

history

Immigrating to Con

Newcomer Canadians were mine's 'backbone'

Northern News Services
Yellowknife's gold mines witnessed a dramatic surge of immigrant workers in the 1950s. It was part of a larger immigration scheme in Can-

ada to find adequate labour for the country's expanding industries.

Mines were the strongest supporters. It was a win-win situation for everyone. The

mines got a reliable source of skilled labour, and war-torn Europeans were given passage into the New World.

The first program in Yellowknife to bring immi-

grant workers directly into a workforce was at the Con Mine in the summer of 1951, when 21 Italians were brought over. The program was very successful. The Italian workers were a dedicated workforce and the labour situation at Con Mine improved.

"Con was always an ethnic mine. They came from all over, Portugal, Germany ... but the majority were Italian," says Moreno Lodovici, who arrived at Con in 1969.

His father, Lilio, first hired on in 1957, was an underground labourer. There were several groups of Italian families, and names such as Azzolini, Cagnoni, Francheschi, Baisi, Bertolini, and Marrai became fixtures at Con for many years.

Language was the first hurdle for the new Canadians. Communication is the most important thing in an underground mine, and the basics of English were essential.

"The mine would send them to the St. Pat's Church to the nuns to learn English," says Lodovici, who also notes that the Italian men worked and traveled in groups.

Heading down the mine shaft one day were eight Italian men and one Canadian.

"All you could hear was Italian language," Lodovici remembers. "So the other guys turned around and said 'You should speak English.' The Italian man asked why. The man said, 'You're in Canada. They replied, 'No, we speak Italian. We're in Con!'"

Lodovici eventually became the mine's bit sharpener, and would spend his day at the grinder reworking dull drilling bits. A miner could go through 25 to 30

MINERS'

Tales

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



bits per shift. Some of them were throw-away bits, but the best bits were the ones you could resharpen with new carbide inserts. Lodovici worked through three companies that owned Con – Cominco, Nerco, and finally Miramar – and liked working for Cominco the best.

"More family-oriented, that's what they were," says

Lodovici, adding the company took special care of their Italian workers.

Con Mine had a wide range of other European nationalities representing the general roll, including Irish, German, French, Yugoslavian, Hungarian, Polish, Czechoslovakian, Greek, and Scandinavian.

Bjørnulf Kristiansen came to Canada from Norway in 1958. Like many Norwegians of the day, he was attracted to the North as it offered some similarities to life back home. Kristiansen also heard about the trapping exploits of Helge Ingstad in the 1920s on Great Slave Lake. Ingstad later became a famous scientist and explorer, discovering the remains of the Viking village at L'Anse Au Meadows in Newfoundland.

A Northern adventure

The North had a long history of Scandinavian adventures in fur trading and exploration, stories which became fascinating to Kristiansen.

He arrived in Yellowknife in the fall of 1959 and mine captain Bob Robertson (for whom the Con Mine shaft is named) hired him. Kristiansen recalls, "I had no idea what it would be like to work underground in a gold mine. All I remember was that

somebody had told me that 'hard rock' mining was pretty safe and silicosis was not a problem."

Kristiansen had a wonderful experience working at the Con Mine. Never his intention to stay in this country, he left in May 1961 to return to Norway.

"My stay in Canada was mainly to seek adventure and live out a dream and get life experience. Living in an isolated mining town was the best 'school' I have ever had."

He found Con Mine a pleasant place to work, but admits that not all immigrants could adapt to the lifestyle.

"Most of us were single and we therefore stayed together," says Kristiansen.

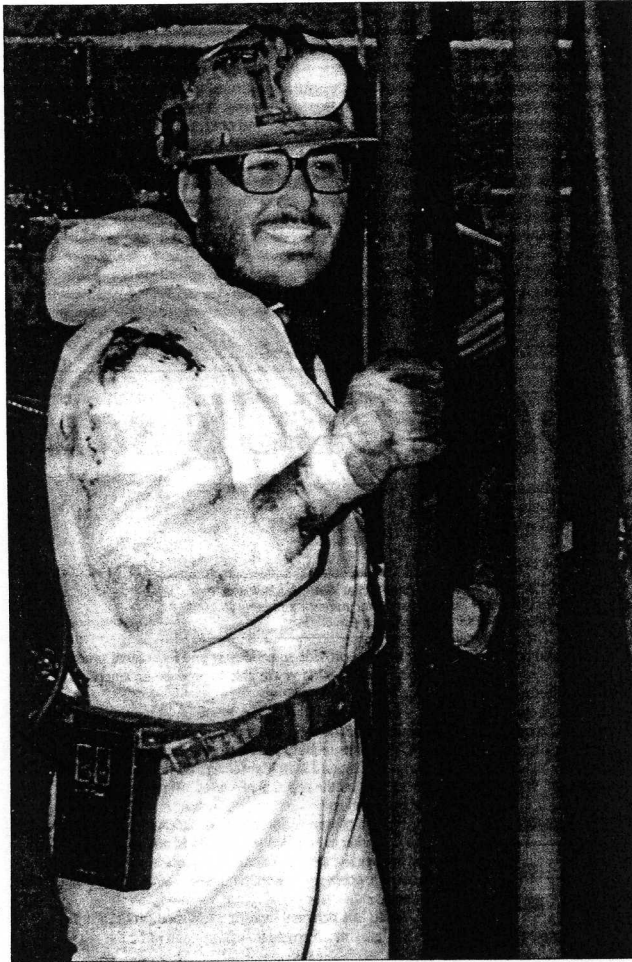
"The quality of life for non-English immigrants depended on your ability to speak English."

It was unfortunate that those who couldn't speak English usually got lower paying jobs. Kristiansen, fluent in English, was promoted to better positions due to his ability to speak the common language. The Canadians appreciated immigrants who could integrate into their way of life.

Alec Richardson, Cominco manager between 1969 and 1973, was grateful for the immigrant workers, especially Italian.

"They are the backbone of the mine and really good, solid citizens" he told *News/North* some years ago.

Labour turnover haunted the mining industry in the 1960s, especially in Yellowknife, where it was difficult to attract and keep miners. Immigration policy brought men like Moreno Lodovici and Bjørnulf Kristiansen to Con Mine, and they became faithful and reliable employees at a time when the mine needed all the support it could to succeed.



Moreno Lodovici came to Con Mine in 1969, following his father who arrived in 1957. The Italian immigrant says Con was "always an ethnic mine."

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