

# DISCOVERY

NEWS AND EVENTS

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Dr Robert G. Rogers  
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## Mining the North Coast:

# A Ghost Town's Past



Jessie (aged 4), with cousin Dick Lavery, is pulled by her father James Brown (who was a crane operator) in Anyox, 1922

by Bob Griffin

In 1858, gold drew thousands of prospectors to British Columbia, up the Fraser Canyon and throughout the Interior. In 1898, it was also the lure of gold that enticed prospectors into another part of the province: the North Coast. This was a rugged and isolated land. Although it took days of travel north of Prince Rupert to enter this rumoured place of gold, the North Coast was not unknown to Westerners. The salmon runs of the Nass River had already drawn cannery operators. At least three canneries were in production at the time a large party of 64 prospectors from Seattle trekked even further north to explore up the Portland Canal and into the Bear River valley. The men never reached gold, but they did report observations of copper and silver.

The first mining claims were staked the same year near the mouth of the Bear River, and word of possible riches spread. The Northwestern Mining District, as the area later became known, was host to a variety of metals, but two were dominant. One mineralized zone was high in silver. (It was here that the well-known Premier Mine would operate, producing over one billion grams of silver.) A second zone was rich in copper.

By 1908, the rip-roaring mining town of Stewart was established at the head of the Portland Canal on the Alaska border. A company was even formed, with



Converters at the Granby smelter, used to make blister copper.

Sir Donald Mann, a builder of the Canadian Northern Railway, to construct a railway from Stewart to his mines up the valley. Several other communities sprang up at the head of the canal, including Alice Arm and nearby Silver City. But what quickly emerged as the regional centre was the company town of Anyox, located in the zone where copper was dominant. Built by the Granby Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company, it would become home to more than 3,000 residents before closing its history as a ghost town.

(Continued on page 2)

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The Granby smelter at Anyox, c. 1925.

William Collinson, George Rudge and H. B. Fluein from Port Simpson were the first to stake the Anyox area, in 1898, at Hidden Creek near Goose Bay (later renamed Granby Bay).

The Granby Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company was British Columbia's largest copper producer. Its smelter at Grand Forks, one of the most efficient processors of low-grade copper ore in the world, was fed by the Interior's productive Phoenix mines. Knowing, however, these mines were not going to last forever, the company began to look for alternatives. After an extensive search throughout BC, Washington State and the rest of Western Canada, the company, in 1910, decided their best prospect was the North Coast, and acquired the Hidden Creek ore deposit.

The ore body was a massive sulphide deposit, primarily chalcopyrite. Development of the eight Hidden Creek mines began in 1912, and construction also soon started on a smelter which opened in 1914.

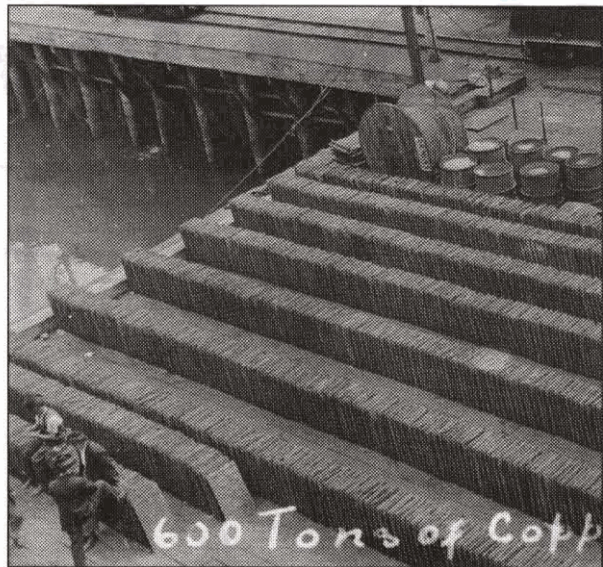
The first crews to live at the site were the tough men of the construction camps, used to rough conditions. Their bunkhouse was typical of the time, with central heaters and beds arranged around the room, dominated by the overwhelming stench of drying wool socks. The smell was so bad inside that at least one teamster felt compelled to seek alternate quarters.

In the mess house, the construction gangs banged on their tin plates until served. This frontier state of affairs, however, was of short duration. As the mine went into production and the smelter rose above Goose Bay, so too the company town of Anyox was built. The new three-storey bunkhouse was of concrete construction, and each room had its own entrance; accommodation was now available for 600 single men. By 1917, there was a 45-room hotel with hot-and-cold water in each room, china on the tables in the company mess hall, a general store, and even an 18-bed hospital – the largest and most modern north of Vancouver. The town streets were planked roads bedecked with electric lights to chase away dark nights. Picnics, boat outings and barrel races were common amusements, and Anyox became one of the major centres of the north.

Opening a new mine was no small task; thousands of metres of diamond drilling were done to outline the location of the ore body. Initially, the miners used candles for light as they manoeuvred their heavy drills to tunnel into the ore bodies. In 1914, the miners switched to carbide lamps, buying the lamps themselves while the company supplied the fuel. In 1916, lighter and more versatile drills were put into operation. The mine was a little over one-and-a-half kilometres (a mile) back from the shore, and the company used two Baldwin-Westinghouse 42-ton locomotives to haul the ore to the smelter. Smaller locomotives were used to pull the ore cars from the mine. The mine was a small community in its own right, with houses, a recreation hall and a small emergency hospital.

The first furnace was blown (started up) in March of 1914. Start-up problems created great difficulties, but within two years, major changes throughout production were implemented, including a complete overhaul of the way ore was loaded into the smelting furnaces. Operations went more smoothly.

Unrefined copper is produced by heating it to separate the metal from the sulphur and other impurities, and by oxidizing it to form a barrier between the copper and impurities. Granby manufactured their blister copper (copper in the range of 99 per centure) in several ways over the years, but generally used several blast furnaces and another piece of equipment called a converter, which, by blasting air through the molten copper, removed most of the impurities and



Bars of copper await shipping on the wharf at Anyox, c. 1923.

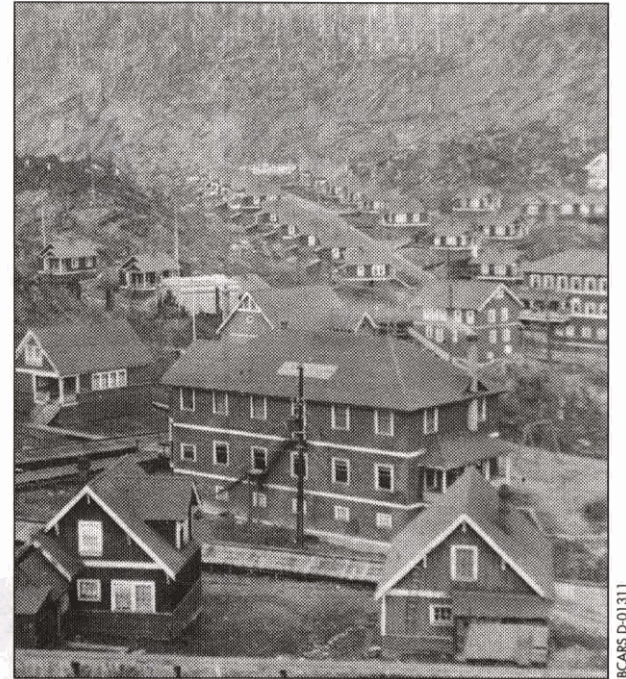
drove off most of the sulphur as sulphur dioxide. The men emerged at the end of each shift, coughing and spitting yellow sulphur. Although the installation of dust-control equipment helped the situation, the fumes killed nearly all the vegetation around Anyox; the surrounding forests were damaged as far away as the town of Alice Arm.

Between 1914 and 1936, the Granby Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company mined 21,725,520 t (23,941,500 t.) of copper ore which produced 321,546,200 kg (708,880,800 lb.) of copper; 206,308,900 g (6,633,000 oz.) of silver; and 3,772,762 g (121,300 oz.) of gold. (Estimates rounded-off and provided by Ministry of Energy and Mines). The blister copper the company produced was barged to Seattle and then transported by rail to New York for refining.

In its early days, Granby was fortunate. While blasting an island from the entrance to Granby Bay, the workers had discovered a gold seam worth \$3 million, which largely paid for the smelter. As well, while laying sewers for the town site, workers located the type of special blue clay used to line the furnaces so it no longer had to be shipped in from the eastern United States.



(Clockwise:) Carbide container, carbide lamp and souvenir ashtrays of blister copper.



Strawboss Avenue and the Elks Hall (centre) early 1920s.

But not everything continued as smoothly. There were labour disputes in 1916; the company blamed the strikes on foreign agitators and enemy aliens. Then in the early 1930s, the low price of copper led to wage reductions, the backlash of a bitter strike involving the provincial police and a violent confrontation. With continuing low prices and the cancellation of a contract to sell copper concentrate to Japan, the Granby Board of Directors decided to close the operation in 1936. The site was sold to Cominco (owners of the Trail Smelter) which retains it still. At present, the old slag piles are being mined as an abrasive.

As for Anyox, the town was abandoned following its closure; in 1942, a fire sweeping through the area destroyed the last homes. Today, concrete rubble and the story of those who lived and work there are the last remnants of its history. ■

Bob Griffin is Acting Manager of History at the RBCM.

## Making Connections

It is original research by curators that moulds the RBCM's collection of artifacts and specimens and shapes how it is presented to visitors. Both the information generated and the artifacts themselves are used in major displays, gallery revisions, published articles and to build our reputation as a credible institution. *Living Landscapes* provides the focus for this original research, as, in turn, each region of the province comes under study (see page 7).

My investigations into one of BC's least-known industrial landscapes – mining on the Central and North Coast – are also made possible through a timely partnership with the *Coasts Under Stress* project. Scholars at the University of Victoria (UVic) and Memorial University in Newfoundland jointly created this important five-year project. It links researchers from government and a dozen universities in Canada and the US together to study how changes in communities and the environment along the coasts of BC, Newfoundland and Labrador have or will affect the health of people and the landscape.



Columbia and 4th, Stewart BC, 1910

As a partner, the RBCM gains cross-country connections, the insight of scholars in St. John's who are looking at similar situations and settlement patterns on their coast, and the opportunity to bring *Living Landscapes* to national attention.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Natural Sciences and Engineering research Council of Canada provides funds for *Coasts Under Stress*. See the Web site at <http://www.coastunderstress.ca/>. ■

- Bob Griffin