

Elsa: the jewel in Treadwell Yukon's crown

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 four.

Livingstone Wernecke, general manager of Treadwell Yukon, shifted focus from Keno Hill to Galena Hill, where the Elsa vein was teasing Charlie Brefalt.

Brefalt was a Swede who came to Keno country from the Pueblo copper mine near Whitehorse. On a February day in 1917, about a month before the cave-in, Brefalt surfaced from an eight-hour shift in the soggy underground workings and picked up his final pay. The timber was taking weight. Brefalt agonized over his safety. But his fears that tons of rock were going to fall on his head had fallen on deaf management ears. He quit.

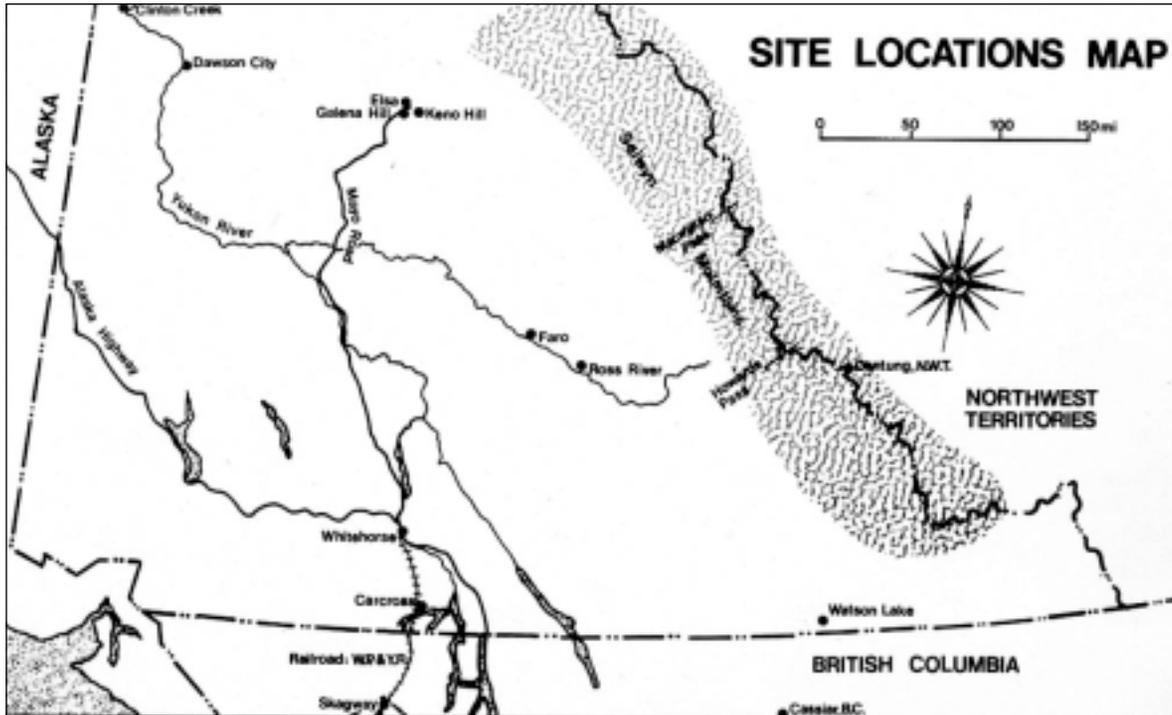
Brefalt had toiled underground at the Pueblo nearly a year since he'd been lured North in the spring by tales of adventure spun by miners in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Then restlessness twitched in the 31-year-old Brefalt again. It was time to move on.

Brefalt's eight-year hardrock mining career had started in the western United States in 1909 after he migrated from Amotfors, Sweden, where he was born Sept. 21, 1886, and died in October 1970, at age 84.

As a young man, he expected only a boring life as a store clerk and had spirited off to Colorado to visit friends. He learned to sink shafts and drive tunnels then saved his pay to grubstake his own energetic prospecting adventures in the hills of the western states.

With his Pueblo pay, he again had the cash to go independent. He drifted down the Yukon River and mined in the Klondike goldfields a while.

But he said the gold was already in the vaults before he arrived. Although hard-working Swedes were reputed for getting pay out of workings nobody else would touch, he said the harder he



worked, the poorer he got.

Looking at the Stewart River Valley, he noted the geology might be similar to the Coeur d'Alene.

By 1920, he was tramping on snowshoes up Keno Hill where the Guggenheims were exploring new silver discoveries. He did odd jobs around the Keno Hill Mining camp and landed a contract to drive a tunnel.

Ambling around Galena Hill in the summer of 1924, he found rust-stained rocks that assayed poorly for silver. He staked it anyway, naming the claim Elsa, supposedly for his sister whose real name was Elsie.

Several years later, he was still up on Galena Hill. The Elsa had turned into a strong, well-mineralized vein which Wernecke suspected to have additional ore shoots.

"How much?" asked Wernecke.

"\$250,000," answered Brefalt.

"Too much for what you've done," said Wernecke, sternly.

Brefalt's blue eyes twinkled at the formidable character cloaked in false severity. Many times Wernecke had gruffly swarmed out of his office after a night of mill planning or beating his brains for better mineral exploration methods.

Approaching Brefalt, he would say: "Charlie, I want you to work for me."

For three years, Brefalt had replied: "I like my independence."

"Doesn't hurt to keep asking, does

it?" Wernecke would say and walk away.

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

Wernecke had a reputation for refusing to haggle option prices. In the past, Wernecke's policy had been never to reopen a discussion about a property if his fair offer had been initially rejected.

While Wernecke was busy mill-building in 1924, Brefalt had covered Galena Hill and found good mineralization on the Elsa claim.

After digging through a metre of overburden to the vein, Brefalt remarked, "I picked up ore like potatoes."

Brefalt trenched, hired men cut wood, started a road and went 150 metres next door to stake the Lucky Strike, worth 3,000 ounces of silver to the ton. In time, he appropriately tagged another claim No Cash because he had to borrow \$10 to record it.

Wernecke had grandiose plans for the 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, oh, how about a right-of-way for an ore haul?

While Wernecke planned, Brefalt high-graded the Elsa, leaving a six-metre millable ore width and an inch of

untouched high grade. He sent a message to Treadwell's office: "I've gone as far as I can."

"The vein's still there," Wernecke declared. "I'll give you \$150,000."

This 1928 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 additional ore shoots proved extremely costly.

Then mining suffered another major setback. Silver prices dipped; lead was worthless. The stock market crash unfolded into bad years that worsened when the United States refused to buy foreign silver.

As the Second World War hovered in sight, the only marketable metal was tungsten. Treadwell Yukon began an avid search.

Meanwhile, only the Lucky Queen on Keno Hill was being mined. Hector Morrison had toiled over the claim for a decade before the Lucky Queen shone with high-grade material.

Morrison had gone to work for the Guggenheims in 1919. Below their operation, he had staked the Lucky Queen on Feb. 18, 1920. By the time he had located the vein, mining interest had shifted from Keno Hill to Galena Hill.

When Wernecke heard the news, he went back to Keno Hill and bought the Lucky Queen for \$60,000 from the well-preserved, 75-year-old prospector.

If not for the Lucky Queen, mining would have ceased in the Mayo district. It was robbed of ore, then gutted.

Wernecke was desperate to keep miners eating during the awful Depres-

Deal passes two steps

The bylaw governing the latest four-year deal between the city and its transit workers' union passed the first two readings at Monday evening's council meeting.

Should third reading of the bylaw be approved, city bus drivers would see a 10.5-per-cent increase in wages over the life of the deal.

The current wage of \$22.80 per hour would go up 2.5 per cent retroactive to July 1, then 2.5 per cent next year and in 2006. Finally, in 2007, the pay would rise by three per cent.

sion years. The miners knew the company's abysmal financial situation and accepted a dollar-a-day cut in pay to keep their jobs to the end.

Mining is a tricky business. It enjoyed a 1934 resurgence that taunted individuals back when silver gradually climbed to 64 cents an ounce.

Treadwell Yukon exhausted visible Keno Hill milling and shipping ore from the Lucky Queen and Sadie-Ladue, then shut down the mill in November 1932, moving to the Silver King and Elsa ore.

On Galena Hill, near Elsa, were the promising Hector and Calumet properties of 1928 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, but not as costly as Wernecke like to pretend.

He cut a swath through camp, ranting that someone was using high-grade ore for road fill. It was only waste rock, of course. Wernecke just liked opening the pressure valve to release steam occasionally.

He ordered an aerial tramline built by Alfred Schellinger, who had resumed employment as Elsa's manager after a separation with Treadwell Yukon because of a tiff with Wernecke.

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 4,350 metres of line draping 15 degrees downhill over 42 towers.

A third of the way down, buckets loaded No Cash ore before clanking into Elsa, where the mill had been relocated in 1936. Three 10-ton Morelands trucked the concentrates to waterfront at Mayo.

It wasn't long before silver prices plummeted again as war breathed down the world's collar. The company went into a hand-to-mouth quandary.

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Next week: Wernecke's last-ditch effort to save Treadwell Yukon ends in disaster.

Underwater camera to search for man's body

RYAN LAKE, N.W.T. (CP) — RCMP are bringing in an underwater camera to help search for the body of a man who disappeared while canoeing in front of his family in choppy water on a deep lake in the Northwest Territories.

Craig Walters, 34, disappeared on Ryan Lake, near Yellowknife, Aug. 18 while fishing about 300 metres out.

His wife, who had been watching him while waiting with their daughter on shore, had turned away for a moment. She heard him say something and when she turned around, he

wasn't in the canoe.

Divers have been unable to find Walters' body in the lake, which is up to 75 metres deep.

Workers are now building a platform to support an underwater mobile camera and generator to continue the search.

"It goes down to the depth you're patrolling at," said Staff Sgt. Steve McVarnock of the Yellowknife RCMP.

"It has a light on it that will give us an image upwards of 10 feet from where the camera lens is."

The camera was expected to be in operation late this week.

Ryan Lake lies at the end of a rough 20-minute drive and a 10-minute hike. It's a popular family fishing spot.

Walters was not wearing a personal flotation device at the time. Wind had whipped waves on the lake about a half-metre high.

Ground crews and a helicopter searched the shore last week.

Walters is presumed drowned, McVarnock said. Alcohol was not a factor.