

Geological pioneer work is legendary

By JANE GAFFIN

Keno, the venerable old gentleman mine, refuses to die a natural death as long as a probable hundred 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 being published in the *Star* each Friday, I'm saying 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 3.

Livingstone Wernecke is an extremely important name to the Yukon geoscience community. His geological reports, maps and concepts are revered as much now as when the brilliant mining engineer aggressively pioneered mineral exploration in the central Yukon.

It is imperative that no more archival records be destroyed, scattered, torched or dropped down the Orwellian memory hole in the federal government's haste to silence this venerable mine.

Wernecke was born Jan. 16, 1883, the son of a fur trader in Livingstone, Mont., one of Northern Pacific Railway's construction camps.

He was an adventurer, fleeing home at age 15 to join the gold rush with a friend. A yen for rocks and the North rubbed off but he wisely returned to get an education.

After graduating in 1907 with honours from the University of Washington, he went to Alaska to practise his profession. He did surveying, geological reconnaissance and engineering in various Alaskan locales until hired by the Alaska Treadwell and Alaska Juneau Gold Mining companies in 1914.

He was one of four men on the last cage hoisted up as sea water gushed down, flooding the shaft and caving the Treadwell mine.

When company president Fred Bradley sent the 38-year-old engineer to Keno Hill in the Yukon, Wernecke found lots of challenges ahead.

The exorbitant ore transportation cost for 65 kilometres to Mayo was \$50 a ton while the next 4,000 kilometres to the San Francisco smelter was only \$30 a ton.

Two weeks of labour turmoil had recently ended at Keno Hill Mining Ltd., a subsidiary of the Guggenheims' Yukon Gold Company.

The men refused to work until conditions improved. The company officials soon admitted their mistakes and relented to an eight-hour day and a massive cleanup.

Wernecke fussed briefly over the Gambler claim in which his boss had invested \$10,000 sight unseen. Then he turned attention to setting up a camp on the Ladue claim next to Guggenheims' Sadie-Friendship portion of the vein.

The Ladue was the genesis for Treadwell Yukon, which purchased a sawmill. Treadwell Alaska furnished underground equipment and experienced miners came from Juneau, increasing crews from 16 to 60 men.

A kind man who cared about his workers, Wernecke installed an adequate water supply to help fight silicosis and adamantly enforced safety and health regulations.



Photo submitted

MINING DYNAMO – Obsessed with work, Livingstone Wernecke drove himself hard, demanding much from subordinates who both worshipped and feared him.

Wernecke Camp, situated in a pleasant surrounding of scattered spruce, functioned in a happy dither despite Wernecke's reputation for being as unpredictable as the silver veins.

The log and frame buildings overlooked a panorama of colourful sunsets and lightning storms flashing over the McQuesten Valley.

Wernecke often invited guests from Mayo and Keno City to social gatherings and provided the transportation and food. Then he disappeared to his office to work out geological problems.

To Wernecke, people's personal lives were their own. But he disapproved of liquor, gambling and illicit sex, and considered indulgence in these vices as legitimate grounds for dismissal.

The story goes that he was suspicious his men were visiting Keno City's dozen prostitutes and, convinced the girls were at fault, Wernecke raged into the bawdy house intending to deport the madam for enticing his men. His jets were cooled when an admiring miner said, "Ah, Mr. Wernecke, you come here, too."

Wernecke could neither control human nature nor Keno City, a booming wild frontier town open 24 hours a day that added spice to the mining camps. It was replete with Northern Commercial and Taylor & Drury stores, ladies apparel and novelty shops, a post office, brothel, dance hall and several hotels.

Open touring cars burned up the

trail, taxiing carousers between Wernecke Camp and Keno City. Wernecke softened to the necessity of prostitutes for a camp teeming with single men.

His personal doctor routinely examined the girls, some of them brought in by famous madams such as Bombay Peggy from Dawson City, Ruby Scott and Tiger Lil. They catered to Wernecke's wishes, ensuring the men were sober and back to camp in time for shifts.

Wernecke was tall and rangy. Thatches of bushy eyebrows shaded glacier-blue eyes. A shadow, dark as some of his moods, hinted perpetually at his chin. Gray hair, waved tightly like corrugated roofing, gave him an even more steel-like appearance, and he was always surprised when someone was not intimidated by this man.

He was said not to like having his picture taken. The only photo known is a professional one required to satisfy the company in his role as general manager.

Obsessed with work, Wernecke

drove himself hard, demanding much from subordinates who both worshipped and feared him. They scrambled to please and produce for the fiery, high-strung boss and inadequately covered deficiencies from his piercing glare.

Snatching naps sporadically, growing crabby and ill-tempered, soothing stomach ulcers with fresh milk from a cow grazing in the backyard, he worked night and day. The more he learned, the more he wanted to know; the more he did, the more he wanted to do and had less time for. It led to trouble.

Wernecke was not one for communicating with words, and procedures often changed radically without warning. He expected things to be accomplished as he thought, not as he voiced, and unspoken policies created confusion.

His impatience was incited often because his workers were untrained as clairvoyants. Swooping into the mine Wernecke would issue a terse: "Pick

up your pay!" That often was impossible if the accountant had been fired again for drinking.

After the dust settled, Wernecke rehired everybody.

Wernecke frequently met shift changes. The men welcomed his praise and attention, trying to supply new answers to his oft-repeated question: "How does it look now, boys?"

Nothing slipped by Wernecke's piercing gaze unnoticed. During the day, he frequently patrolled the camp, visiting wives who were strong barometers regarding their husbands' contentment or discontentment with their jobs.

On his tours, Wernecke gathered information, tuning in to how living conditions were for the families. His wife, Mabel, often helped with household chores and meal preparations if a family suffered an illness.

Then the mines suffered acute exhaustion around 1923. Neither Treadwell Yukon's Ladue nor Guggenheims' No. 9 vein — the two largest and strongest ore bodies — were holding out.

Rich mineral veins slumped off relatively shallow while ore-deposition horizons remained mysteriously favourable — a problem dating back to the Silver King's weakness. Even Wernecke flinched at exploring too deep.

Interest waned for the undeveloped Calumet, Lucky Strike, Elsa and others. Keno Camp closed. The Guggenheims turned full attention to the Lucky Queen.

Wernecke's ace was a 10-year lease negotiated with the Guggenheims for the Sadie-Friendship portion of the vein in order to drain last-gasp millable ore for his proposed 100-ton concentrator.

Any profits from millable product over the first 2,559 tons would be divided between the two companies.

Wernecke hired Alfred Schellinger, the engineer retained by the Keno Hill Mining operation which had ceased production; Fred Bradley, a metallurgical expert, researched flotation; and Wernecke triangled between Keno, Juneau and the San Francisco head office getting mill equipment moving.

Under adverse weather conditions, the mill was rammed into place in January 1925. Soon, valuable concentrates began bubbling to the surface.

Gratification didn't leave room for complacency. Wernecke went up Galena Hill to see Charlie Brefalt, who was being teased by the Elsa.

*Jane Gaffin is author of **Cashing In**, a definitive history of the Yukon's hardrock mining industry, 1898 to 1977. You can e-mail her at janegaffin@canada.com or visit her at www.diArmani.com.*

Next week, she will trace the history of Elsa, which was destined to become Treadwell Yukon's richest mine.

Toyota staff visiting Whitehorse

Toyota Canada is going for the gold as award-winning dealer staff are in Whitehorse to sample the delights of the North.

The territory is this year's destination of choice in the Toyota Skills Challenge '04, an annual contest for Canada's Toyota dealers.

The top-scoring parts and service

advisors and technicians are the gold winners in the 2004 Go for the Gold contest.

The best 15 have earned an all-expense trip to Whitehorse, and arrived Thursday. They will sample local fare, learn about the northern lifestyle and challenge themselves with outdoor activities.

They will receive their gold awards under the northern lights surrounded by packs of sled dogs. At that time, three top-performing people will be designated as national winners and invited to represent Canada in Japan in 2005.

The visitors will leave the Yukon on Sunday.