

Old Mines Die Hard

NUMEROUS OWNERS, LOW METAL PRICES AND A MILL FIRE COULDN'T THROW THE PREMIER MINE OFF TRACK

by Ian McLeod

▶ THE PREMIER MINE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE prosperity of Stewart, B.C., and Hyder, Alaska, during three decades beginning around 1918. Its production record of two million ounces of gold and 45 million ounces of silver makes it the third most productive precious metal mine in B.C.'s history. Located in the rugged mountains near the Alaska border, 25 kilometres north of Stewart, the Premier mine camp has seen extensive mining and exploration activity for more than 80 years.

First staked in 1910 by Scotty Dilworth and the Bunting brothers, it was surrounded by other claims owned by numerous partners and investors. Dr. W.T. Kergin and Dr. Richards of Port Simpson each had a claim given to them by Dilworth as payment for medical services when the prospector broke his leg. Farther up the "hill," McKenzie Logan and John Morrison staked a group of claims that would become the main ore-bearing claims of Premier. O.B. Bush formed a company and all the claims were amalgamated into the Cascade Falls Mining Company.

O.B. hired Pat Daly as superintendent for various prospecting and development activities, but the early results were not promising. In 1917, Daly told R.K. Neil, an engineer, about the property. Neil travelled to Stewart to size up the project, then contacted Messrs. Trites, Wood and Wilson of Fernie. They, along with Neil, optioned the property from O.B. & Associates for \$115,000. Under Neil's direction, a tunnel was excavated and within a month they had hit high grade. In 1919, American Smelting and Refining bought 52 per cent for a million dollars and put the property into production.

The Guggenheim family, who controlled American Smelting and Refining, were known far and wide as the "Guggies." They were also known as "high-grade and run" operators, and run they did when the ore began deteriorating in 1936, despite the \$23 million in dividends up to that point. The mine, however, stayed alive.

By 1921, camps and facilities had been built, and the aerial tramline for transporting ore and freight was operational. The tramline at Premier operated from the mine to the Salmon River valley over 18 km. There were four cables in view, the top two about 1.8 metres apart and fixed at both ends. These cables bore the weight of the moving cars. The two lower cables were attached to the cars, based on the operating principle that the loaded cars going downhill would pull the empty cars and some freight uphill by a continuous system of pulleys to make the corners. Gravity provided the power. These old-timers were pretty smart – they used an electric motor to launch from a standstill, but once things were underway, a switch would turn the motor into a generator to provide power for the mine. The Premier tramline used a total of 79 km of cable, with 250 baskets hauling 360 kilograms each.

The mill ran 400 tons a day and was supported by a machine shop, welding shop and blacksmith. Although the wages were not very good, people were generally satisfied because they knew the rest of Canada was suffering through the Great Depression.

Although Premier was mainly a gold and silver operation, the miners also found lead and zinc on the lower levels, a commodity much in demand during World War II.

In the 1930s, Premier was a self-contained town with a doctor,



Ticket to ride: the Premier tramline comprised 79 km of cable and 250 baskets.

MORGAN

BRAKE & CLUTCH COMPANY

www.morgan.ca

- > Caliper assemblies
- > Rotors & drums
- > Disc pad & shoe linings
- > Friction materials
- > Air / hydraulic actuators
- > Brake & transmission discs
- > Mill clutches - Eaton/Wichita style
- > Pressure converters
- > Shovel brakes
- > Rebuild kits
- > Complete rebuild facilities

CARLISLE

Industrial
Clutch

Raybestos
The Friction Experts

MIDLAND
HEAVY DUTY SYSTEMS

WELLMAN FRICTION
PRODUCTS

GOETZE

MERITOR

IR Ingersoll Rand

**Now Offering
Industrial
Seating from
KAB/Seating**

Richmond
1.604.247.0035

Prince George
1.800.563.2345

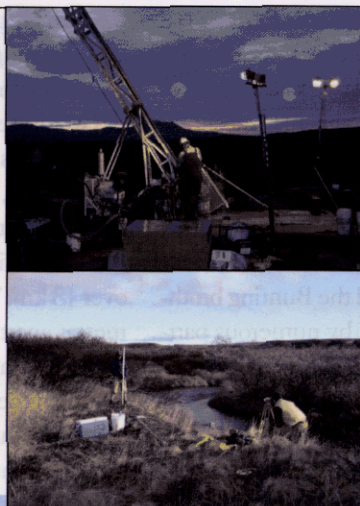
Edmonton
1.780.484.7001

Sparwood
1.250.425.2538

Knight Piésold CONSULTING

*With local knowledge in more than
100 countries, we can help you
work efficiently wherever
your business takes you.*

- Environmental Assessment
- Waste/Water Management
- Tailings Disposal
- Heap Leach Pads
- Cold Regions Engineering
- Mine Reclamation
- Hydrology
- Hydrogeology
- Open Pit Stability
- Risk Assessment



Tel: 604.685.0543 : www.knightpiesold.com

hospital, movie theatre, school, store, tennis courts and a seasonal swimming pool. It was, however, an isolated town during the six months of winter when it was covered in over 12 metres of annual snowfall, although in 1936 the situation improved when the town first had access to large snow removal equipment. During this period, Premier had about 200 employees with 150 living in a seven-storey bunkhouse and about 50 families in various types of housing scattered on the hillside.

One of the many characters at the Premier was Jack Hamer, known as "Jack-hammer." Hamer was an old, broken down miner, deaf as a door nail and, like so many of his ilk, very fond of the bottle. When a miner was beyond his hard working years, the Premier Company would transfer him to an easier job. In Hamer's case he became the King Nipper, the man who transported supplies to the working miners. Explosives, sharp steel, etc. were loaded and pushed on a flat car over the rails to the drift headings, raises and stopes. Hamer was very good at his job but at times he would go on a bender and miss a few shifts. Al Kirby, the underground superintendent, warned Hamer a number of times that he would have to let him go if the benders didn't stop. But Hamer did it again. Kirby called Hamer into the underground office and told him he was fired. Hamer cupped his hand to his ear and said, "Yes, Mr. Kirby. I'll do that right away," and headed off down the drift. Kirby later said that although he had fired a lot of men, trying to fire a deaf one was just about impossible. So Hamer stayed on until the mine closed.

Dale Pitt was the manager from 1921 to 1934. Pitt was an autocrat, as were most managers of his era. He lived in a nice mansion on the hill with Japanese gardens and a Japanese gardener. Tom Lee, an old-time miner who lived his retirement years in Stewart, told a story about one Christmas when two drunken immigrants asked where they could find a bootlegger. Lee pointed at Pitt's mansion and the drunks headed that way. Several days later, Lee

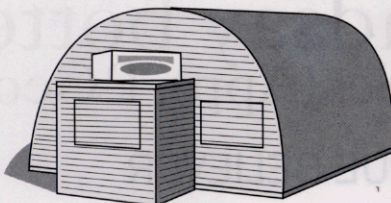
was called into the office and summarily fired. "Pitt just didn't have a sense of humour," he said.

In 1952 Premier closed due to low metal prices, but by 1956 things had improved and a crew was sent in to restore equipment. A welder was repairing things in the mill when his torch ignited the oil-soaked timber and the mill burned to the ground. Many of us thought that would be the end of Premier, but we were wrong.

In 1958, when Julian Berkosia was prospecting in the former upper glory hole of the Premier, he discovered a new very rich vein. With partners Tommy McQuillen and Bob Hutchings, they obtained a one-year lease from the company and commenced shipping raw ore. In that year, the partnership cleared a quarter of a million dollars from about 250 tons of ore grading in the range of 20 oz/ton gold equivalent; one of the ore shipments of 11 coal bags ran 50 oz/ton gold equivalent. The Premier Company then commenced work on the new discovery, known as the Lessor's Lense and comprising 6,694 tons of very rich ore averaging 0.54 oz/ton gold and 12.39 oz/ton silver. By 1964, a 75-ton mill was built at Level 6. Don McLeod was manager – a definite promotion from his earlier mucking days at the mine. In 1965, McLeod left and the Bralorne-Pioneer Company took over management, bringing in Adam O'Krainec as manager. Bralorne-Pioneer managed the mine until it closed in the early 1970s.

In 1981, Westmin Resources took over the Premier operation and, after years of diamond drilling, decided to put the mine back into production as an open-pit operation. In 1989, a 1,500-ton-per-day mill was built and for seven years the ore from both Premier and the nearby Big Missouri properties were milled. From three million tons of ore, Westmin produced 260,000 ounces of gold and five million ounces of silver. The mine has been idle since the mid-1990s, but exploration activity continues today on many properties in the area. ■

Weaver & Devore TRADING LIMITED



SINCE 1936

Specializing in

- Camp Orders
- Camp Supplies
- Groceries • Dry Goods
- Hardware • Men's Wear
- Work Boots

Phone (867) 873-2219

Fax (867) 873-9020

www.weaverdevore.ca

Email: sales@weaverdevore.ca

3601 Weaver Drive,
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2J5

Eagle Mapping Group



- Aerial Photography
- GPS Survey Control
- Digital Topographical and Orthophoto Mapping • Scanning
- Aerotriangulation

Contact Us for a Quotation and Timing
Eagle Mapping Ltd. is
ISO 9001:2000 Registered

Quality Management System In Place

Canada:

Toll Free in Canada/USA:

877.942.5551

Ph: 604.942.5551

info@eaglemapping.com

Chile:

56-2.334.3677

gsv@eaglemapping.cl

Peru:

51-1.226.2615

eagle@terra.com.pe

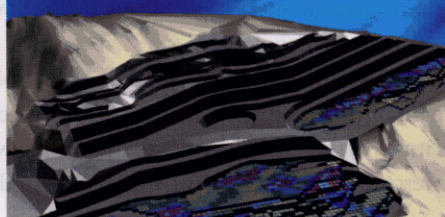
eaglemapping.com



mining software specialists

Surpac Vision
Quarry
XplorPac
MineSched
Sirovision

www.surpac.com



Computer Software,
Hardware & Network
Solutions Provider for
the Mining and
Exploration industry
since 1995.

Mining Industry Clients include:

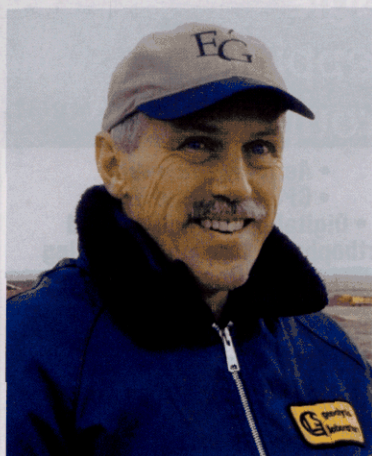
Eurozinc Mining Corporation
Foundex Explorations Limited
Golden Queen Mining Company
Gold-Ore Resources Limited
Huckleberry Mines
Imperial Metals Corporation
Kemess Mine
Nordic Diamonds
Quadra Mining
Robinson Mine

Tel: 604 535 1182

Fax: 604 535 4432

www.cronostechology.ca

info@cronostechology.ca



The quintessential geologist: Lindsay Bottomer touring a property in Mongolia.

lindsay bottomer, M.Sc. (App), P.Geo

A TRUE BELIEVER

Lindsay Bottomer, VP, Evaluations, at Entrée Gold Inc. and former president and CEO of Southern Rio Resources, is the quintessential geologist, both in his passion for the profession and his belief in the critical contribution of mineral exploration and extraction to the fabric of our society. Australian by birth, he boomeranged between Canada and his homeland for two decades before settling in Vancouver in 1989 as a member of Murray Pezim's Prime Capital Corp. team. He took a few moments from his busy agenda to answer some questions for *Mining Review*.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE A CAREER IN MINERAL EXPLORATION?

I was interested in natural history and science. I wanted to work outdoors and travel, and my career as a geologist has given me the opportunity to do all of these.

YOU'VE BEEN IN THE INDUSTRY FOR 30 YEARS, THEREFORE HAVE EXPERIENCED BOTH THE CREST OF THE WAVE AND THE TROUGH. WHAT KEEPS YOU IN THE GAME?

My driving force is the basic belief that the discovery and extraction of mineral resources is a worthwhile contribution to society. Our society is based on natural products, minerals and metals being one of the major components. The world needs explorationists to find mineral deposits and to exploit them in a safe and environmentally sensible way, be it in Canada, Mongolia or wherever.

WHAT ASPECT OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE DO YOU ENJOY THE MOST?

I enjoy the challenge of continually collecting new information and refining ideas and hypothesis to come up with a better model for whatever property we are exploring. It's like playing a game of chess with nature. I also enjoy the people; the variety of people I meet through the course of a day is one of the biggest pluses.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE FACING THE INDUSTRY IN B.C. TODAY?

In the Lower Mainland, there is a large body of people who believe that B.C. does not need extractive industries such as mining and forestry. Some of the negative press we receive is very hurtful because the geologists I know regard themselves as environmentalists; we are there in the outdoors more than most people and fully appreciate the fragility of the world. Groups such as the B.C. and Yukon Chamber of Mines and the Mining Association have to educate people so that they realize that much of their prosperity is in part due to the spin-off benefits from resource industries.

WHAT IS THE BEST ADVICE YOU CAN GIVE A GEOLOGY STUDENT?

Don't go into geology if you are looking for monetary reward or stability. We can't guarantee either because of the cyclical nature of the industry. If you truly love the science, that will sustain you through the lean times. Always keep in mind that the world is not oversupplied with quality resources, therefore there will be a continual demand for natural resources.

YOU WERE PRESIDENT OF THE B.C. & YUKON CHAMBER OF MINES FROM 1998 TO 2000, A PERIOD IN WHICH THE INDUSTRY WAS AT A VERY LOW POINT. WHAT WERE YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGES?

Most of my time as president was spent fighting rearguard battles with the provincial government. We had to fight to remain an industry-in-being so that when the next upturn came we could bounce back and once again be a significant part of the B.C. economic picture.

YOU HAVE BEEN VERY ACTIVE IN THE B.C. CHAPTER OF THE ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL ENGINEERS AND GEOSCIENTISTS (APEG). WHY IS THIS ORGANIZATION IMPORTANT TO YOU?

I became actively involved with APEG in the 1990s after the Bre-X debacle, which showed how lax the industry had been with self-policing. To practise in B.C., geoscientists now have to be registered with APEGBC and abide by a code of ethics. The same applies in other provinces, but since each jurisdiction has different rules, there is a move to have a national registration that would enable geologists to work freely throughout Canada.

HOW DO YOU UNWIND AT THE END OF THE DAY?

My wife is good at keeping me grounded in the real world! I referee rugby games and when I am running around a field with 30 athletic young players, the office is the farthest thing from my mind. ■