

CHARLIE BREFALT: DISCOVERER OF THE ELSA JEWEL

Prepared by Jane Gaffin



Charlie Brefalt
1886 - 1970

"The Brefalt story exemplifies the initiative that spurs men onward through years of hard work to justly-deserved success," wrote Dr. Aaro Aho in his manuscript *The History of Keno Hill Mining District*. "(Brefalt) was honest, honorable and rightly proud."

It was a February day in 1917 when Charlie Brefalt (Hall of Fame) surfaced after an eight-hour shift in the Pueblo Mine and picked up his final pay from mine superintendent J.E. Berg.

The Pueblo was a soggy mine and Brefalt refused to work underground one more agonizing day. The timbers were taking weight.

His fears that tons of rock were going to fall on his head had fallen on deaf management ears. He was quitting. But he wouldn't be missed. He was just another Pueblo statistic for transient worker turnover.

Brefalt had worked nearly a year at the Pueblo Mine, located on the Whitehorse copper belt in the Porter Creek valley. He had been lured North in the spring by romantic tales of adventure spun by miners in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Now restlessness twitched in the 30-year-old Brefalt again. It was time to move on.

Brefalt's hardrock mining career had started in the western United States in 1909 after he migrated from Amotfors, Sweden, where he was born September 21, 1886, and could expect only a boring life as a store clerk.

He slipped off to Colorado to visit friends and learned to sink shafts and drive tunnels. He saved his pay and grubstaked his own energetic prospecting ventures in the hills of several western states.

After a year at the Pueblo, he again had saved enough cash to go look at the Klondike region and the Stewart River valley. Maps and reports suggested the geology might be similar to the Coeur d'Alene mining district.

Prospecting would be pleasant when the snows melted and much safer than mining the Pueblo. He left in the nick of time. A month later, the disastrous Pueblo cave-in buried six men for eternity on March 21, 1917. (See full story in **Cashing In**).

Brefalt independently mined the Klondike gold fields for three years and sank \$1,200 in debt. "The harder I worked, the poorer I got," he said. "All the gold had already been tucked inside the bank vaults."

He snow-shoed to the Stewart River area, where, in September, 1919, the Guggenheims (Honour Roll) were preparing to excavate the Keno silver property and had put up tents above timberline, built cabins and were mobilizing supplies from Dawson City.

With money from a contract to drive Keno's No. 1 tunnel, Brefalt paid off his accumulated Klondike debts and went independent again, prospecting in the vicinity of Keno Hill in the central Yukon.

Dr. Aho described Keno Hill as jutting up over 6,000 feet between Christal Creek and the head waters of Lightning Creek, a Duncan Creek tributary, and lies northeast of Galena Hill, a massive green mound in the central Yukon's mountainous plateau. The rich silver-lead veins, unknown by early-day prospectors, were covered in places by several hundred feet of permafrost. The unknown veins trailed upward from the valley, crossed Galena Hill and looped Keno Hill.

In March, 1922, Brefalt took a lease on Bert Lamb's Gambler claim which Livingston Wernecke (Honour Roll), consulting geologist and engineer for Alaska Treadwell, had first opened up with a short adit in June, 1921 and then had abandoned after spending the \$10,000 as required by an option agreement.

A little ore had been exposed in the bottom of the drift. Lamb carried on until the showing widened out and he asked Brefalt to join him. The two men mined out the pocket, hoisted 70 tons of ore to the top of the hill and the Guggenheims' Keno Hill Mining Limited took the ore to one of its smelters in Washington. The returns were enough to pay expenses with a bit left over to embark on other mining ventures.

Wernecke, who became general manager of Treadwell Yukon, was the one greatest factor keeping the independent prospectors alive. He pampered the responsible ones by doling out money during flush times. If the company bank account was ragged, he offered tools and equipment in lieu of cash.

About 1925, he remembered the "Elsa" teasing Brefalt and went up Galena Hill to see him. Brefalt's newest jewel was a strong, well-mineralized vein which Wernecke suspected to have additional ore shoots.

Wernecke thought Brefalt's asking price of \$250,000 was too much money for the work done. Brefalt knew Wernecke had a reputation for refusing to haggle option prices. In the past, Wernecke's policy had been never to re-open a discussion about a property if his fair offer had been initially rejected.

It was while Wernecke was busy mill-building, Brefalt had been investigating Galena Hill and found good mineralization on the claim he named Elsa for his sister, and later was the name adopted for the company town.

After digging through three feet of overburden to the vein, Brefalt remarked, "I picked up ore like potatoes." Brefalt trenched, hired men, cut wood, started a road and went 500 feet next door to stake the Lucky Strike, worth 3,000 ounces of silver per ton.

In time, he appropriately tagged another good claim "No Cash" because he had to borrow \$10 to file it with the government mining recorder.

Wernecke had grandiose plans for Elsa and convinced the government in 1928 that a winter road was needed...he then needed a bridge over Galena Creek's lower canyon...and how about a right-of-way for an ore haul.

While Wernecke planned, Brefalt high-graded the Elsa, leaving a 20-foot millable ore width and an inch of untouched high grade. He then sent a message to Treadwell's office with: "I've gone as far as I can."

Wernecke offered \$150,000 for it. The offer, plus the ore Brefalt had shipped and a \$10,000 development contract with Wernecke, added up to his original quarter-million-dollar asking price for Treadwell's richest mine. But finding each new ore shoot proved extremely costly.

The mining industry enjoyed a 1934 resurgence when silver gradually climbed to 64 cents an ounce. Treadwell Yukon had an agreement to mill Keno Hill Mining's ore from the Lucky Queen and Sadie-Ladue. The visible mining and shipping ore was exhausted. Treadwell had shut down the mill on Keno Hill in November, 1932, and relocated it to Galena Hill where the company mined Silver King and Elsa ore by 1936.

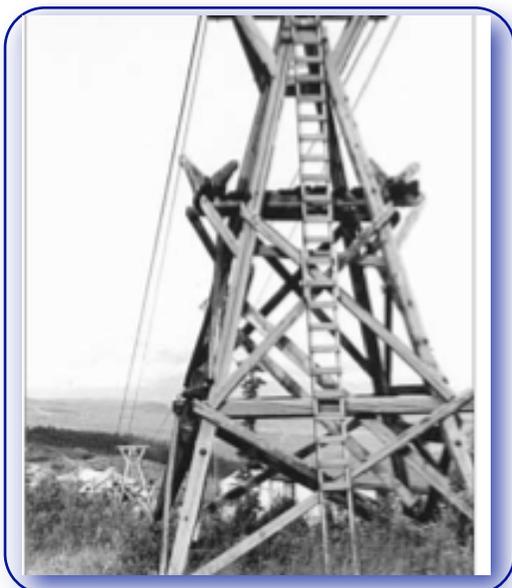
On Galena Hill near Elsa were the promising Hector and Calumet properties of 1920 vintage. A great branching fissure zone faulted the Calumet's quartzite and split against the Hector fault, rejoining it in three rich veins.

The Hector was operated for two years before the death of one of the owners launched the estate into litigation that prevented negotiating an option. Treadwell opened the adjoining Calumet--a manna to the ore plight.

Wernecke feasted on his assessment that enough ore was blocked out to keep going for several years. Road maintenance was proving costly between the mines, though. He ordered an aerial tramline built by Alfred Schellinger (Honour Roll), who had resumed employment as manager of the Elsa after a separation with Treadwell Yukon because of a tiff with Wernecke.



First shaft on Clem Sinyard's Hector claim, Galena Hill, 1935, (l to r): Charles Brefalt, Malcolm McCown, Nick Milosevich, Elmer Gustaveson, Clem Sinyard (Hall of Fame).(Alfred Schellinger Photo Collection, Yukon Archives).



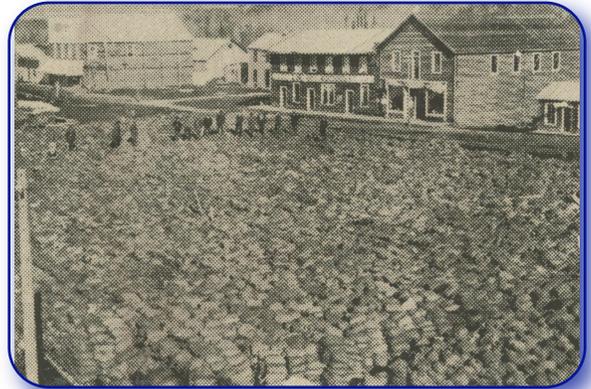
John Scott, a shy University of Washington mining engineer, used a mining engineer's handbook and a U.S. Bureau of Mines' tramline bulletin as guides to design and supervise the construction of 14,500 feet of line draping 15 degrees downhill over 42 towers.

A third of the way down, buckets loaded ore from the No Cash before clanking into Elsa, where the mill had been relocated in 1936. Both mines had been discovered by Brefalt.

Towers and lines to tramline, completed 1939 (Jane Gaffin Photo, 1974)

Concentrates were trucked to Mayo's waterfront to await the sidestream, shallow-draft riverboats to take the ore to Stewart Crossing for transfer on to larger sternwheelers going up the Yukon River for railhead at Whitehorse.

Endless stacks of Treadwell Yukon ore sacks piled on the Mayo docks over winter awaiting the season's first riverboats, November 1927.



Mining again suffered a major setback. Lead was worthless. Silver prices dropped drastically. The United States refused to buy foreign silver.

As the Second World War hovered in sight, Treadwell Yukon began an avid search for tungsten, one of the few marketable metals of the day. After investigating a tungsten property at Hyder, Alaska, Wernecke and his pilot, Chuck Gropstis, were killed in an airplane crash on the British Columbia coast near Milbanke Sound in October 21, 1941.

It was the same year Treadwell Yukon had shut down operations in northern Canada. Yet the San Francisco office contacted Charlie Brefalt, whom Wernecke had highly regarded, and offered him a lease on the company's Elsa mine. He started working it again, following the smaller shoots of ore that Treadwell had not touched.

Brefalt continued mining the lease with Elmer Gustaveson and made a good profit for another four years until Fred Connell's Conwest Exploration and Frobisher Exploration Company, an offspring of Thayer Lindsley's Ventures Ltd., co-sponsored a new business in 1945 called Keno Hill Mining Company (not to be confused with the Guggenheims' Keno Hill Mining Limited).

Brefalt had been one of few men who had managed to produce ore out of his Elsa lease when all else was closed during most of the 1940s. Production resumed when Keno Hill Mining Company was reorganized into United Keno Hill Mines in 1948.

In 1950, Brefalt took sick and spent most of the summer recuperating in the Mayo hospital. In the fall, he went to Toronto to sell a fraction claim to a company for \$30,000. While in the big Ontario city, he was seized with a paralytic stroke and had to spend three months in the hospital there.

In 1954, at age 68, he had to give up the Yukon. He retired in moderate climes near Gibson's Landing north of Vancouver.

In 1963, after his third wife died, he returned to his original home at Amotfors, Sweden, where he prospected the hills near his home until he died in October, 1970. He was 84.

See related articles: *Livingston Wernecke: An Idol in the Yukon Mining Annals* and *Clem Sinyard: Discoverer of the Hector Treasure*.

Information for this article has relied on: **Cashing In** by Jane Gaffin, Word Pro, 1982; *The History of Keno Hill Mining District*, archival manuscript by Dr. Aaro Aho, circa 1974, published posthumously in book format as **Hills of Silver: The Yukon's Mighty Keno Hill Mine**, Harbour Publishing, 2006.

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