



Aurel Lemay was a hoistman, first at Negus and then Con Mine, for nearly 40 years. He is seen here with Con Mine's Robertson Shaft auxiliary hoist in 1983, the year he retired.

# The elder hoistman

Aurel Lemay worked the cages at Negus and Con for almost 40 years

This past fall, the city added a tiny house owned by Aurel and Annette Lemay to its roster of historical Yellowknife buildings. The house was built at Negus Mine; the Lemays, owners of this house for more than 50 years, and former Negus residents, are elders of the mining community.

The Lemay family is originally from Lac La Biche, Alta. Adolph was the father. In 1938, he got a job at the Negus gold property, south of Con Mine. A mill and underground shaft was then being built and the mine was preparing to pour its first gold. As carpenter, Adolph built many of the first structures. After a few years, his wife and children moved north to join him, including Aurel, who arrived in 1940 at the age of 20.

Negus tradition at the time was for a new hire to work menial labour, either underground or on surface. Aurel operated Caterpillar tractors, hauling freight and building roads. He then worked on the wood-fired boilers, which supplied the entire mine with steam heat.

"In a cold winter you'd burn four cords of wood in a 12-hour shift," he remembers.

Eventually, if you proved to be a hard worker, you'd be promoted to a better job.

"I became what they called a machine doctor, repairing machinery that goes down underground," says Aurel.

"That gave me a chance to get acquainted with the mine and the shaft."

The Second World War temporarily closed the local gold mines, but in 1945 Negus reopened. Aurel was now employed as a hoist operator, the man at the controls of the cable drums that raised and lowered the cages out of the mine shaft. He spent seven years on the hoist, until 1952 when the mine closed. His career continued at the nearby Con Mine until his retirement in 1983. Aurel witnessed great changes at Con as it expanded and modernized. He worked on four different hoists, and had to keep up with technology, especially the highly

## MINERS' Tales

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



automated Robertson shaft which went online in 1977.

Being hoistman was an important job, but fairly boring. Most cage movement was at the beginning and end of the shift, followed by random movement of supplies and skipping of ore. Next to the miners themselves, working the hoist was perhaps the best-paid mining profession. Good wages were an incentive to stay on the job — most couldn't handle the boredom.

"When the work was done we just sit down and look at the clock," says Aurel.

### In love at Negus

Reading a good book was a favourite way to pass time, or sometimes Aurel would hang out at the door of the hoist room and feed birds and squirrels.

Annette was living in Montreal when she first met Aurel, and they became close friends. He convinced her to visit Yellowknife, and they were married on May 17, 1952, the last couple to be married at the tiny Negus community. She remembers Negusville very fondly.

"I fell in love at Negus, to be right beside the water," recalls Annette.

"I never saw that in my life. Just go down the steps with the pail and pick up the water and that's it! For me that was really something I never dreamed."

It was a very tight-knit community, with a cozy cottage country feel. Log cabins were nestled together on the rocks, only a stone's throw from shore. Despite the lack of amenities (no running water, just outhouses), Negusville offers good memories to its former residents.

One of the worst disasters to strike Yellowknife was on Christmas Eve, 1946, when the bunkhouse at Negus burned down. Three men were killed. Aurel remembers it well. He and his roommate had to jump away from the flames out a second-floor window.

The mine manager was Jock McNiven, who went on to become Yellowknife's first mayor. He was a tough but likable guy, and knew how to run an efficient mine.

Aurel says, "The company treated us very good. At that time the price of gold was only 36 dollars an ounce, so the mine had to scrounge everything to make it good."

Working on the surface did not expose Aurel to the dangers of the underground very often. Accidents were common, and at least a few deaths occurred at Negus. That hit the community hard. Aurel recalls a young student named Bill Lang who was in a stope (a mined-out chamber), hosing down a muck pile to control dust. Then, in what Aurel called a freak accident, a chunk of rock on the ceiling came loose and crashed down on him, and "squashed him like a little mouse."

When Negus closed, the Lemays bought one of the old staff houses and moved it into Yellowknife. It had previously been occupied by Jim Dünn, the mine's mechanic, and was built in 1947. Sixty-two years later, this tiny house still looks as new as the day it was built, thanks to much tender-loving-care from the Lemays.

The Lemays have retired, but are still active in the community. You can find them every week helping out at St. Pat's flea market. They are proud of their time spent in Yellowknife, and were very happy that their tiny home, with its memories of Negus Mine, has been honoured by the city.