

Exotic yields proved mines weren't dead

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 10.

Bharti Laamanen Mining of Sudbury, Ont., took ownership of assets belonging to United Keno Hill Mines and its exploration division in August 1990.

By then, roughly 214 million ounces of silver had been produced collectively from Treadwell Yukon mines between 1921 to 1941 and from United Keno Hill's mines between 1947 to 1988-89.

The statistics did not account for at least another million ounces of precious metal produced by the Guggenheims' Keno Hill Mining, small operators and individuals who had mined for seven decades in the Keno area.

One modern-day case was taking place in 1989-90.

The Vancouver-based exploration firm of Archer, Cathro and Associates was surface mining leased property United Keno Hill Mines hadn't touched.

Alan Archer was an astute geologist and a shrewd businessman who had reason to be perceptive about the potential of United Keno Hill properties. He was the former chief geologist when United Keno Hill decision-makers opted to undertake an ambitious exploration program underground and topside in 1962.

He had hired Dutch Van Tassell to head the surface exploration to look for more ore reserves. Two other new geologists rounding out the strong team of geoscientists were Robert Cathro and Mike Phillips.

In 1965, Al Archer and Bob Cathro quit United Keno Hill to form a partnership and set up a geological consulting practice in Whitehorse; they employed Phillips in 1968.

Over the years, the junior exploration company became legendary. It was hard to mention any Yukon mineral property the firm hadn't touched directly or been associated with through one of its affiliates.

Long before information was touted as the wave of the future, Mike Phillips spent winters amassing and cataloguing valuable historical material about mining properties. The mineral-inventory database, known as the MIN file, was purchased by the federal government's exploration department in 1992.

Another unsung contribution was the launching of innumerable geology and prospecting careers. Archer Cathro was renowned for hiring and training fresh recruits.

The introductory course was usually bagging dirt. Elevated to field assistants, good trainees intuitively learned to return to camp each evening packing a heavy bag of pretty rocks. The gifts kept project geologists happy and usually cinched a job



Star file photo

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY – An hour after rushing down to Archer Cathro's former offices in Whitehorse, Bill Wengzynowski was packing his bags for a month-long adventure into the Casiar country of northern British Columbia.

the next field season.

One such exemplary protégé was a 1983 graduate of F.H. Collins Secondary School. Bill Wengzynowski, who grew up in a Yukon bush setting, had a natural bush radar and could always find his way home. But he had no geology training.

The Crash of 1982 rendered exploration jobs at a premium, and for Wengzynowski to compete with the more experienced job-seekers could be tough.

Through the grapevine, he learned Archer Cathro had an immediate opening. He rushed down to the Third Avenue office in Whitehorse where the Java Connection is now.

Bob Cathro liked the polite, enthusiastic young man. An hour later, Wengzynowski was packing his bags and heading off with a few trailmates on a month's adventure into the Casiar country in northern British Columbia – and on the path to a rewarding career.

Field work trumped campus life. Yet Wengzynowski wisely listened to his mentors and earned a geological engineering degree from the University of British Columbia.

"I am and always will be a prospector," said Wengzynowski, who was honoured as recipient of the Yukon Prospectors' Association's Prospector of the Year award in 2000. He was specifically recognized for

discovering an exotic nest of tiny gem-quality emeralds in the Finlayson Lake area in 1998.

"I'm the one who starts the fire," he said. "Somebody else takes care of the fire while I go start another one."

The emerald "fire" is currently under development by True North Gems Inc.

In 2002, his employer was inducted into the Prospectors' Hall of Fame. The veteran mineral exploration company was recognized by the prospectors' association for expending an immense amount of energy and capital on a myriad of worthy projects that economically benefited Yukoners and for showing an unwavering faith in the independent prospectors over the-then past 37 years.

Wengzynowski has been all over the Yukon, looking. Topping the emerald find would be hard. But his absolute favourite thing to do was high-grade silver mining out near Keno in 1989-90, he confided in a 1999 interview.

The project was initiated through the ingenuity of Al Archer in 1982, surface mined up to 1985, then mined again in 1989 and 1990. Roughly a hundred tons of ore was high-graded from open pits on the Lucky Queen as well as Keno #3 and #9 veins.

Treadwell Yukon had reported

certain mines gutted. However, the crown pillar supporting a mine is the last section excavated before an underground cavern is considered cleaned out and exhausted of ore.

Many times, the crown pillar is too dangerous to mine because of rock instability, in which case the richest ore goes untouched.

The history of the Lucky Queen dates back to 1923, when both Treadwell Yukon and Guggenheims' Keno Hill Mining operations were thought to be suffering acute exhaustion.

Rich mineral veins slumped off relatively shallow while ore-disposition horizons remained mysteriously favourable. Interest waned for the undeveloped veins. After the Guggenheims closed the Keno Camp, full attention turned to the Lucky Queen on Keno Hill.

Hector Morrison had gone to work for the Guggenheims in 1919. Below their operation, he had staked the Lucky Queen on Feb. 18, 1920. He toiled over the Lucky Queen for a decade before exposing high-grade material.

When Keno Hill Mining ceased production completely, mining interests shifted to Galena Hill. It was Treadwell's manager, Livingstone Wernecke, who went back to Keno Hill and bought the Lucky Queen for \$60,000 from the 75-year-old Morrison. If not for this bonus, mining

would have stopped in the Mayo district before 1941.

The oldtimers had removed as much silver as possible, using mining methods of the day. Almost 50 years later, Wengzynowski came along and found native silver, which denotes 100-per-cent purity.

High-grading was labour-intensive, somewhat reminiscent of slaves swinging crude tools in a Siberian salt mine. On surface, bulldozers and excavators took down the crown pillar, while a small crew busted rock with sledge hammers and scooped up ore with hand shovels.

On smaller operations, an open pit would be prepared, then two or three men knocked down the vein on a plywood sheet, broke out the galena boulders to a certain-sized fraction, then bagged it. Another person would come along and ready the next small area for hand mining.

Thanks to the very rich silver, the rather primitive operation paid off, especially when silver prices ranged between \$10 to \$12 US an ounce in the mid-1980s.

Though prices never rebounded from the slide that forced United Keno Hill Mines to halt production at \$8-US-an-ounce silver in 1989, high-grading was still worth a fair chunk of change.

The old Lucky Queen shaft and shaft house remained intact and a road trailed up to it. There, a wide, brand new, super-rich vein was exposed.

The treasure went from surface right on down to the fault where the newly-found ultra-rich vein pinched out.

"It eventually pinched in, which is probably why the oldtimers missed it," explained Wengzynowski.

Simplistically, a fault is a fracture in the earth that fills in with minerals to form a vein system. Wengzynowski recalled the best day over 2 1/2 months yielded up to 14 bags of galena.

"Each bag was 1-1/2 tons, or 3,000 pounds," he noted. "It was some of the richest galena I've ever seen."

Holding a specimen to the portable XRF sent the instrument into a spasm of bing-bing-bings revealing whopping readings of up to 13,000 ounces of silver per ton.

That's when Wengzynowski clued in to expect a collision with the native element composed of 100-per-cent silver.

"Native silver is the real deal," he beamed. "It's as silver as you're going to find."

He also found ruby silver, which contains about 67-per-cent silver. It is technically known as pyrargyrite.

The red silver sulphide mineral appearing in the drill core was the initial indicator that Dutch Van Tassell found the Husky vein system in 1967.

It induces a strange animation in core grabbers likened to what catnip does to felines.

"It is incredibly exciting to find this stuff," confirmed Wengzynowski, radiating with the memory.

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

Next week: oh, what a tangled web financiers can weave.