



The Island Copper Mine, for a quarter-century an important part of the Port Hardy economy, is rapidly winding down, with construction already under way on a trench to flood the giant pit with sea water



## DIGGING DEEP

Its ore body depleted, work begins to turn the Earth's deepest surface depression back to nature



IAN MCKEAN/TIMES COLONIST

Island Copper Mine manager Brian Welchman looks over the huge crater left by more than two decades of digging

### NEWS FOCUS

## It's the end of an era as copper mine winds down

By Bill Smith  
Times Colonist staff

IT'S THE lowest place on the globe you can go by car, it has fed the north Island's economy for 25 years — and now they're going to fill it with sea water.

It is the giant hole gouged out of the Earth at a now-dying copper mine near Port Hardy.

Island Copper Mine, owned by Australian company Broken Hill Proprietary Minerals, is rapidly winding down.

With the ore body played out, reclamation work is beginning.

"It's the lowest point on Earth you can drive to," said mine manager Brian Welchman.

"It's 1,320 feet below sea level, more than double the Grand Canyon, which is 600 feet below sea level and surpassing the Dead Sea [1,298 feet] as the deepest surface depression on Earth."

More than 1.2 billion tons of rock were dug out of the mine in 24 years.

At its peak, the mine added \$28 million annually to the economy of northern Vancouver Island communities.

Today, there's more than 60 metres of water in the pit. Very soon it will start rising quickly.

Work began Thursday on digging a 20-metre-wide trench a distance of several hundred metres, with the idea of creating a channel to flood the giant pit with sea water.

"It will be a spectacular sight watching sea water cascading down the wall of the pit," Welchman said.

Flooding will take about three months to complete.

"It would take 35 years to fill the pit relying on rainfall, which averages about 60 inches a year on the north Island."

The pit will eventually become a treatment pond for acid rock chips and non-marketable fish from area fish farms.

"This time next year productivity in the pit will not be measured in tons per man hour. It will be measured in grams of carbon per cubic metre — an expression of how hard the little bugs are working to create a productive lake," Welchman said.

When created, the mine almost overnight transformed Port Hardy,

such as the arena, pool and hospital.

Mine employees have served as mayors, municipal councillors and on hospital boards, local committees and been members of service organizations.

The plant site covers 55 hectares. It will be reclaimed.

All areas contaminated by fuel and other materials will have to be rehabilitated to provincial environmental standards.

The company has been monitoring fish populations in Rupert and Holberg inlets since the mine opened.

The most recent survey (1990) showed the population was virtually the same as surveys carried out when mining started.

In the early 1980s the company's local tax bill was about \$3.5 million.

Last year, Island Copper paid \$1 million into Port Hardy's coffers.

The last load of ore was taken from the pit in August and dewatering pumps were turned off.

Runoff began to accumulate at the bottom of the cavernous pit immediately.



IAN MCKEAN/TIMES COLONIST

Workers use a large shovel to begin digging a 20-metre-wide trench that will be used to flood the copper mine with sea water



Rob Strathairn/Times Colonist

drainage. Organic fertilizer will be added to feed bugs existing in the sea water, which will help transform the pit into a living entity.

The fertilizer will be like a sourdough starter mix composed of wood chips and non-marketable fish from area fish farms.

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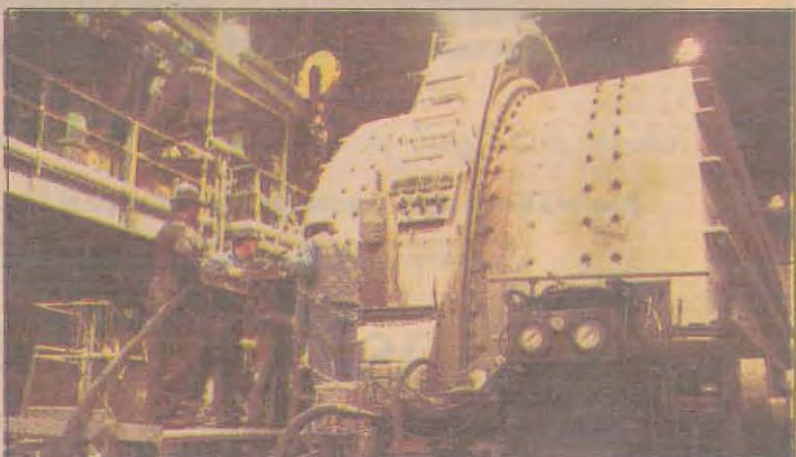
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## After 25 years, operation's total payroll: \$900 million

Since beginning production in 1971, the Island Copper Mine produced 1.3 billion kilograms of copper, 31 million kg of molybdenum, 317,000 kg of gold and 3.36 million kg of silver.

The mine created more than 16,250 man-years of employment with a total payroll of \$900 million. At its peak, the mine employed more than 900 men and

women.

Spending on supplies and services in the province topped \$1.2 billion. Total spending by Island Copper over the 25 years was almost \$3 billion.

The company was an active partner in the construction of housing and community facilities

VITAL STATISTICS · A5

### TIMES COLONIST

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## News Focus: Plant employed 900 at peak

First phase of the two-stage reclamation project will take about eight months. The company is also disposing of equipment.

At its peak in the late 1980s, the mine employed 900 workers.

Over the years a pit more than 2.5 kilometres long has been created.

The 650-hectare pit area is being filled with salt water and the adjacent beach area, now a sea of waste rock, will be transformed as top soil is dumped and alders planted.

"I've ordered 480,000 trees to be planted on the 500-hectare beach area," Welchman said.

Welchman believes the land should be returned to wilderness.

"Let's return it to the bears, deer and other wildlife."

Another 55-hectare site which houses warehouses and other buildings should be developed as a light industrial site, he said. Adjacent deepwater docking facilities make it an ideal location for that purpose, said Welchman.

Some of the former mine employees have found work in Alberta or at a mine in the North. Others are staying in the area.

Welchman admits the mine closure will affect the area's economy, but added that it will not be devastating because the company's intentions have been widely known for five years.

The municipality of Port Hardy has planned accordingly.

Municipal administrator Phyllis Belaire said councils for the past eight years have been setting up

reserve funds and have given economic development a top priority.

"Some value-added forestry and fishery plants have been added to the local scene," she said.

Port Hardy's population today is 5,300 — an increase of almost 300 since the 1991 census.

Construction is booming, housing starts are up and the real estate market is buoyant.

"Confidence in the community's future well-being is at a high level and there has been no evidence so far of a major economic impact due to the mine's closure," Belaire said.

This confidence in the future is borne out by an \$11-million renovation nearing completion at Port Hardy Secondary School and construction of two commercial buildings to house a drug store and a television and electronics business.

Mayor Russ Hellberg is upbeat about the community's future, despite the loss of a major industry and the district's biggest tax contributor.

He sees recently announced changes to the ferry system aimed at better serving the mid-coast as a "tremendous benefit" that will boost tourism.

"We've cut municipal expenses and taken other cost-saving measures to prepare ourselves for this day," he said. "We have been giving economic development a high priority and it has borne dividends as several small forestry and fishery related operations have opened."

#### OFF PAGE ONE

## Vital statistics: Mine

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# WORLD

## ORGANIZED CRIME

### runs most banks Russia — magazine

article said is used to fuel illegal activities, including drug-dealing.

Friedman said from January 1994 to the present, more than \$40 billion in new \$100 bills have been shipped to Russia to meet orders from Russian banks, an amount that far exceeds the total value of all rubles in circulation.

His article added from Monday through Friday of any given week, at least \$100 million a night is flown from New York City's John F. Kennedy airport to Moscow, where the money "is used to finance the Russian mob's vast and growing international crime syndicate."

The U.S. Federal Reserve Bank has sanctioned the selling of the enormous amount of \$100 bills and the New York-based Republic Na-

tional Bank, which specializes in selling currency, has taken a lead in providing the cash to Russian banks, Friedman said.

A spokesman for Republic National Bank said Sunday that Friedman's article is "false, malicious and defamatory, a concoction of lies, misinformation and innuendoes" compounded by quotes from unidentified sources.

The spokesman added Republic's lawyers "are reviewing the article and will take appropriate action."

Friedman said the shipment of money to Russia is legal because the banks in Russia ordering the funds from U.S. banks are chartered and officially recognized.

The money is purchased on be-

half of Russian banks by U.S. banks with whom the Russians have accounts, a spokesman for Republic said, adding: "The money is already in the U.S. banking system."

In his article, Friedman quotes from a U.S. State Department cable the magazine obtained, in which a top Russian banking official cited estimates anywhere from 50 per cent to 80 per cent of Russian banks are under the control of organized crime.

The official, Viktor Melnikov, the Russian Central Bank's director for foreign-exchange control, also "warned that much of this [imported money] was being used for illegal purposes, including narcotics trafficking."



Chien Yi-kun, right, and Hsu Yi-ding getting married with seven other couples.

## ODDITIES

### Flushed with couples wed

The Associated Press  
TAIPEI, Taiwan

Flushed with happiness, eight couples got married Sunday in a bathroom in a public garden in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung.

The idea was dreamed up by one of the couples, 29-year-old Chiu Chiu-kuei and her groom, 28-year-old Lee Wang-ising, who met while the Encore Garden's public bathrooms were being built in 1993. Lee worked on the construction and Chiu helped with the decorating.

### hostages, Chechens told

hostages and surrender their arms, Russian news agencies reported, quoting Mikhail Barsukov, director of Russia's Federal Security Service.

"If even one hostage is shot, I will act immediately," Barsukov was quoted saying.

He did not say what steps he would take.

Helicopter gunships circled overhead as Russian officers inspected positions and troops stood ready around Pervomayskaya, near the northern Russian republic Dagestan's border with Chechnya.

Upping the psychological pressure on the rebels, Russian jets dropped bright flares at about 10 p.m., lighting up the snow-covered landscape around Pervomayskaya.

Armed with grenade-launchers and anti-tank and anti-aircraft rockets, the rebels patrolled the village perimeter. Their hostages were kept under guard in a mosque, a school and a few homes.

"Strategically, our aim is to free the hostages and punish the criminals," said Russian Maj.-Gen. Alexander Mikhailov of the security

service.

"But tactically, the terrorists are the ones with the strong hand, it is they who are making the demands."

Talks between the rebels and Dagestan officials continued but no progress was reported. Rockets fired from Dagestan could be heard exploding around the forests and villages of Chechnya early Saturday.

The rebels have threatened to shoot the hostages seized in Tuesday's raid on the Dagestan city Kizlyar if they are not guaranteed safe passage back to Chechnya.

### in presidential race

Cavaco Silva admitted defeat without waiting for the count to be completed.

The result was a fresh triumph for the Socialist Party, just three months after Portugal thrust the party back into government for the first time in a decade in legislative elections.

The election also marked the first time the Portuguese have chosen a president from the same party as that of its prime minister since democ-

racy was established in the country after a 1974 revolution ended decades of fascist dictatorship.

For Cavaco Silva, who as prime minister was the master of Portugal's destiny for a decade until the election last October, the result was a bitter blow.

He had pinned his hopes on his record in government and a call to the Portuguese not to give too much power to one party.

### Newspaper's owner-editor gunned down

The owner of an independent Algerian newspaper was gravely wounded after publishing a stinging editorial against Islamic rebels and the newspaper's librarian was killed by gunmen.

Nourredine Guittoune, the owner, manager and editor-in-chief of *L'Independant*, and librarian Khaled Aboukacem were leaving the daily newspaper's office in Algiers late Saturday night when they were shot.

Aboukacem, 30, died immediately. Guittoune, 47, was wounded in the shoulder and abdomen. He played dead until the gunmen left, then got up and ran 100 metres to a nearby printing company, where he collapsed. A passer-by took him by car to a hospital.

No one claimed responsibility for the shootings Sunday. But Islamic militants have killed dozens of people in their four-year campaign to replace Algeria's secular government with an Islamic theocracy.

### Chagall painting stolen from gallery

The Marc Chagall painting *Jacob's Ladder* has been stolen from a Tel Aviv art gallery.

Gallery owner Shaya Yariv said Sunday the painting was displayed prominently when the gallery opened Friday morning. But when a visitor asked employees where the Chagall was 20 minutes later, all that was left was a bent nail on the column where it had hung.

The painting, valued at \$190-245,000 Cdn, was scheduled to be auctioned Sunday. It was insured.

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