

By Walter Guppy

A PLACER MINER with the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition party led by John Buttle in 1865 discovered gold in the bed of the river flowing into the head of Bedwell Sound. The *Victoria Daily British Colonist* of Aug. 11, 1865, gives a glowing report on the discovery. It reads in part:

The news received from the government exploring expedition cannot, under present circumstances, prove other than gratifying. To find gold in paying quantities on our west coast corroborates statements so often expressed about the auriferous character of that portion of the country and gives renewed hope of the gold bearing nature of the Island generally.

The report continues at length in the same vein, giving a detailed account of the discovery and speculating on its potential to support "a highly profitable operation employing several miners."

However, it proved to be a fiasco. Later *Daily British Colonist* reports indicate that about a hundred stampedeers that travelled to the scene of the discovery in two chartered steamers failed to find significant quantities of gold. They returned, disgruntled, to Victoria to demand compensation from the government for time and money lost on account of the publication of misleading information.

There are no further reports of activity at Bear River — as it was called at the time — until 1898 when numerous gold and base metal discoveries around Clayoquot Sound were reported in the annual report of the minister of mines for British Columbia. This report mentions earlier operations by Chinese placer miners that apparently found the gold that Buttle reported on but others failed to find. It states:

In the early '60s, Bear River had a placer excitement, and about 12 years ago some 15 Chinamen were at work in the upper reaches of the river, washing for gold; these, however, suddenly left in a body, having been driven away, it is said, by superstitious fears engendered by the sudden death of one their number.

Whether it was "superstitious fears" or a dearth of gold and difficult conditions that caused the Chinese to discontinue their operations here is a matter for conjecture. However, the report states that they found "considerable gold" and it appears that it was sufficient to keep them occupied in this remote area for a couple of decades.

The 1898 report also mentions that a



WALTER GUPPY COLLECTION

Gold up the Bedwell

trail had been built for eight miles up the valley by prospectors with government assistance and states that a hotel had been built at the head of Bedwell Sound at a point known as Port Hughes.

Most of the prospecting activity at Bedwell River around the turn of the century was centred on copper-magnetite iron deposits at Penny Creek a couple of miles above tidewater. Considerable work was carried out on the Seattle, New York and Castle prospects but shafts and adits failed to encounter targeted ore-bodies and, as financial backing dried up, the boom petered out.

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A miner sacks gold ore for the smelter from the Prosper Mine in 1947, at left. Few traces remain of the Buccaneer Mill, pictured at right in 1940

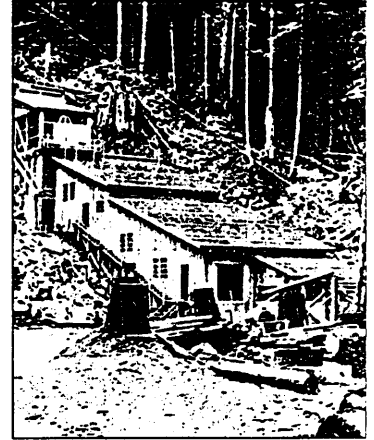
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The next boom at Bedwell River started in 1913, again involving copper. The Ptarmigan-Big Interior prospect, discovered by Joe Drinkwater of Alberni on the summit northeast of Bedwell Valley, was acquired by British interests that formed a company named Ptarmigan Mines Ltd., with head offices in London, to develop it to production.

It was proposed to construct a road up Bedwell Valley to connect with an aerial tramline to the top of the mountain at an elevation of 5,000 feet.

Seven miles of wagon road had been completed and materials for the tramline landed at the head of Bedwell Sound when war broke out in 1914 and the entire crew employed on the project left to enlist, leaving all the supplies and materials assembled on the site abandoned to the ravages of nature and the depredations of humans and animals. A later survey conducted with a view of reopening the project concluded that the \$40,000 that had been spent on it was a dead loss.

A puzzling feature of this Ptarmigan Mines development is the fact that the boundaries of Strathcona Park were extended in 1913 to take in the upper Bedwell Valley where the development was taking place. This was contrary to the original Strathcona Park Act of 1911. This act was amended in 1918 to accommodate mining but, by that time, copper prices had slumped and interest in developing a copper mine at Bedwell River waned.

Following the Zeballos gold rush of the late 1930s, which stimulated another surge of prospecting activity all along the coast, discoveries were made at Bedwell River that resulted in a boom of considerable



ALBERNI VALLEY MUSEUM FN 3044

proportions developing there late in the summer of 1938. This was only a year before the outbreak of the Second World War caused a decline in gold mining ventures but not an end to mining at Bedwell River. The Musketeer and Buccaneer prospects, discovered by Sam Craig and Patrick McCrory respectively, were acquired by major mining companies and developed to production.

A road, over a distance of some eight miles from tidewater to the mines, was constructed by the mining companies with government assistance at a total cost of \$53,000. By December 1942, when restrictions on labor and materials caused the mines to close, more than 5,000 ounces of gold had been produced by the two mines.

In the post-war period, up until 1972, there was intermittent production from mines at Bedwell River. The Musketeer mill was rehabilitated and some shipments of selected ore made to Tacoma Smelter, bringing the total production from mines there, including about 200 ounces from the Prosper Mine outside of the park, to something over 7,000 troy ounces (217,700 grams).

The Strathcona Park area has now been closed to mining and various other factors have inhibited exploration of the area outside the park. However, trends and conditions change and nothing devised by legislation is inscribed in stone. Some day there may be another mining boom at Bedwell River.

Walter Guppy lives in Tofino, retired after a career as electrical contractor and prospector. He has published Clayoquot Soundings and is working on a history of mining on Vancouver Island.

