

TOS → Britannia

For the Love of

COME FLOOD, FIRE OR MUDSLIDE, BRITANNIA MINES AND HER TOWNS ENDURED FOR DECADES

DRIVING UP THE SEA TO SKY HIGHWAY, you can't help but be drawn to the massive, dilapidated structure tucked into the slope of a mountainside just south of Squamish. Built in 1921, the concentrator processed ore from Britannia Mines for more than 50 years, and today it's the star attraction at the B.C. Museum of Mining. If you stop for a tour, you'll hear the tale of the rise and fall of the massive copper mine that helped attract settlers to the West Coast.

Copper mineralization was first discovered near present-day Britannia Beach in 1888 when a prospector named Dr. A. A. Forbes shot at a deer and noticed that the animal's flailing hooves had exposed mineralized rock below the moss. Britannia Mines was soon born and, controlled by the Britannia Mining and Smelting Company (a branch of the New York-based Howe Sound Company), shipped its first ore to the Crofton Smelter on Vancouver Island in 1904. By 1929, Britannia was the biggest copper producer in the British Commonwealth.

The early history of the mine was punctuated by tragedies. Bruce Ramsey's book *Britannia: The Story of a Mine* describes how just after midnight on March 22, 1915, the mountainside collapsed, raining millions of tons of rock, mud and snow on the Jane Camp and killing 60 people. In 1921, heavy rainfall caused a dam to break above Britannia Beach and within minutes 37 people were dead, 15 injured and rows of houses had floated away. "On Friday, Britannia was a show place as industrial communities go, with pretty houses set in neat gardens," reported the *Province* newspaper. "Today, a

tangled mass of trees, boulders and the wreckage of homes cut the village in two."

That same year, a mysterious fire started in the crusher and burned down the entire concentrator. Its replacement – the concentrator visible from the highway today – was designed and built in just 18 months. It used gravity to move the rock from the top to the bottom level as it was crushed, ground and chemically treated to separate the precious minerals from the waste.

Some open-pit mining took place at Britannia, but most of the ore was extracted from underground, using a network of 210 kilometres of tunnels (including one 600 metres below sea level). The mine also extracted ore by "leaching" or "precipitation." A series of shallow channels were built to collect run-off water from the mine, and iron scraps and tin cans were thrown in. Copper residue accumulated on the tin, which was then knocked off and sold. Today, the museum still demonstrates this concept, showing school children how to get pieces of copper from the mine water in just a week.

The only way to reach Britannia in the early days was by steamship from Vancouver. Goods were carried to the Mount Sheer townsite on the mountaintop by packhorses, Japanese labourers and an aerial tramway called "the skip." The tramway became a tourist attraction and boat travellers heading up the coast often stopped to see it. The railroad reached Britannia Beach in 1956 and the highway was built in 1958, inaugurated by a 600-car convoy led by Premier W.A.C. Bennett.

Back in the day at Britannia: Men attended informal social gatherings called "smokers" and women competed in the Copper Queen contest (below). The winner would don a copper crown while children danced around the maypole.



f Copper



“A lot of people at the Britannia Beach 2004 Reunion had strong feelings and memories about the Mount Sheer town site.”

—Farrah Rooney, B.C. Museum of Mining curator

Life at Britannia Beach and Mount Sheer was full of social activities. Men went to informal social gatherings called “smokers,” while the Beach Ladies Aid put on summer festivals. Women also competed to be elected “Copper Queen” – the winner wore a crown of local copper while children danced around the maypole.

In the late 1950s, the price of copper plummeted. In 1963, the Howe Sound Company sold the property to the Anaconda Copper Company, which operated the mine until 1974, when it finally closed due to rising operating costs and taxes.

“I worked the very last shift,” recalls Allan McNair, an 85-year-old former miner

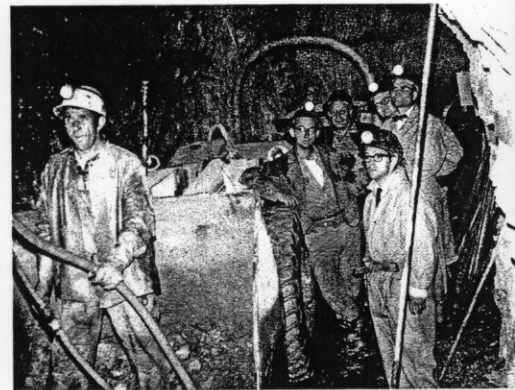
who still lives at Britannia Beach. “The mine shut down and then we had to bring all the stuff out from underground. They had a big auction and sold all the equipment.”

According to the B.C. Museum of Mining, 60,000 people of many races, languages and religions lived and worked at Britannia between 1904 and 1974. During the life of the mine, more than 50 million tons of ore were extracted, containing 1.3 billion pounds of copper, 274 million pounds of zinc, 34 million pounds of lead, 500,000 ounces of gold, six million ounces silver and one million pounds of cadmium.

In July 2004, 500 former residents returned to celebrate the 100th anniversary

Star attraction: The once-active concentrator building (left) now draws thousands of tourists each year and sometimes doubles as a movie set.

Dirty work: Miners had to navigate some 210 kilometres of tunnels, including one 600 metres below sea level (below).



of the mine. Many had lived at Mount Sheer, which was abandoned in the early 1960s. The former town site is now completely overgrown and, except for the old dam and powerhouse, bears few signs of habitation.

“A lot of people at the reunion had strong feelings and memories about the town site,” says Farrah Rooney, curator of the B.C. Museum of Mining. “They were taking trips up there and just crying. It was very emotional.”

Today, big plans are underway to revitalize Britannia Beach: a new subdivision is being developed above the current town site and the museum is planning a massive expansion. The federal government is funding the Britannia Project (see *Extreme Makeover* on page 17), which could include a commercial district, a revitalized waterfront, a park and a marina. If all goes according to plan, by the time the Olympic Games hit the Sea to Sky corridor in 2010, Britannia Beach will have returned to the bustling place it was during its heyday. ■