

Van Tassell finds vein system's aorta

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 7.

If United Keno Hill Mines was going to stay in business, the company had to initiate an aggressive hunt for additional ore reserves. Chief geologist A1 Archer was given a budget and instructed to establish a strong team for both underground and surface exploration.

It was May 21, 1963. North of Whitehorse, Robert "Dutch" Van Tassell turned the blue Volkswagen onto the Mayo Road for the last 480 kilometres of his 5,600-kilometre journey to the Calumet townsite.

The 28-year-old Nova Scotian, who had a geology degree from Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, was heading toward a mining district where more experienced men than he had failed to find new vein-type deposits.

He knew nothing about Keno Hill's geology or its history. It would be helpful before supervising a surface-exploration program to conduct an in-depth study of old reports and maps and talk with other geologists.

There wasn't time. The field season — five months long at best — would be underway the next morning.

He had never found a mine before. He wondered why he thought he could find additional ore reserves this time.

Well, he'd better. If he didn't, he would be among a bunch of other Yukoners looking for jobs outside the territory.

Regardless of where a person looked for minerals, the only thing definite about geology was the frustration of putting together missing pieces of a puzzle with only indefinite parameters for guidelines.

His previous experience was in a different type geology in the Northwest Territories for Giant Yellowknife Gold Mine, which was owned by Falconbridge Nickel, the parent of his new employer.

It had been the birth of his daughter, Pamela, that spurred the new father to find another stimulating job, one that offered a better chance for a domestic life and abolish those long five-month stretches away from home in the bush.

Denison Uranium Mines at Elliot Lake, Ont., was the wrong place. Within a year, he was bored, unhappy and investigating other career opportunities when he landed the position with United Keno Hill Mines in the central Yukon.

At Stewart Crossing, he turned northeast and followed the Stewart Valley into Mayo, 56 kilometres from his destination. He checked the map Archer had mailed him, guided the blue Bug through Elsa townsite, up Galena Hill, and into Calumet townsite.



Photo by JANE GAFFIN

MODEST CATALYST - "The company owes me nothing," Dutch Van Tassell said in a 1974 interview.

He drove along rows of bunkhouses and Panabode homes that housed 500 people. It was 6 p.m. when he knocked on the front door of a varnished log house at the end of the street. The chief geologist welcomed him and introduced United Keno Hill's consulting geologist, Alex Smith.

After dinner, the geologists dis-

cussed work-related matters. There were 18 summer students on location waiting for Van Tassell's supervision and guidance.

An Atlas Copco overburden drill arrived on the property that very day. UKHM was the first company in Canada to consider using an overburden drill as a geochemical and geological exploration tool.

Surprise! There were no trained drillers to operate it. Nobody knew much about the drill except it *might* do a job.

Boyles Brothers had three diamond drills enroute. The diamond-studded bits would bite into the rock. Cylindrical core would be pulled from the barrel and placed in elongated wooden trays.

In their sanctum, the "core grabbers", as drillers tagged the geologists, would "ouhh" and "aahh" and speak in a foreign tongue while examining the core with magnifying lenses for the tiniest clue that spectacular mineralization *might* be present.

They split and logged the core, keeping one half for future reference with respect to milling the product; the other half of the core was sent to the assay lab.

Archer and Smith briefed the newcomer on area geology; where ore might shoot off from veins; troubled junction of veins; ore exhaustion; cuts weren't up to snuff; and permafrost was several hundred feet deep.

Oh, boy, it was going to be a long day. Early the next morning, Van Tassell walked across the street to the geology office. He surrounded himself with drafting tables, filing cabinets, maps, books and rocks.

He was going to be close to home, for sure. But, like Livingstone Werneck before him, a geological hazard might be inattentiveness to the family for a while.

Untying all the twisted knots would require concentrating on Keno Hill geology 17 hours a day, or repacking his gear. He buckled down to research the current package of 63 properties and prospects.

By 1964, the Atlas Copco overburden drill churned out the first indications of the Husky vein system. This sophisticated method was certainly a tribute to pioneer prospectors who managed to find vein material with nothing more than gold pans, pitting and shafting.

United Keno Hill, continually

expanding properties, increased its kingdom to 700 claims. All were grid-mapped and soil-sampled.

Van Tassell prepared an eight-metre-long geological map of vein-system patterns for interpretation. Ore shoots tended to occur close to off-setting faults, near vein junctions and where veins changed directions.

OK! But where is this elusive rich stuff?

The calendar flipped to 1965. Diamond drilling stabbed at good Husky targets while revealing — only uneconomic vein-type material.

"A geologist lives in mortal fear of working an area and missing something," said Van Tassell, who reworked the Husky anomalies innumerable times to no avail.

In October 1966, the axe fell. United Keno Hill told 16,000 Yukoners, who relied directly or indirectly on the mine for a livelihood, the company intended to close.

Ore reserves were declining, therefore, profits were nil. A1 Archer had quit the chief geologist job to open a private geological consulting firm in Whitehorse.

No Cash's lunchroom caught fire. A Giant Yellowknife rescue team, equipped with sophisticated breathing apparatus, was flown in to free miners barricaded in air pockets; four men suffocated trying to outrun the smoke.

The tragedy halted production at No Cash and the five other underground mines. As the tonnage yield slumped, spending had to be curtailed. Van Tassell's budget did not escape the cuts.

The looming closure was an epitaph to a mine once celebrated as North America's richest silver camp.

The few employees, who had retained their jobs, were listless; community spirit flagged. While the solution seemed obvious, the company officials brought a management consultant to Elsa, anyway.

Van Tassell, who spent every waking minute looking for a new mine on a skimpy budget to provide employment to 600 people, could cure the ailment.

"I'm paid to look for a mine, not meddle in social problems," he advised the consultant. "Once I accomplish my goal, your job will be simple."

By 1967, the company realized Van Tassell's work had the power to be the saviour. His budget was restored. He turned attention to fill-in work on the Husky target that was located between the Silver King, where mining began in 1913, and the Elsa, an early-day mine Treadwell optioned from its founder, Charlie Brefalt.

Economic values were intersected with the overburden drill that went as far as it could go. Then Canadian Mine Services substituted a diamond drill.

It was 2:30 on a snappy September morning. Van Tassell stopped by the Calumet staff house to pick up his assistant geologist, Scott Zimmer.

The headlights of the red half-ton truck sliced through the darkness to the Elsa townsite. They turned onto a frost-caked access road to the drill site.

If his computations were accurate, the vein would be intersected in 30



Photo by JANE GAFFIN

THE HUSKY HEADFRAME - United Keno Hill Mines' showpiece was the Husky, which provided 60 per cent of all silver from the six operating mines. The Husky was discovered by Dutch Van Tassell in 1967. It was the first new mine to be found in the area since the mid-1920s.

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The puzzle was coming together

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minutes. As soon as the target was hit, Van Tassell wanted to shut down the rig to ensure no dollars were chewed up unnecessarily. Then the drill would be dismantled and moved to another location pinpointed on the grid.

Van Tassell did not know what he was onto yet, except the unusual 99-per-cent core recovery indicated that the pieces of the puzzle were slipping into the right places.

He parked and led his assistant a short distance down the hill to the plywood drill shack. The change in the Longyear 38's engine noise meant the two-man crew had just pulled the core barrel and were ready to drill again.

The engine revved. As Van Tassell greeted the crew, his brown eyes swept the neat rows of smooth marble-white cylinders nestled in the wooden boxes.

Casually choosing a piece of rock caused the core grabber to go completely out of character.

He whooped inarticulately, flung his ballcap to the ceiling and yelled over the engine's noise, "It's a hot one! It's loaded with ruby silver!"

He grabbed the 50-pound tray of NQ-sized core, charged to the truck and was returning for another load before the assistant or driller had time to offer help or to deliver the core trays to the geology shack.

Van Tassell had waited four years for this news. He wasn't about to let this treasure out of his sight.

He had discovered what was developed into the aorta to the Keno Hill vein system, a veritable showpiece responsible for 60 per cent of all the silver produced from the company's six operating mines.

The company principals, shareholders and a lot of Yukoners were indebted.

"The company owes me nothing," Van Tassell insisted, modestly, in a 1974 interview.

"I got a regular paycheque to do a job. I hope the company and I are even."



Photo submitted

SURFACING FROM HUSKY – Just up from a 1974 visit to the Husky deposit are, left to right, John Holzapfel, the mine captain and tour guide; author Jane Gaffin; and Dr. Ed Haldemann, a Toronto-based Falconbridge Nickel geologist.

Jane Gaffin is author of Cashing In, a definitive history of the Yukon's hardrock mining industry, 1898 to 1977.

Next week: Jim McFaul finds his niche with United Keno.

Council approves trailer park subdivision

Lobird Park is now able to consolidate the three portions of Commissioner's land next to it that's currently being leased from the territorial government.

City council voted in favour of the subdivision which allows the consolidation at its Monday evening meeting.

While Whitehorse Savings Ltd. had applied in the past for the consolidation, it was deferred because of land claim negotiations with the Kwanlin Dun First Nation. The intervention was removed in early 2003 with survey authority being granted by the territorial government for the three pieces of land next to the trailer park.

The consolidation will see the trailer park gain a 3.73-hectare parcel to the north, a 9.3-hectare parcel to the east and a 7.4-hectare parcel to the south of the trailer park.

The land on the north and east side have been leased by Whitehorse Savings since 1987, and have a water well along with other infrastructure and a road.

The owners want to use the 9.4-hectare section of land to install a reservoir and expand the trailer park.

The 7.4-hectare site has also been leased to the trailer park since 1987. It currently has a sewage lagoon and other infrastructure. The water licence to operate the lagoon is valid until 2020.

The consolidation requires the Public Use Land Dedication be taken in the form of cash for 10 per cent of the assessed land value of the 20.43 hectares being consolidated.

John Emerson Trout

John Trout passed away Sept. 15th, 2004 at Whitehorse General Hospital at the age of 64 years. John will always be remembered with special love by his wife Elizabeth (Liz), daughter Terri of Edmonton, AB, sons Don (Kaya) of the Yukon and Jay (Patricia) grandsons Emerson & Everett. Stepdaughters Brenda (Dave) grandson Jason, and Andrea (D.J.) grandson Aidan Dawson, all of Vancouver, B.C.; and many relatives. John will also be sadly missed by his many friends, and everyone whose life John has touched.

Grace and Ross Ogram Trout, of Bashaw, AB and Stan of Vancouver, B.C. predeceased John.

A graveside service will be held in Bashaw, AB on September 22nd, 2004 at 2:00 pm at the Bashaw Cemetery, reception to follow at the United Church.

In lieu of flowers, if friends so desire, memorial donations may be made to Lung Cancer Research, Diabetes Foundation, or to the Heart & Stroke Foundation.

A Memorial Service will also be held at the Mt. McIntyre Recreation Centre in Whitehorse on Saturday, Oct. 2nd, 2004 at 2:00 pm. Please join us for a Celebration of John's accomplishments and adventures, especially those along the Alaska Highway and in the Gold Fields.



Headstone Potlatch for

Howard Arthur Johns

~ KAAJINEEK ~

September 25th, 2004

Carcross Cemetery at 2:00 pm

Potlatch to Follow

O Son of Spirit!
With the joyful tidings
of light I hail thee:

Rejoice!
To the court of holiness
I summon thee:
abide therein that thou mayest
live in peace for evermore.

*Nothing can ever take away
The love a heart holds dear;
Fond memories linger everyday,
Rememberance keeps him near.*

