

520494

SUMMARY HISTORY
OF
BRITANNIA BEACH MINING OPERATION



This material is provided
through the Educational staff
of the B.C. Museum of Mining

"HISTORICAL DATES" OF THE BRITANNIA MINE

- 1859 Captain Richards surveying B.C. coast for British Admiralty named Mountain for 100 gun frigate "Britannia".
- 1888 Mine discovered by Dr. A.A. Forbes, medical doctor, stationed at Hopkins, B.C.
- 1905 Mill completed and first mine production from the Jane and the East Bluff.
- 1912 Beach store and many houses built on the flats.
- 1915 Upper, or 1050 Camp at the Jane wiped out by a mudslide - 56 lives lost.
Tunnel Camp built (Mount Sheer Camp).
No. 2 mill of 2,000 ton capacity completed.
- 1921 In March the temporarily idle No. 2 mill burned down.
- 1923 No. 3 mill completed.
- 1930 Britannia's peak year - reached 7,100 t.p.d. and 44,000,000 pounds of copper produced for the year. Over 1200 employees on payroll during 1930's.
- 1949 Road connection to Squamish
- 1952 Road completed to Townsite - later called Mount Sheer.
- 1956 September: The Pacific Great Eastern Railway started regular passenger service to North Vancouver.
- 1958 March: operations suspended because of low copper prices.
- 1959 Operations resumed.
- 1963 The Anaconda Company acquired Britannia property.
- 1964 Employees went on strike on August 11.
- 1965 March 2, settlement of strike, with the Assistance of the Minister of Mines, the Honourable Donald Brothers. Resumption of operations on curtailed basis.
- 1968 Start of the No. 10 Shaft
- 1970 October 1 - expected start of production from the new No. 10 Mine.
- 1974 October - notification to all employees that the mine was closing. Final shift, - November 1, 1974.

The Britannia property is situated about 20 air miles north of Vancouver on the east shore of Howe Sound, and is accessible by Pacific Great Eastern Railroad, by car or bus on the paved Seaview Highway, and by boat.

The history of Britannia is well documented in government reports, mining magazines, and some occurrences have made world news. Between 1925-30, Britannia was rated as the largest copper mine in the British Empire. To the end of 1969 it had produced 1,269,926,000 pounds of copper.

From the start in 1905, Britannia Beach was the base of all milling operations. In mining this billion pounds of copper, 50,538,671 tons of ore were dug out of Britannia Mountain and hauled to the concentrator at the Beach where it was crushed, ground, milled and the valuable minerals separated out. Besides copper, approximately a quarter billion pounds of zinc, over five million ounces of silver, over 450,000 ounces of gold and more than 700,000 tons of pyrite were extracted. The rejected waste **rock** was poured into the sea until a small market was found for its use in the making of cement.

In getting out all this metal, the mountain has been riddled with tunnels, and other mine headings; some 140 miles of development workings, extending from the top of the mountain, 4,350 feet above sea level, to the lowest workings 1,300 feet below sea level. In the past, the men who did all this work lived in several camps located close to the orebodies which lie in a general easterly direction from the Beach. Later all workers either lived at the Beach or commuted daily from Vancouver, Squamish and other centres.

EARLY HISTORY

Captain Richards, surveying the B.C. Coast in 1859, for the British Admiralty, named the mountain situated behind the actual townsite, Britannia, after the 100 gun frigate in his command.

The original mineral discovery was made by Dr. A.A. Forbes in 1888. Dr. Forbes was a medical practitioner stationed near Hopkins Landing. He travelled to Britannia Creek in a small boat accompanied by a fisherman named Granger. The doctor later **bought** the fisherman's share in the discovery in exchange for a small boat. He returned to his discovery the following summers, prospected, did a small amount of development work and tried to interest capital. Five years later he moved up the coast and made another discovery on Texada Island.

While showing this to Thomas T. Turner of Vancouver in 1897, he described his Britannia discovery. This led to the serious development of the prospect. Turner met Oliver Furry (after whom Furry Creek was named) and in 1898 they staked five claims.

Incredibly, these original claims have produced the bulk of Britannia ore. Turner then made a deal with Boscovitz & Sons, of Victoria, and sold a half interest for \$10,000.

In 1899, these claims were surveyed with two fractions added to make a solid group. A pack trail was built from the Beach, and a camp established on Jane Flats. Prospecting was done and a 150 foot tunnel was driven. Turner now managed to sell a 7/10 interest in the property for \$35,000. to Walters of Libby; Montana, and the balance to G. Robinson of Butte, Montana, for \$53,000. (Notice how even before 1900, it was American capital that was interested.) The property also included one lot of 75 acres at the Beach.

In 1900 the property was visited by W.M. Brewer of the Engineering and Mining Journal, who must have been something of a prophet, gifted with second sight. After touring the snow covered rocky hills, he reported that "If the property was worked under careful management, with a sufficiently large capital to install necessary machinery, and with a large force of men, Britannia ought to develop into a producing mine of great capacity."

At this date, January, 1900, Britannia Copper Syndicate was organized to develop the property. Robinson bought out Walters' share, gained control of the Syndicate, and increased its capitalization. He took on the active direction of the company. In 1904, an aerial tram was built from the dock at the Beach to the Halfway, (11,800 feet) and from the Halfway to the terminal at the main camp, (8,000 feet). A pole line carrying power, alongside the tramway, was erected, and water licenses on Britannia Creek obtained. An upper tram terminal, where the ore could be crushed and sorted, was built; along with a concentrating plant at the Beach. Then an office, stores, hotel, and some houses added - also at the Beach.

Robinson now interested a New York banker, Grant B. Schley, in the venture. He organized the Howe Sound Company under the laws of the State of Maine, and it became the holding company for the Britannia Copper Syndicate in 1903.

By 1905, the Mine, tram, and mill were operating and a shipment was made to the Crofton Smelter on Vancouver Island. This smelter, and a lease on the Mount Andrew Mine on Prince of Wales Island, were bought by the Britannia Smelting Company.

There is little to report for several years. The Company did not do very well. Its mill was unable to make a satisfactory product and the mine was slow in developing good ore. In 1908, the Britannia Copper Syndicate and the Britannia Smelting Company

were merged under the latter's charter. The new company was known as the Britannia Mining and Smelting Company Limited. It wasn't until 1915 that the Britannia Syndicate was wound up and other companies included, i.e., the Britannia Land Company Limited, Britannia Power Company Limited, and Howe Sound Power Company (South Valley).

In 1910, an exploratory working off the Mammoth Bluff cut a Fairview vein, (Fairview outcrops were known, but inaccessible) and with a fresh impetus, development surged ahead.

There was, of course, extensive prospecting going on over the whole area. Of these, the Empress group developed the only other mine. The company staked, and bought claims until 1915. With few claims from tide water, on Howe Sound, to east of Indian River - comprising some 25,000 acres, 485 crown granted claims and 17 Beach lots, and 8 timber licenses.

All work except Fairview development stopped; and the only drawback to more tonnage was the aerial tram which was handling only 500 tons per day. In 1912, a new low tunnel was started at the 2200 Level. By 1913, plans were made for a Townsite at the 2200 Level. The tunnel was completed and shaft (No. 1) and raise (68) were going up. A railway was also planned to handle the new ore, and replace the aerial tram. By the end of 1914, the railway to the top of the incline was finished and the incline part three-quarters done. Hoists for the incline cable car and No. 1 Shaft, were on the property.

At this time, the camp on Jane Creek Flat was the base for mine operations. It was crowded. The mine was developing rapidly, and this small flat was home for several miners. The camp consisted of four bunkhouses; and a large cookhouse, a Jap' bunkhouse, warehouse, stable, tram terminal, crusher house, office, compressor and powerhouse, blacksmith shop, candle house, and powder magazine. There were numerous single family dwellings, a small school and also a tennis court. All the buildings were connected by wooden covered walkways - even the track joining the Jane and Mammoth Bluff mines to the crusher tram terminal was roofed in. This was necessary because of the very heavy snow-falls.

Almost all this material was brought up on the aerial tram. The horse trail from the Beach was pretty rugged, particularly the last mile and a half, which climbed 1,200 feet. It was this horse trail which the miners and their wives walked, carrying their babies, on the few occasions they travelled to Vancouver. Another deterrent to "trips out" was the fact that the mine worked seven days a week - three shifts a day at this time - and continued to do so, until legislation, the Hours of Work Act, in 1934, necessitated a change.

It was here, at midnight, Sunday, March 21, 1915, that a catastrophic slide wiped out about half the camp. With no warning whatsoever, the whole side of the mountain above the camp gave way. In this slide, 56 lost their lives. Most of the bodies were never recovered. Twenty-two were severely injured. The biggest loss of life occurred when the messhouse was crushed. All this occurred in pitch dark when there was four feet of snow on the ground. The camp did not recover from this blow, and was for the most part abandoned.

This disaster only stopped production for three months. During that time, a new tram terminal was built next to the surface railway. The raise system from 2200 Level to 1050 was completed. Bunkhouses and a cookhouse were erected at the Tunnel Camp alongside the Powerhouse.

The year 1915 was probably the most active ever on the property. Much of the Tunnel Camp was built, including the store, office, and hospital. The dams on Britannia, the bins on the Incline were completed, and the locomotives and cars brought to the surface railway.

The next year, 1916, the club building, an extension to the bunkhouse, a school, 40 more houses, an extension to the compressor plant and a house for the superintendent were built. Other additions to the camp came more slowly, but in the next 14 years, two more bunkhouses were built, a gymnasium, 4 apartment blocks of 16 units, a staff house erected, and a copper plant built (1927). A swimming pool, finished in 1930, completed the building at the Townsite, until a brief period in 1952, when the buildings of the Incline Camp were moved into the lower end of town to increase the housing facilities.

While the Townsite or Tunnel Camp was growing, the Beach Camp was also growing, though at a much slower pace. By 1912, there were a large number of cottages on the "flats", and the big store was put up. The mill was treating 600 tons a day, and produced 14,000,000 pounds of copper. That year the Crofton smelter was closed down because there was not enough feed - the new flotation process had reduced the tonnage. The next year, 1913, the club building was put up, and 30 more cottages built. There was regular, daily boat service to Vancouver.

1914 saw the erection of the No. 2 mill and new wharf bunkers. Then war was declared, the copper market was demoralized, and operations were almost halted.

In 1915, the second 1,000 ton unit of No. 2 mill was completed, and the Canadian Government Telegraph office opened, but the slide at the Jane Camp, and an acute shortage of manpower made it a very poor year.

1916, with old and new mills operating, 3,000 tons per day were milled, and the general office and warehouse built.

During 1917, the Customs house was built, and a cloudburst took out the incline railway for almost a month.

In 1920, due to the recession following the war, the mill was shut down and only development crews kept on. The payroll was cut from 1,000 to 250. The railway crew continued to supply the Townsite, and concrete storage bins for development ore were built.

1921, the idle mill was destroyed by fire in March, and seven months later, half the Beach Camp was destroyed by a flood. On the night of October 28th, water impounded by the railroad fill at the Townsite, broke down the wall and surged down the creek. There had been very heavy rains - approximately 6 inches - on top of some snow. This great wall of water washed all before it out to sea. Thirty-seven were killed, 15 seriously injured, and over 50 houses destroyed.

The following year, 15 new houses were built on higher ground near the railroad connection with the incline.

By 1923, a new mill was completed, which replaced the one destroyed by fire, and a new transportation system for ore, eliminating the incline, was installed.

In 1930, Britannia's peak year, 7,100 tons per day were milled with a production of more than 44,000,000 pounds of copper. To handle the increased production of the mill, larger shops were built, and in 1929 a foundry was added. These shops were capable of making anything used on the property, as well as repairing them. For a period, balls for the mill were made out of rails by a "slug" plant which turned them out between worms, but this job was later done in the foundry.

Then the depression came. With copper down to 5¢ a pound, the organization was cut to the bone, and employment dropped from 1,000 in 1930 to 400 in mid-1933. But during the depression years, additional accommodation was provided. The Beach hotel, which burned down in 1933, was compensated for by additional rooms added to the store building, until a new hotel and dining room could be built. New Style bunkhouses, the Ritz and the Savoy were completed, followed later by two others.

By 1938, production was back to 6,000 tons per day and 1,324 persons were employed.

The Second World War did not affect the copper market as did the First one, but the attraction of armed forces, and higher paid

industries - especially shipbuilding, caused the labour force to shrink steadily. One year 1,152 men quit, and Britannia was hiring just about anyone who could walk. In mid-1946, with only 400 men on the payroll, a labour strike occurred which lasted from July 1st to October 21st.

A swimming pool was built at the Beach, and by 1949 the road had been completed into the Beach from Squamish. Gradually, roads were built around the Beach and the Surface crew started using trucks. A road was built to handle backfill to the No. 8 Mine, and the first mile to the Townsite was then completed.

In 1950, a group of 16 "Honeymoon" apartments were built across from the school and a new Community Church was constructed. The 4100 yard area was built up with a large "dry" (men's change room), framing shed, car and locomotive barn, powder magazine, etc.

With the increased use of lumber (timber) in No. 8 Mine, and the rapidly increasing cost of timber, it was decided in 1950 to use company timber, which was very abundant along the old mine wagon road, and a site was chosen about one mile above the 4100 yard for a mill. In order to eliminate the cost of operating the surface and incline railways, which was increasing with the cost of labour, the road to the Townsite was started in 1951, and completed during Easter 1952.

The foregoing outlines the growth and development of the two main camps, but there were numerous other camps built and operated as the need arose, and then abandoned.

From 1916 on, the company did extensive surface prospecting. In 1919 ore was found on Victoria claim. This ore was developed during the shutdown of 1920-1922. This area was accessible only by trail up Furry Creek - seven miles from tidewater or through the mine via 1600 level, which was connected to No. 1 Shaft in 1918.

In the spring of 1921, a crew living in tents, put up a saw-mill, cut logs, and built a camp, which was occupied in October. This camp at its peak had 300 men. There was a tram line built to the 1600 portal, which carried the Victoria ore to the mill.

An extensive logging operation developed as the Victoria mine required a great deal of timber. A good part of the surface crew were Japanese who stayed in a separate building and also occupied a bunkhouse at 1600 portal.

In 1924, the Victoria mine was connected to the other mine working on 2200 Level and the tram no longer needed for handling ore. The tram was extended to other portals on that side of the mountain. Victoria was isolated, only accessible through the mine and up the shaft. There were no women at all. Two pool

tables, a card room and a bowling alley were the recreational outlets. There was also a good library and books were exchanged with the Tunnel camp library. Radio reception was good, but not popular in the bunkhouse, as there was always someone sleeping. Chinese cooks did a good job. The camp was closed in 1933 and re-opened in 1936 for a few years until it was closed down during the war years for want of crews.

On a flat near the top of Britannia Mountain, in a beautiful location, was the Barbara Camp. Here, in 1916, at the 500 foot level, two bunkhouses were built for 80 men. There was also a house for the foreman and his wife, a stable, powder magazine, etc. The camp had a pool table, card rooms, running water in each room and hot water heating. The men here worked the glory holes on top of the mountain. Generally, the camp was greatly reduced during the winter months, because of the snow, and was closed permanently in 1933.

In 1917 bunkhouses were built at Empress, 1000 Level, and Beta; 1600 Level portals. These large buildings housed 40 men each. The dry and furnace were on the lower floor, the pool-room, dining room and kitchen on the second floor, with the rooms on the third and fourth floors. The Empress was closed in 1933, but re-opened in 1939 for a few years. The Beta camp burned to the ground in 1926.

At the head, or top of the Incline, there was a camp, first for crews working on the incline and driving the 2700 tunnel, and later for the crews hauling and crushing the ore. This was started in 1917 with two 3 room houses. Later, 7 houses and another two-storey house were added. It, too, was closed for a period, 1933-37. In 1938, a large bunkhouse, a dry and a hotel were built. These crews used the Townsite recreational facilities, but had a library and card rooms of their own.

Above and below the Incline were camps on Mineral Creek. There was the Goldsmith or Daisy camp, a group of log cabins at about 1600 Level where tunnels (2), and a large amount of trenching was done in 1911. Below was the Seaview Camp at 3100 Level and 3250 Level, and the raises for the 4100 Level were driven by men who lived there. This was occupied 1919-24.

In 1925 a camp was established, approximately a mile up Furry Creek from Victoria, the Fairwest Camp. This housed a crew who developed a prospect in the mountain south of the creek. It was abandoned the next year, and was used by the Vancouver Water Board guard until 1940.

And finally, there was the camp on Seymour Creek at the bank of Vancouver - Saulter's Cabins.

The Townsite, by 1950, had 143 housing units and beds for 350 in 3 bunkhouses and hotel, and its population was approximately 850. Located high in a mountain valley, where the annual snowfall amounts to as high as 30 feet, and the surrounding mountains prevent the sun from reaching it for two months every year, it was isolated - though just 20 air miles from Vancouver. Its connection to the outside was a narrow gauge railroad, in incline cable cars, and the Union Steamships' Line.

But, there was no dearth of entertainment or employment. There were many local organizations, some short lived, and some lasting as long as there was a town. The Community Club was the father of all the organizations. Everybody was a dues-paying member, and had privileges of club rooms, kitchenette, library, reading room, pool room, gymnasium with a professional instructor, swimming pool and tennis courts.

Traditional annual events were the New Year's Ball, Burns Night Dance, First Aid Competition, July 1st Celebration, Hallowe'en party and Christmas Dance. In between times there were innumerable card parties, two movies weekly, frequent dances and many hobby clubs. It was an ideal place for people to develop their own talents, and the place had more "characters" per unit than any other camp.

There was little difference in housing - everyone's house was about the same. The rent was low-\$1.00 per room, with free water and cheap electricity, and no taxes. There were no old people, or retired couples, no unemployed. Peddlers were carefully checked at the main office, and were few and far between. There were no thieves, no one locked their doors. There was no juvenile delinquency - parents were told to straighten out their children, or get out. The church was unusual in that Protestants and Catholics occupied the same building; and there was excellent co-operation between them. There was no graveyard.

All night poker games occurred after every pay day. They were deadly serious; stakes were high, and many a complete cheque changed hands. There were always bootleggers.

The Beach community, while not so isolated, developed along very similar lines and most organizations were duplicated in the two camps.

In 1954 things began to change at the Beach, to make way for the road and the P.G.E. railroad. This meant tearing down some houses and moving others. Some fourteen new houses were built to replace the old manager's residence. The following year, nineteen others, and similar units, were added. In the fall of 1956 the P.G.E. began regular service through the country, and along the coast of Howe Sound, and for two years Britannia was the biggest passenger point on the line. With the arrival of the passenger trains, the twice daily service of steamers to Vancouver was stopped, and a real link with the past severed.

In 1956 and in 1957, the Company was having a difficult time to adjust to the lower metal prices, and early in 1958 had moved the site of all its operations to the Beach to consolidate its position. However, at the end of February the directors decided to close it down because of a further drop in copper to 19 cents, and by the end of March, 1958, the Britannia Mining and Smelting Company Limited was employing only ten men. During the shutdown the place was closed up, scrap and idle machines sold and the Townsite, or Mount Sheer Camp, about emptied. The Company then divested itself of housing and stores.

On August 8, 1958, the Company went into voluntary liquidation and its assets returned to the parent company, the Howe Sound Company.

By the end of 1958 the metal market seemed promising and a new contract was signed with the Union for two years. On re-opening, thanks to the road, it was not necessary to re-open the bunkhouse; the shops were reduced in scale to take advantage of the larger shops in Vancouver, and the foundry was not re-opened.

At first, the high grade portions of the ore bodies were mined with the thought of salvaging the operation for a few profitable years, but, as the operation developed, it became apparent that the possibility of finding further ore had not been exhausted.

In 1962 negotiations were started with the Anaconda Company (Canada) Ltd., and in January, 1963, all the properties and assets of the Howe Sound Company at Britannia Beach were sold to Anaconda.

Operations were brought to a halt, and exploration curtailed as a result of a strike which commenced on August 11, 1964. The strike continued for almost seven months; agreement was reached with the assistance of the Minister of Mines, the Honorable Donald Brothers, on March 2, 1965.

During the strike, the equipment had been removed from the mine, and the lower levels allowed to flood. After settlement the equipment was re-installed, the mine pumped out, and mining was resumed at a curtailed rate of production.

The mill was started up on the first of June and operated, after a build-up period at a rate of approximately 50,000 tons a month.

The road to the old Jane Camp was completed and all the old glory holes made accessible by four-wheel drive vehicles, even to the Barbara Camp. This was followed by an extensive sampling campaign and, in 1967, a large amount of ore was brought down from the Jane Flats to the mill by truck.

A new copper plant of the launder type was built on the old railway grade at Mount Sheer and put into operation late in 1965. That winter, all the houses in the area were burnt down due to their deteriorated condition.

On Hallowe'en 1966 a fire destroyed half of the 4100 dry building. It was quickly rebuilt and by the end of 1967, had two more sections added. Again on Hallowe'een 1967, a flood of Mineral Creek spilled into the 4100 yard and buried the industrial area.

The exploration work of Anaconda finally paid off and a large new orebody was located west of the No. 8 mine. Development of this started in earnest when a new shaft was collared in March, 1969. By the end of the year it was complete above the 4100 Level and almost complete to the 5700 Level.

At the beginning of 1969, the Britannia operations of The Anaconda Company (Canada) Ltd. were transferred to Anaconda Britannia Mines Ltd. Extensive surface and underground operations were made to improve the operation. New equipment was purchased and the townsite cleaned up.

The day of December 23, 1969, saw Victoria Hoist shut down and the mine closed except for some stoping on the 4100 Level.

1971 was British Columbia's Centennial and the Britannia Centennial Committee began plans for a small Museum to be built. The Anaconda Corporation turned over a portion of their land and paid for the construction of the museum building. From this modest start, the B.C. Museum of Mining became a reality.

In 1974 the mine was operated 24 hours per day on a 5 day week, with week-end maintenance, using a labour force of 140 underground workers. Surface personnel such as concentrator operators, maintenance engineers, office staff and managers brought the total work force to just over 240 persons.

In the fall of 1974, it was announced by the Company that, due to a combination of limited ore reserves, rising costs and reduced prices on the world copper market, the mine would close. The last shift went underground on November 1st, ending the colourful 69 year history here at Britannia Beach.

With this record of 69 years of production the Britannia mine ranked as the oldest continuously operated mine in B.C. and one of the oldest in Canada. At one time it was the largest producer of any copper mine in the British Empire. In its lifetime 1.4 billion pounds of copper was recovered from 55 million tons of ore.