unusually deep snow that covered the surface late in the season of 1916, work was postponed. After that very little work was undertaken at the mine except when gold prices were high. In 1938, samples were brought out from the Della Mine and assayed at an average of more than one ounce of gold per tonne. Gold at that time was valued at \$35 per ounce. 092F 064

Meanwhile, on the summit of Big Interior Mountain there were major plans in progress to mine the copper. In 1912 the claims, known as the Ptarmigan Mine, were purchased by a small group of investors, chaired by Rudolph Robert Basil Feilding, the 9th Earl of Denbigh from England, at a cost of \$250,000.

The following year the earl, his 21-year-old daughter Lady Marjorie Feilding, and a number of friends and mining consultants accompanied them on an inspection of the mine site. The party left Victoria in mid-September and gained the mountain via Drinkwater Creek, Della Falls and Della Lake. To commemorate Lady Marjorie's ascent to the summit, it was decided to record a new peak

on the physical feature map by christening one of the minor spires of Big Interior Mountain by the name "Marjorie's Lode." This name was never popularized and has since fallen into obscurity.

The earl's party departed by the Bear (Bedwell) River where considerable work had taken place in the last year in order to get the mine ready for production. A landing had been built at Bedwell Sound and a wagon road constructed to within five kilometres of the base of the mountain. In that distance were twenty-five bridges spanning the canyons of the river. At the end of the road, equipment for the construction of an aerial tramway that was to rise for 1,500 metres to the mine site was stacked. Another month or two would have seen the road finished and then it was hoped production would begin in July 1914. It was expected the plant would have a capacity of 1,000 tonnes a day, and from Bedwell Sound the ore would be transported by steamer to the Tyee Smelter at Ladysmith.

The purchasers never saw any financial reward from the project. Construction came to a halt due to the First World War and later development was inhibited by the establishment of Strathcona Provincial Park. While the Earl of Denbigh's crew was road building in the Bedwell, prospectors found a rich quartz vein containing gold on the southwest slopes of Big Interior Mountain. Access was via the You Creek, one of the largest tributaries of the Bedwell River, first travelled by Joe Drinkwater. 092F 062

The four claims were known as Ex, Ten, You

and Eight and became Crown Grants in 1921. In 1923 a small cyanide mill was installed and although no figures on its production are available, remains suggest a capacity of five to ten tonnes per day. In 1932, the owner, with a small crew, worked for a couple of months rebuilding the old camp and reconditioning the mill. Test runs showed that recoveries could be made by concentrating and cyaniding the ore and it was estimated that sufficient tonnage was available to make the property a profitable producer. Further samples were taken but by 1933 it was realized that the lack of transportation facilities was going to handicap the mine's production and it was eventually abandoned, left to stand as a ghost town.

Reports from the prospectors and assayers over the years gave every indication that the mine sites on Big Interior Mountain could easily have developed into one of the largest mining areas on Vancouver Island. Prospectors and miners were upset that the area never came into full production as they could have benefited from the opportunities.

The area now retains its wilderness value within the boundaries of Strathcona Park and the old mine sites are a unique historical museum in situ. Although there is little mining evidence to be seen, the area has become a popular destination for hikers and climbers who wish to mix their experience with a piece of the Island's history.

Lindsay Elms is a writer and mountaineer who lives in Courtenay. He is the author of Beyond Nootka: A Historical Perspective of Vancouver Island Mountains.

