



Horst Nendsa stands next to a Caterpillar tractor at Discovery Mine, where he lived from 1955 to 1965.

# A ghost town with a story

Nendsa family remembers a vibrant community at Discovery Mine

Two young women hold a gold brick, struggling to keep it above their knees; a large Caterpillar tractor rolls down main street hauling a sled of logs; rows of kids hike down a hard-packed airstrip; and a family of happy fishers spends a day on a motor boat.

I watch the scenes of an old home movie and while the place seems familiar, I know it much differently than my hosts. The place is the abandoned Discovery Mine and town site, an active community between 1950 and 1969, 80 km north of Yellowknife — a place I visited often before it was razed by government crews a few years ago.

My hosts are the Nendsas, Horst and Ingeborg, who lived at Discovery Mine between 1955 and 1965. Their home movies document a community and way of life that has gone the way of the dodo. Yet you can still find men that worked there, and kids who grew up in the isolated town.

I found the Nendsas in Camrose, Alta. a few years ago, where they are now retired. The first Nendsa family member came to Discovery in 1954. Father Karl was the surface foreman responsible for all construction. Son Horst followed the next year and worked on the surface crew, driving the truck, tractor, and loaders and assisting in any and all repairs around the site. He became a jack of all trades.

There were many German and Italian immigrants working at the mine, and to pass the time they sent pen pal letters back home. Horst began to correspond with Ingeborg. Sure enough, they hit it off and three years later they were married and she came to Canada. Her new home reminded her of wild west towns with their false-front shack design, "like in the cowboy movies," and having come from Munich, was not accustomed to its isolation and lack of stores.

Officially, Discovery was a dry camp, but alcohol was easy to smuggle in.

"Booze was against the law, but we brought it in anyways. So if somebody came in with a suitcase full of booze, we all got drunk if you were a friend of this guy," says Horst.

The men would charter in airplanes to fly a load of beer out to one of the many islands on Giauque Lake, where large crevasses kept the beer cool for days.

## MINERS'

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



Mine manager Bob Kilgour, whose house was on the ridge overlooking the lake, would stand with his binoculars and survey traffic on the lake. Within hours, a boat would rush out to where the airplane landed. Management could do little but watch, as technically the booze was not on company property. You had a job so long as you behaved.

"You didn't get a second chance. If you were too much of a troublemaker, you're on the next plane out," says Horst.

They remember the large outdoor swimming pool, the most northerly in Canada. It was heated by pumping coolant water from the mine's power plant.

"On the edge of the airstrip, they dug a hole and lined it with a big tarp," says Ingeborg.

Recreation was important. Weekly movies were shown and the rec center had game rooms for all ages. In the summer, fishing and pleasure boating on Giauque Lake were most popular and soccer games were held on the airstrip. In the winter, curling bonspiels were held against teams from Yellowknife.

They'd bring them in on a bus in the wintertime. Famed pilot Max Ward was the sponsor of the curling bonspiel trophy at that time.

Discovery was a very rich gold mine, churning out on average one ounce of gold for every ton of rock processed. Some people describe the gold like butter painted on the wall. High-graders — men who stole gold on the job — were prevalent and difficult to catch.

"They had bags full of (samples)," remembers Horst.

"When they went to Yellowknife there was a jeweler, right



Nendsa drives Discovery's dump truck.

beside the Gold Range Hotel. He would buy the stuff off the fellows."

Custom jewelry made with gold from the local mines was a popular tourist memento.

The Nendsas left Discovery in 1965, moving to Yellowknife where Horst worked at Con Mine until his retirement in 1998. They raised three sons in Yellowknife and saw the town grow from a frontier mining outpost into a capital city. All of their sons would go on to work in the mining industry.

I visited Discovery Mine several years ago, before the government tore it down. The place was almost forgotten. Its old decrepit houses rotting away, overgrown with weeds, hollow shells of past lives. The Discovery I learned about from the Nendsas was an exciting and friendly place, a mining community with a unique identity. A few months after I talked with the Nendsas, Discovery was gone. Upon learning this, they were visibly sad. Only pictures, home video, a few memory tokens, and the Nendsas' tales are all that is left of Discovery, NWT.