

A History of Aboriginal Participation in Mining

by Ryan Silke, September 2009



Dene participants of a prospecting course get a tour of Con Mine, 1959.

(Busse/NWT Archives/N-1979-052:7798)

“In the mining future of the north, we must not overlook the large native population already resident here. In these people, already acclimatized to northern living, we have one of our greatest resources.”

– Colin H. Macdonald, Discovery Mine manager, 1966

A fundamental challenge to resource development in the Canadian north during the last 50 years has been a societal one: how best to promote extractive uses of the land that can work for to the best interests of the collective community and the environment as a whole. Despite the challenges to bring an aboriginal presence into the mining work force, mining companies in the NWT and Nunavut made positive strides in the 20th century and continue to show improvement.

At its start, our mining industry saw the involvement of individual aboriginal people through the procurement of services. At Great Bear Lake in the early 1930s, there are records of Sahtu men who were out staking and selling claims. Famous author and prospector Fred Watt wrote, “Not only are they blocking in large areas of ground, but they are collecting samples as they go. Their interest in geology, sketchy though it may be, is filled with the greatest of enthusiasm.”

During the original Yellowknife gold rush, dozens of greenhorn prospectors arrived who didn't necessarily have the skills to succeed in bush life. Aboriginal people were there to assist. Mines needing fresh meat looked to native hunters to harvest it. Dene men found work cutting logs for boilers and packing supplies through the bush on dog team. Johnny Baker was particularly thankful for the native men who helped him build cabins and the wharf at Yellowknife's first gold prospect, the Burwash Mine, in 1935. Mineral activity, as strange and foreign it seemed, allowed aboriginal participation in a new economy, just as the fur trade had.

The Byrne family recognized the value of native labour and the Rayrock uranium mine north of Bechoko had a large aboriginal presence; in fact, Tlicho families set up a tent community on the opposite side of Sherman Lake. They were expert wood cutters and could be found on surface work crews.

In 1958, Yellowknife's vocational wing of Sir John Franklin high school was established, and government hoped to use it to educate aboriginal people in mining trades. They looked for mining companies to assist. Con Mine offered to bring on four Dene students in 1959 and teach

them the art of underground mining. The mine also hosted underground tours during a 1959 prospecting school for aboriginal men, who learned the basics of claim staking and geology. While the intent of these programs was to acclimatize the participants with careers in mining, there was very little follow-through by government until the 1970s. At the time, it was personal initiative that drove aboriginal participation in gold mining: Sahtu born George Blondin worked at Giant Mine for 20 years and was, by all accounts, an exceptional worker.

The Pine Point lead/zinc mine was very active in promoting aboriginal employment, although it was always a tenuous relationship as nearby aboriginal communities were uncomfortable with the massive project. Nonetheless, significant progress was made. Its mine manager in the 1970s, William Gibney, had a special interest in aboriginal communities because he grew up on an Alberta reserve. “We try to show them that if they are good workers, conscientious and attentive, they can become supervisors in the operation” said Gibney, referring to the company’s efforts to train native men as shift bosses in the open pit. Cominco tapped into GNWT apprenticeship training programs for both Pine Point and Con Mine, and with the commitment of its staff developed several training programs for natives. At year-end 1977, Pine Point had 52 aboriginal people on its payroll, or about 8% of its total workforce.

Cominco regularly visited communities on both sides of Great Slave Lake to promote employment opportunities to Band Councils. Arrangements were also made to fly community leaders to Yellowknife and Pine Point to experience at first-hand a mining operation in order to alleviate misunderstandings or fears about working at a mine.

Looking at the arctic, aboriginal involvement in the mining industry dates back to the Rankin Inlet nickel mine on Hudson’s Bay in the 1950s where an entire community was built to service the mine. It was short lived but the mine made incredible progress by instituting Inuit labour. The same theme carried over into planning for the Nanisivik lead/zinc mine in the 1970s but was enacted much more responsibly.

Social licensing, which we consider a more modern phenomenon, got its start in the early 1980s when mining projects such as Cullaton Lake, Polaris, and Lupin signed socio-economic agreements with the GNWT to guarantee northern employment. Several Yellowknives Dene found long term employment at these high arctic mining operations as well. Colomac signed similar deals with Tlicho communities when it first started construction in 1989.

It should be remembered that the standards for socio-economic considerations, environmental performance, and community consultation were either vastly different or non-existent in the early years of mining. This reality often leads to the idea that aboriginals were not involved in mining activities. However, the record shows that job opportunities were plenty for those that wanted them and our mines were very proactive in bringing northerners into the mining way of life. Ultimately everything is a learning experience. The lessons of the 20th century have guided current industry-aboriginal relations and these too will no doubt evolve in time.