

Driller of gold

Ken Johnson joined the Yellowknife gold mining boom after the Second World War

Yellowknife owes its history to the discovery of gold here in the mid-1930s. The first few decades were marked by a series of booms and busts as gold mines sprouted up around the burgeoning town – some with success while others disappeared as quickly as they came. Yellowknife historian Ryan Silke has spoken to dozens of players involved in Yellowknife's early mining days. This article is the first of many stories Silke will share with Yellowknifer as he compiles his interviews for a book on the NWT's mining history. Stay tuned for more to come.

News of the discovery of a massive gold-bearing shear zone underlying the Giant Mine claims in 1944 sparked a new gold rush. With the end of war, hundreds of men returned to Canada looking for opportunity. They found it in Yellowknife.

The period 1946-1948 marks one of the most intense periods in the search for gold in the NWT.

There to witness it was Ken Johnson. Leaving the armed forces in 1945, he was told about work in mineral exploration up north. He arrived in January 1946 and began the job search. They were not hard to find. Companies were looking for reliable labourers to operate machinery, cook in their camps, and prospect.

Johnson met Norman Byrne, mining engineer. Byrne had a lot of respect for people who fought in the war.

"I went down there and somehow he knew I was in the war. I was in the invasion of France. And he says, 'You're hired,' that's all he said."

Byrne was part of a family with many mining interests. His brother Jerry was president of Discovery, a developing gold mine north of Yellowknife. Johnson was flown out as part of the diamond drilling crew. A diamond drill is a machine that drills into a rock and pulls out a cross section core so that geologists can map the structure of a mineral deposit. The drill bits are studded with diamonds, hence the name. When the holes were completed, rock cores were placed in wooden trays and brought to Yellowknife for an assay. One of Johnson's early jobs was to transport the core trays from the drill site to camp via canoe or pack-sack.

The crew was living in canvas tents and the temperature was 60 below zero, Johnson said.

"We had a bull cook to keep the fire going all night. He'd just load her up during the day and that was it. Later this one guy looked after some of it. He'd reach out and put some stuff in the tent heater, and boy it would get going rapping like a son of a gun."

After Discovery, Johnson worked at various mining properties around Yellowknife. He does not remember many of their names (there were many projects in 1946-1947) but he has a clear memory working at the famous Thompson-Lundmark Mine.

As a hoistman, it was his job to operate the shaft cage and buckets to move men and ore from the underground. He also worked as a miner's helper.

"I had a chunk of gold in my hand as big as that," he said, showing his thumbnail.

"I took a lot of it, but when I come out I gave it to my friends!"

While working at the Viking gold project, north of Yellowknife, bears were a big problem. One morning the crew woke up to the

MINERS'

Tales

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



breakfast gong but were angry to hear that during the night a bear had wandered in and taken all the eggs.

"We went looking for him and the bear was a good 100 feet away and there was the whole case of eggs. He hadn't broken them. I guess he heard us and took off."

They never had to shoot a bear, as the animals always struck the food cache at night and never attacked anyone.

He remembers a host of Yellowknife characters, including Tom Doornbos, the water carrier, the man he slept beside on his first few nights in town. This was at the beer parlour, which after hours became a makeshift dormitory.

"When they sold out of the booze and all that, then they'd put beds in there. That's where I slept. A dollar a night."

A water taxi ran the narrows between the mainland and Latham Island to ferry people to the liquor store. They ran on a schedule, so if you were late coming back you would be stuck on Latham Island. This one time, Johnson and his buddies had little choice but to "swipe" a canoe. The current was swift and not going in the direction they wanted.

"We landed right at the police barracks. We got out and ran like hell!"

'Drank like a bastard'

His career as mine labourer and diamond driller took him all around the North. He worked at North Inca on Indin Lake, Contact Lake uranium mine on Great Bear Lake, and around Uranium City, Sask. One of his favourite characters was Scotsman Vince McAffrey, a diamond driller at Discovery and other camps.

"He drank like a bastard," said Johnson. He had many creative ways of smuggling alcohol into camps. They were all dry camps, except at Christmas time when everyone was allowed one bottle.

Around 1949, he returned to work at the Discovery Mine, which had a proven ore body and was about to open for production. On Jan. 1 1950, the first gold brick was poured.

After a quick speech by president Jerry Byrne, the gold bar was carried over to the office vault. A man named Scotty was a bit clumsy and tripped on the path. The gold bar fell into the snow and was lost from sight as it sank to the bottom of the deep drift. Scotty dug as furiously as he could to find the brick before someone saw his fumble.

Of course, the brick didn't go far, but Scotty's face was bright red as he picked up the bar and continued on his way.

Luckily for Scotty, the president did not see the klutzy display, but Ken Johnston did. He promised never to tell anybody!



Ken Johnson handles dynamite while working at the Thompson-Lundmark gold mine in 1948.

photo courtesy of Ted Hunter