

THE MAKING OF A MINE-

881665



Early management staff, 1958: (front row, left to right), Jack Berry, mine superintendent; Mickey Dopson, mine captain; Andre Beguin, mill superintendent; Fred Murray, general superintendent; (second row), Dick Stevens, purchasing agent; Rene Pasiaud, mechanical superintendent; (third row), Craigie Hood, surface superintendent; Alex Powell, electrical superintendent; (back row), Dr. Charles Cobb, M.D.; Peter Davies, safety supervisor; Chuck Caron, chief engineer; Bill Johnston, office manager.

The Early Days of CASSIAR

To those born and brought up in a small northern community, there is, of course, a feeling of permanence, but that is not shared by those pioneers responsible for its inception a few years earlier. The real romance lies in the story of its beginning.

So it was with Cassiar, now the largest town in British Columbia north of Fort Nelson, with a population approaching 2,000, its own store, school, hospital, churches and recreation facilities, and set in a beautiful alpine valley 100 miles southwest of Watson Lake, Yukon.

To those who transformed this "moose pasture" into the current "rough jewel in the wilderness" there is an almost overwhelming feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction, transcending the memories of the frustrations, the compromises, the hardships and the heartaches required to achieve it.

What follows is an attempt to describe those feelings and to give to the uninitiated a sense of what it takes to develop a mining community in virgin country.

Tipped off by a summer student

from a Geological Survey of Canada field party, two prospectors, Victor Sittler and Hiram Nelson, and two equipment operators, Robert and Ronald Kirk from Lower Post, B.C., staked the first claims on McDame Mountain in the fall of 1950 — much to the chagrin of local miners working the nearby placer deposits on McDame Creek. Asbestos had been known in the area by white men since 1872 and the local Indians had known for centuries that the mountain sheep bedded down on the yellowish-white "fluff" at the north end of Mount McDame.

by Bill Plumb

However, to one and all it had been only a curiosity until a GSC party chief mapping the area casually remarked to his UBC summer assistant, "If this deposit was in Quebec it would be a mine."

With visions of instant riches, that student hitched a ride down the Alaska Highway at the close of the season, stopped off at Lower Post, met the prospectors in the beer parlour and, for the promise of a fifth interest, divulged his "secret" to them. (NOTE: He never did receive his interest and he died in an accident ten years later.)

The stakers played it cool. After recording the claims at Lower Post, they contacted all the known asbestos companies in Canada and, for good measure, included some of the exploration companies at the time active in the Yukon. Then they rented a room in the Watson Lake Hotel and waited for the scouts to beat a path to their door.

Alec Berry, a Conwest scout in Whitehorse, heard about it and phoned F.M. Connell at head office in Toronto, who sent geologist Dr. W.V. (Bill) Smitheringale post-haste to Watson Lake with instructions to "Get up there and buy it — if there is anything to it, of course!" The established asbestos companies in Quebec, Johns-Mannville and Asbestos Corporation, thought the deposit too remote, as did ASARCO, and delayed bidding on it. Conwest, however, which already had a stake in the United Keno Hill Mine in Yukon, thought it might have some merit and examined it. Once they saw it and recognized the potential of the iron-free long fibre, they moved quickly. Bill Smitheringale arrived at the Watson Lake Hotel with an offer of \$100,000 cash and 300,000 shares in a company to be formed — and, then and there, he opened up a briefcase bulging with \$1,000 bills. That did it! Conwest got the option. . .

There now began, in the spring of 1951, a valiant effort to prove up, develop and bring to production — against a monopolistic market, in one of the most inaccessible and remote areas of Canada — the high-grade Cassiar Asbestos Mine.

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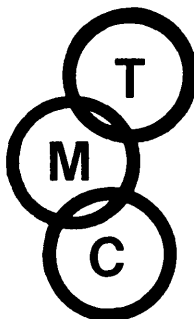
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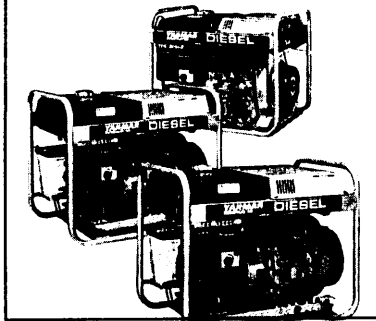
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15... by the vicissitudes of war, it would have been impossible. The mine is on top of a mountain in northern B.C. at 6,000 feet elevation, 86 miles south of Mile 648 on the Alaska Highway and 100 road miles from Watson Lake, Yukon. A tote-road had been bulldozed through the low hills and swamps of the Liard Plain three years before as far as Good Hope Lake, just inside the Cassiar Mountains, to supply a seasonal gold-dredging operation known as Moccasin Mines.

Beyond that point, Cassiar had to construct 18 miles of access road following McDame Creek through the mountains to the deposit.

It so happened that a Conwest-controlled gold mine, Central Patricia at Val d'Or, Quebec was closing and several key personnel were available to start this new project in the wilderness. Hired to do this were A.C. (Chuck) Caron as chief engineer, Gordon Little as mine superintendent, Rupert Mackenzie as pit foreman and Jim Ballantyne as mill superintendent. Fred Murray was the first general superintendent while Bill Smitheringale was in charge of exploring the orebody and developing initial reserves for start-up. A number of old army huts from construction camps along the Alaska Highway were freighted in to form the first camp at 3,500 feet in the valley of Troutline Creek.

During the next two years, protection claims were staked, a six-mile switchback road was built to the deposit, a 400-foot-long adit was driven into the showings at 6,000 feet elevation and a test mill constructed at the townsite. Feasibility and market studies were undertaken and a production decision made.

By 1953 the property was in production. A tremendous amount of credit is due to the early pioneering staff whose ingenuity and perseverance under the most adverse conditions had to be experienced to be truly appreciated. The winters were severe, often with temperatures down to 40 degrees below zero or more.

Keeping the road open to Watson Lake in the winter was difficult; in the spring, almost impossible. Four-wheel-drive trucks bogged down when the frost melted; roads had to be corduroyed, culverted and drained;



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Preparing to stake McDame Range, 1950. The orebody is at the north end, upper left in picture.



PHOTO JOHN HEMBLING

The original road to Cassiar, springtime, 1953.

one hill was so steep that often it could not be climbed without assistance and vehicles would travel in convoys, but even so, many a night was spent in the open, waiting for help to arrive. From the beginning, it was realized that to maintain a stable work force in this isolated area, provision must be made for married staff.

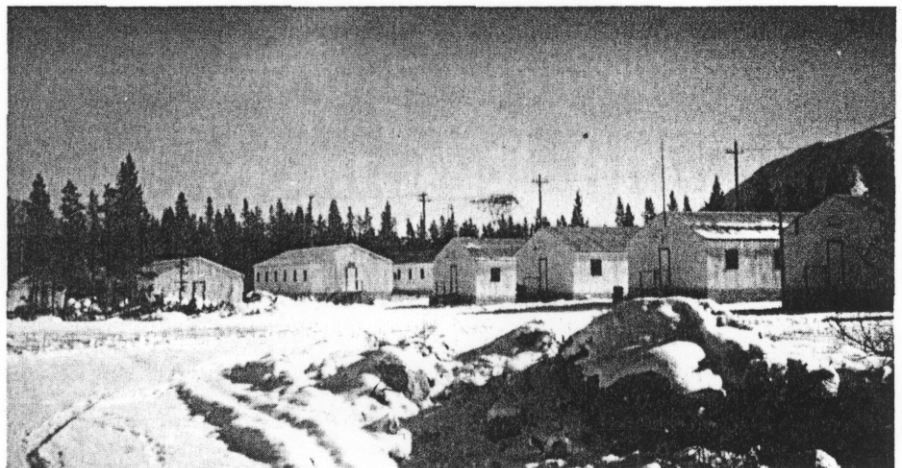
As a well-renowned mining explorationist from Alaska, Chuck Herbert, once remarked, "If you need your wife to cook and darn and help you in civilization, you need her twice as much in the bush!" However, this is easier said than done.

Shelter, fuel, food and water can be reasonably provided but how do you overcome the mud and slush in the spring, the mosquitoes in summer, the autumn winds, the winter blizzards and the ever-present feeling of isolation — to say nothing of dealing with the occasional mother bear

with cubs, a rutting bull moose or a threatening forest fire? Groceries were brought in by fibre truck, clothing was ordered by catalogue, communications were maintained by intermittent radio, personnel and mail came and went by power-wagon

over the 100-mile tote-road to Watson Lake.

Despite these and other difficulties, an adventurous spirit of optimism prevailed, problems were resolved and Cassiar became an established world producer of asbestos.



Army huts from the Alaska Highway provided the first winter camp.

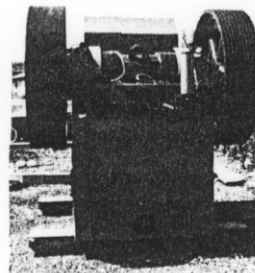
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Staff houses, Cassiar townsite, 1970. McDame range in background.

Unfamiliarity with asbestos was one of the early problems. Being an industrial mineral, it is subject to many rigorous specifications not encountered in metal mining, such as brittleness (which affects its spinning

ability,) magnetite content (diminishing its electrical insulation properties) and discolouration (causing contamination when used for filtering wine or beer). One major disappointment was the realization that several hun-

dre tonnes of "free-milling asbestos fluff" coating the talus slopes below the mine were too discoloured and contained too much "dust" to be acceptable to markets. Another setback was the failure of an ingenious metal chute laboriously constructed to convey the mined ore from the crusher at the pit, 1,000 feet down the steep slope, to a loading bin on the road below for trucking to the mill. It proved impossible to maintain an even flow in the chute and some ore was spilled all over the mountainside.

Eventually, a three-mile aerial tramline was installed from the pit pre-concentrator, with the added advantage of generating power as the loaded buckets descended the 2,500 vertical feet to the mill.

A new underground ore-body is going into production, extending the life of the community well into the 21st century.

One major cost was the necessity of kiln-drying the ore for milling, which required a lot of diesel fuel, so a transport division was established and fleet of trucks each carried 24 tonnes of bagged fibre the 350 miles to Whitehorse and back-hauled an equivalent weight of diesel fuel in belly tanks for the Cassiar power plant and dryers. At first, the open-pit mine was operated only in the summer and ore was stockpiled to feed the mill through the winter, but as markets increased, it became more economical to operate the mine continuously.

The product was marketed through Bell Asbestos of Thetford Mines, Quebec, a subsidiary of asbestos manufacturer Turner & Newall of England, whose supply of fibre from South Africa was diminishing. From Whitehorse, the fibre on pallets went by White Pass & Yukon Railway to Skagway, Alaska, then by ocean freighter to Asbestos Wharf in North Vancouver and from there to markets all over the world.

And so the mine prospered, another feather in the cap of Conwest Exploration Company Limited, one of Canada's mining "greats." Gradually, a modern community

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Bench mining, Cassiar open pit, McDame Mountains, 1959.

evolved, with most of the amenities of the "outside world," including (eventually) colour TV (courtesy of the Anik satellite and the CBC), a community centre, a curling rink and even a swimming pool provided by the local Lions Club.

Nor was this all! Strategically located in this part of far-northern British Columbia, Cassiar became a centre for mineral exploration, eventually resulting in the construction of the Stewart-Cassiar Highway (now an important alternative route to Yukon) and contributing to the development of the north, including such projects as the Klappan coal field, the Golden Bear Mine near Telegraph Creek, the Erickson Gold Mine beside Cassiar and numerous other exploration prospects waiting in the wings.

Now, almost 40 years later, after mining about 40 million tons of ore and producing a billion dollars of new wealth, a new underground orebody is going into production, extending the life of the community well into the 21st century. Cassiar is only one of the many mines developed in Canada's north but it stands as a monument to the spirit of enterprise and resourcefulness that makes this country great! □



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