

# Genesis of one of Earth's richest silver mines

By JANE GAFFIN

**Keno, the venerable old gentleman mine, refuses to die a natural death as long as a probable 100 million ounces of silver keep its heart beating. Yet, the federal government is bent on subjecting the mine to euthanasia.**

**I believe the mine deserves a dignified burial.**

**In a series of articles to be published in the *Star* for the next several Fridays, I'll say last rites and farewell to a great mine that served as the Yukon's lifeblood off and on for more than 80 years.**

**Here's part 1.**

In the summer of 1974, Jim McFaul was freshly graduated from the University of British Columbia.

In those days, young geologists could join any number of mineral exploration companies and see Canada. There were plenty of exploration opportunities for bright, enthusiastic mineral hunters.

Amoco Canada's mineral division sent the 21-year-old McFaul into northeastern Yukon to look for zinc. To reach the Bonnet Plume target area, the crew went through the town of Mayo, situated on the bank of the Stewart River.

As the Trans North Beaver aircraft motored up the McQuesten River Valley, the pilot pointed out the Elsa townsite and the United Keno Hill Mines' operation below.

McFaul peered out the window in disbelief. "Who in their right mind would ever want to live there?"

Geologists sometimes aren't in their right minds.

Three years later, the geologist linked up with the other 350 residents who lived in the remote mining community of the central Yukon. The living conditions weren't exactly Hilton Hotel standards. But an interesting job coupled with a string of successes equals a fun time.

Before McFaul turned 35 in 1987, the United Keno Hill Mines geologist had set a record for finding a total of seven mines.

It was indeed a feat; statistics indicate that only one in every 50,000 prospects makes a mine. To boot, all

seven went to production.

The first discovery was the Galkeno Open Pit vein-type silver deposit, situated on Galena Hill's northeast slope that faces Keno City. It was followed up with the new Silver King Underground; Ruby Offset; Hector 3 & 4 Vein Open Pit; Flame and Moth Open Pit; Black Cap Open Pit and the Bellekeno Underground.

Combined, the seven mines produced four million ounces of silver.

Although the whole district was a land-mine of treasures, finding the rich lode deposits didn't come serendipitously. Every geologist and prospector who ever worked the area dealt with the frustrations of deep overburden masking the high-grade silver veins.

To unravel the mysteries of the underground and open-pit silver-lead-zinc operations in the Galena Hill - Keno Hill area required ingenuity and patiently poring over geological maps and reports that United Keno Hill Mines inherited from a tangle of companies and a legacy of countless actors.

## The Lucky Swedes

The genesis of the Keno area began in the summer of 1898. Hundreds of disheartened gold seekers fanned out to look outside the Klondike for better prospects.

The died-in-the-wool placer miners were encouraged by paying quantities of coarse gold found on the Stewart River tributary of Haggart Creek. But most prospectors had not been weaned off placer gold and were unable to relate to hard rock, vein-type deposits.

Among the most energetic was the secretive Gustavenson trio. The father and two sons vanished until the fall of 1899, when they floated 322 kilometres into Dawson City and made a substantial bank deposit from their three bulging bags.

The incident set gossip swirling. Each subsequent fall, they bought winter supplies with a coarse gold not characteristic of Klondike nuggets.

The quiet, solitary Gustavensons were opposed to gold stampedes and

had not followed protocol by announcing a gold strike. The Swedes kept their isolated quarters a secret.

In the vast country, they felt secure in their seclusion. For two falls they came into town and managed to lose anybody who attempted to trail them. In September 1901, their luck changed.

Four men waited for the Lucky Swedes to make their annual trek down river. The quartet changed their path several times before going up Christal Creek and locating a trail that led them between two hills — Keno Hill to their left and Galena Hill to their right.

Thirteen kilometres in from the river they found the Swedes' possessions. Neatly tucked in a boxed canyon were an immaculately arranged log cabin, a few smaller storage buildings and a sawmill operated with water power.

No staking posts were visible. Duncan Patterson whacked crude poplar ones for the Discovery claim of September 12, 1901. He named the creek "Duncan".

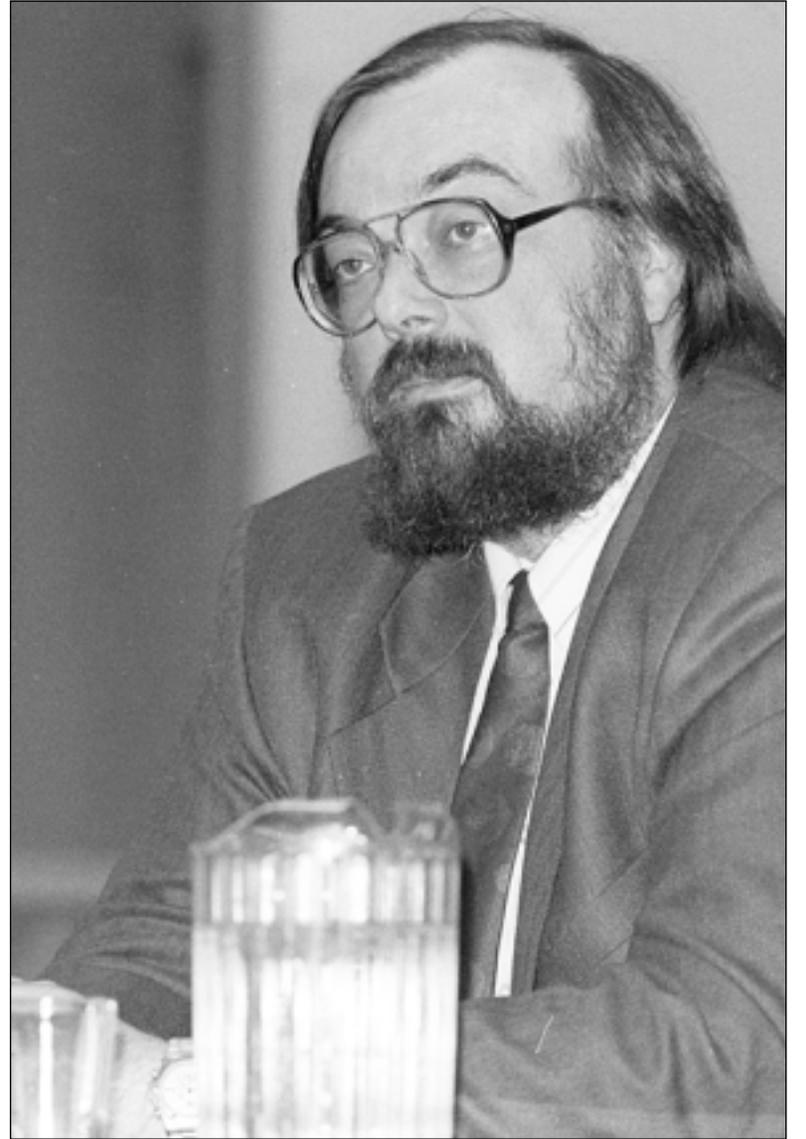
A while later, the four men floated to Dawson City to record the most important claims staked since the Klondike and announced a phenomenal gold strike on Duncan Creek.

The Swedes vanished forever. Only their quiet patience had overcome the obstacles. Nature's barriers had been caused by a great ice tongue welling over the divide 10,000 years ago when only the tops of Keno and Galena hills protruded above the rubble-strewn ice that had scattered and buried the treasures in deep overburden.

Between Christal Creek and the headwaters of Lightning Creek, a tributary to Duncan Creek, Keno Hill juts up over 1,800 metres to the northeast of a massive green mound called Galena Hill in the mountainous plateau.

The rich silver-lead veins, unknown by prospectors at the time, 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.

Duncan Creek courses between



Star file photo

**PROUD TRACK RECORD – Before Jim McFaul turned 35 in 1987, the United Keno Hill Mines geologist had set a record for finding a total of seven mines. All seven went to production.**

the two heights. The large south-westerly-flowing stream branches and enters Lightning Creek.

## Silver King

Silver was initially recognized on the Hell's Gate claim in 1903.

Prior to sparking what would become a craze for hard rock mining, Yukon prospectors were intent on washing placer gold from the creeks. In the post-Klondike era, prospectors fanned out to look for gold and silver in veins.

Jake Davidson, one of the four men who had rushed into the Swedes' private domain, was a determined free spirit. Although his interest was gold, he staked the Hell's Gate in July 1903.

Eventually his silver claim lapsed from neglect.

Before departing for the camps of Cobalt, Ont., Davidson told Henry McWhorter, his partner at Duncan Creek, about the location of the silver vein and presented him with samples assayed in Dawson City.

The results had been astoundingly good.

Regardless, McWhorter thought a goldless vein worthless. He went looking for greener pastures in the camps at Fairbanks, Alaska. But, like many others, he returned to the Yukon.

On Feb. 23, 1913, he staked what became the first significant silver claim of the area. The Silver King was a throwback to the Hell's Gate where unspectacular galena, the principal ore of lead, was recognized before Jake Davidson vamoosed to Ontario.

Hard rock mining hadn't caught the imagination of explorers yet. But McWhorter managed to lease the Silver King to Jack Alverson and Grant Hoffman for a year.

The proviso was the vein would be developed and a cabin built on the bank of the creek they called "Galena" to correspond with the massive mound known as Galena Hill.

McWhorter later sold the Silver King outright. It was worked five years before all visible ore was extracted while metal prices remained high. Then mining ceased in 1918.

Some narrow-minded disbelievers thought the Silver King was a single occurrence and assumed its closure spelled the end of the area's hard rock mining.

Eternal optimists recognized the Silver King as the advent of more mines, more ore, more teamster contracts, more economic rewards.

Government geologists agreed. Examination of the area suggested the Silver King wasn't likely a single occurrence. More shoots should sprout off along the vein while many hidden veins were probably down there somewhere.

But where?  
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Next Friday, she will tell of geological prophecies come true when the area is set in a tizzy with new discoveries on Keno Hill.

See commentary on mines' current situation, p. 11.



Yukon Archives photo 5877 / A. K Schellinger photographer and collection

**LOOKING TOWARD HISTORIC DUNCAN CREEK – A view looking northeast from Mount Hinton toward Discovery on Upper Duncan Creek. Discovery is where gold was first discovered and worked on at Duncan Creek in 1898, then staked in 1901. The Duncan Creek power plant was eventually located in the proximity of Discovery.**