

history



Pictured here is the Giant Mine rescue team in 1962. They are, from left, Ed Sader, Al Rappholder, Nick Majacich, Guenther Golchert, and Bill Powless.

Miners to the rescue

Mining is a dangerous profession. The risks are high, and miners throughout history have been trained to spot and deal with dangerous conditions.

Safety was always on the mind of Bill Powless, who worked at Giant between 1956 and 1976 and was captain and coach of its mine rescue squad.

Mine rescue has been an important part of the industry in Yellowknife since the 1950s, and teams have competed in friendly mock trials since 1957. Powless is a veteran of the sport, and in a 30-year mining career his first aid and rescue skills were in high demand.

In 1966, there was a fire at the United Keno Hill silver mine in the Yukon. Dozens of men were trapped underground and rescue teams from across the North were dispatched to save them. Giant Mine promptly sent Powless and his team. He was amazed by what they found when they reached the trapped miners.

"We had a map and knew approximately where the guys were. They had built a wonderful bulkhead, the drift was sealed ... They took all these wood blocks and were able to completely build it in and took the ditch muck and plastered it over, so they were nice and sealed in. They could have survived there for a long time."

Powless was first on the scene in 1974 when Giant miner Alfred Daina passed out from carbon monoxide poisoning at the top of a raise at Giant.

By then, Powless was a shift boss, and coach of the mine rescue squad. Standard procedure after an underground blast

was to open up the pipes to vent the working area of fumes.

"I guess they thought they left the valve running to clean the air," said Powless.

Daina and his partner realized as they ascended the raise that there was a gas buildup, and they started their quick descent. It was too late for Daina, who was overcome with carbon monoxide and passed out; his partner lost his balance and fell a short distance to the ground below.

Powless tried to revive Daina, but he later told an inquest panel, "I think he was on the verge of death if he was not dead already."

When someone blew up the A-shaft in 1976, Powless was quick to form his own theories and helped solve the crime. The guy was a powder man and got into a dispute with the company about an eye injury, and "built up hostility" to management.

One night, he sneaked away from a party and climbed down the A-shaft, blowing up a shaft station. This was on the night shift, when no one was working in the area. First mystery: what time did the explosion go off? Powless suggested they look at the seismic readings at the research facility past the golf course.

Sure enough, it registered a seismic event when no blasting was supposed to be done at Giant. They brought in a seismologist to study the tape.

"I think it was 1:30 in the morning – he actually had it to the second – so then they had this information ... Then they found out what was going on in the camp at the time." Nar-

MINERS' Tales

Ryan Silke is a local historian who is working on a book on mining history in the Northwest Territories.



rowing down the evidence, their prime suspect became the guy who had a grudge against the company.

Powless worked with many people at Giant and says it was an efficient, talented workforce. When asked about aboriginal workers, he remembers many of them working as underground timbermen, the carpenters who built the cribbing and the ore chutes. George Blondin, who died recently, comes to his mind.

"He did such a really good job. You give him any job and he would work it out in his head and do it," said Powless.

He also remembers timber's helper Peter Sangris, who commuted from Ndilo to work everyday by dog team.

I still see Bill Powless at the annual mine rescue events in Yellowknife. New teams and new high-tech equipment now compete for the prestige of "best in safety," but the basic procedures and spirit of mine rescue remain the same. Powless will mutter his critiques and kudos as the younger men perform simulated first aid and recovery, watching from the sidelines with concentration as if he's still ready to jump to the rescue.