

ISLANDER

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The town that sleeps

By Len Lindstrom

STANDING ON THE SUMMIT of Mount Sicker looking west, you would not believe that this tree-covered slope once was occupied by a thriving town, laid out in 1899 to house and provide the necessities for the miners and their families who worked the Lenora Copper Mine directly below the town site.

The first claim was staked in 1895 by F.L. Sullivan, T. McKay and Henry Buzard. They sunk a shaft 22 feet deep at the Leona mine, but Christmas was approaching so they departed for Washington to spend time with their families. One of the partners, McKay, died in January 1896 while home for the festive season. In the spring of 1896, the two remaining partners were joined by Harry Smith.

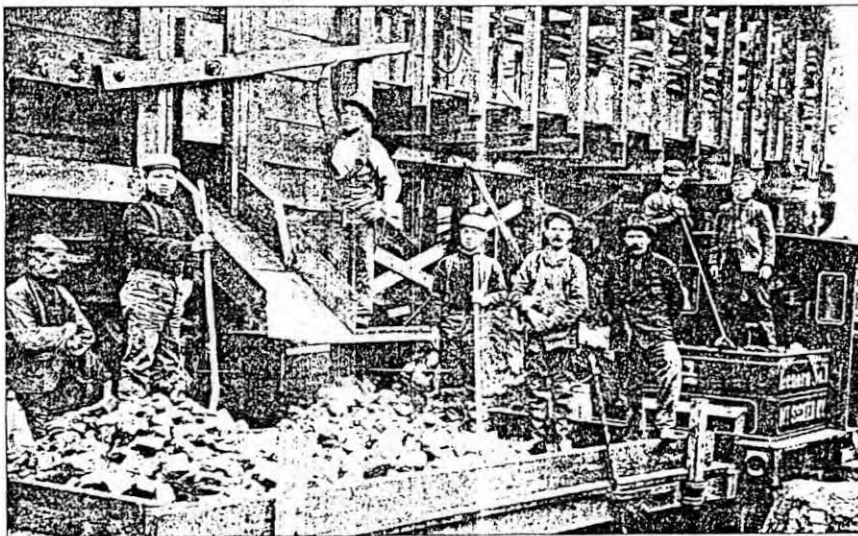
In 1897 a major strike was made on the western slope at the 1,400 foot level by Harry Smith, prompting the staking of the mountain to the very summit. Harry Smith named the main strike after his daughter Lenora. Smith also staked another mine several hundred feet higher which he named Tyee. The shareholders were doubtful of the outcome of the venture and decided to sell out to a Mr. Croft who organized the Lenora-Mount Sicker Mining Company.

Soon the town site boasted a general store, a small school with 21 students, a livery stable and many homes. A wagon road was built along the northwest face of Mount Sicker from Westholme through Copper Canyon to access the town.

The Lenora mine was in full production by 1900 and the town expanded to accommodate the influx of workers on the site.

The ore could not be moved quickly enough by wagon and team, so a contractor was hired to build a tramway down the east face of Mount Sicker to connect with the E&N Railway. The tramway was operational by March 1900. Mine production increased to 150 tons per day, far too much for the wagons and the tramway. The solution was to build a railway from the mine to Osborn Bay, the nearest point of tidal waters. The six miles of railway was

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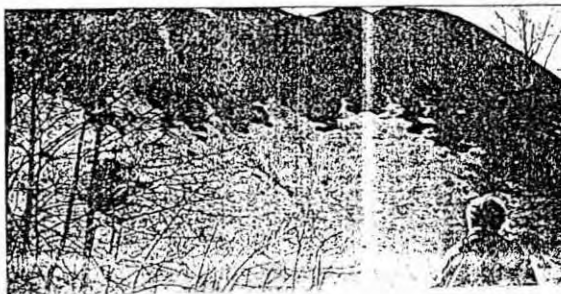


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All that is left of the mining company's gate, above. Just a few heavy boards, rusty hinges and one fence post gradually rotting into the forest soil.

Some 150 tons of ore a day moved in 1900 on the Mount Sicker Railway, at left, from the Lenora terminus, below.

Today, a winter hiker looks at the eroded hill of mine tailings, below left, while a fence marks the snow-filled mine shaft, top of page.



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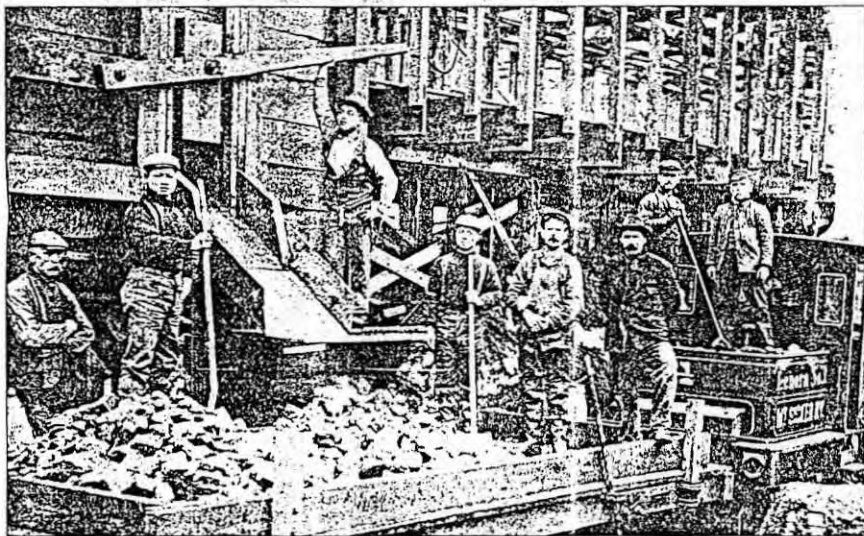
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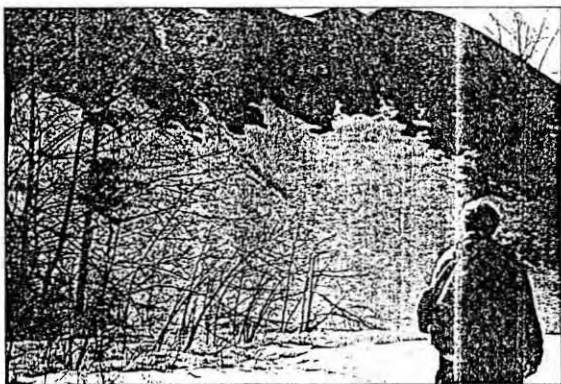


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A second wagon road was built in October 1900 from Somenos to Mount Sicker on the southeast side, considerably shorter than the Westholme route. Frank Lloyd moved his sawmill from Westholme to Mount Sicker in September 1900 to cater to the needs of the mining companies. A great building boom took place during 1901. A second post office was built by April at the Lenora mine, an 18-room Mount Sicker Hotel sprang up, complete with dining room and ornate bar, and the school house was rebuilt to accommodate forty pupils. Corner lots went for \$75 and in-between lots for \$50. At the Tyee mine site, a few feet further up the mountain, a post office, the Mount Brenton Hotel, another school, a church and a general store were added by the fall of 1901. The population of Mount Sicker at its prime was 1,700, making it one of the largest towns on the Island outside Victoria and Nanaimo.



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Advertisements in the *Daily Colonist* newspaper urged people to visit the mine site and enjoy the view, plus the magnificent food at the Mount Sicker Hotel.

Mount Sicker, just north of Duncan, had a flourishing mining town in 1901. When the world price of copper rises, the town, too, may rise again

Major crime was not a problem during the days of Mount Sicker's fame. Only one incident is recorded of a murder and suicide. Fred Beech became enthralled with a widow, a Mrs. Campbell. When her desire for him waned, he attempted to shoot up her cabin one Sunday morning after a night of heavy drinking. A Mr. Bibeau attempted to stop Beech before he got himself into more trouble. For Bibeau's efforts, Beech killed him with two shots to the chest. The police swarmed over the area hunting Beech down. Mrs. Campbell was taken to the Mount Sicker Hotel for her safety. How-

ever, Beech had not left town as suspected, and Mrs. Campbell, curious to see how the search was progressing, looked out a hotel window. Beech fired a shot that narrowly missed her head, causing her to faint. He, thinking he had killed her, then killed himself. When the police investigated, it was alleged they found a farewell message to his parents carved on the stock of his rifle.

The Lenora Mine went into receivership in 1904. By 1906, the Lenora mine was shut down. The Bank of Montreal was in control of assets. A house in Mount Sicker could be purchased for \$2 and the Mount Sicker Hotel was available for \$8. The Lenora was reactivated for a short time in 1907, but the heyday for Mount Sicker was over.

The three major mines were located at varying elevations, with the Lenora the lowest. The two mines above, the Tyee and the Richard, had problems pumping the water from their shafts to maintain a profitable operation. It took 100 cords of wood every 24 hours to provide the energy to run the pumps. If the Lenora tunnel had been extended, the two upper mines could have been

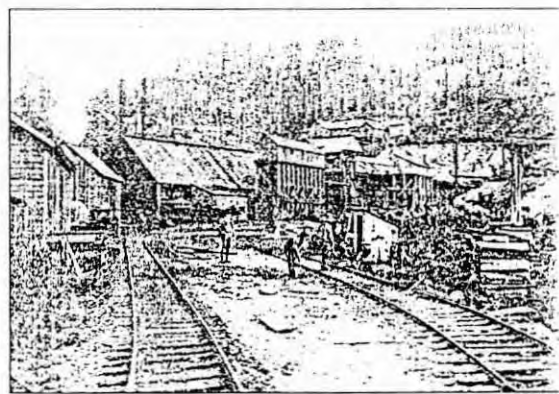


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drained by gravity through the Lenora. The owners of the Lenora, jealous of the profits to be made by the Tyee and the Richard, halted the shaft 75 feet short of relief for the two mines above. Had all three struck a deal, they could have continued to operate for several more years at a reduced smelting level.

The railway was dismantled, the mines were closed and people left for other areas. The town buildings gradually toppled and rotted away. Very little remains today of this once thriving community situated on this picturesque westward facing mountainside except portions of foundations that supported the buildings and the sealed mine adits. Nature has taken it back, but at one time it was bustling with families, commerce and industry.

This town is not dead; this town is

asleep. One day, the extraction of ore at Mount Sicker will become viable again and the people will flock back to build homes and businesses to renew the town. Families will sit on their porches more on warm summer evenings viewing the blazing sunsets on display between Mount Brenton and Hill Sixt while their neighbors in the towns below are already draped in darkness.

There have been attempts to reopen the mines in the years since the demise of this town, but none have been successful to date. Copper is obtainable at a far lower cost in other areas of the world to render these mines competitive. Len Lindstrom lives in Duncan. More details of Mount Sicker can be found in *Shays on the Switchbacks*, published by the British Columbia Railway Historical Society.