



Con Mine as it appeared in 1937. Jack Lambert arrived at Con in December 1938 where he worked as a warehouse clerk.

## MINERS' Tales

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# Con Mine's first years

Jack Lambert still fondly remembers of the place after 70 years

When I talked to Jack Lambert two years ago, he was 94 years of age, an old-timer in any part of the world. To Yellowknife, he's a surviving link to a period long gone, when the town itself was but a collection of log cabins and shacks on Yellowknife Bay and its gold mines were just small holes in the ground.

In 1938, Lambert was working as a store clerk in small-town Alberta when he heard about job opportunities in the North. A bunch of his friends were making \$125 a month working in Yellowknife gold camps. It was quite the wage, considering he was only making \$35 a month at the store. Lambert heard about a job at the town of Goldfields on Lake Athabasca, Sask. where gold had been found a few years earlier.

"I saw an article in the paper that said that a fellow by the name of Howard Carrothers was coming into Edmonton on a buying trip from Goldfields and he was looking for a book-

keeper," Lambert recalled.

Carrothers was part of the crew building a hydro dam near Tazin Lake, so that Cominco could supply its gold mine at Goldfields with cheap power. Cominco was busy in the North at this time. Its Con gold mine at Yellowknife had just begun production in September 1938 and they were looking to get a steady crew. Lambert was offered a job at Goldfields and after a brief stint there, he flew further north, landing at the Con dock on Christmas Day, with the winds blowing 35 degrees below.

"I was so cold when I got to the Con dock, they poured me a drink of rum," says Lambert.

"It felt like I was drinking water, I was so cold."

Con Mine was still in its infancy, but it boasted a large camp and modern facilities. Lambert was impressed with what he saw, and stayed three years. He worked as a warehouse clerk, spending his days at the counter of the commissary – the store for employees – and the mine warehouse, where staples and supplies were stored, organized, and distributed to miners.

"When the miners wanted something for work around the mine or underground, they came there and we dished it out. It was like a little storehouse," says Lambert.

Work as a clerk in Alberta had prepared him for the general routine of his job, but the mining industry was an entirely new thing, and it took some time to understand exactly what tools or supplies the miners were asking for.

"Far different than farm machinery!" Lambert laughed.

Within a year, Lambert got married and brought his wife north. Cominco had built a number of "little shacks" for married families.

Single men stayed in large bunkhouses and ate in a cookhouse, with recreation facilities in a small game room and bowling alley. There were not many women in the camp in those days.

"Pretty much a male situation," said Lambert, but he remembers Ruth Stanton, wife of the famous doctor, and the family of the mine manager, Henry Giegerich.

Asked about the labour situation at Con, Lambert said it was a stable workforce.

"When I was there, I don't think there was any turnover. People would be coming in and if they got a job, they stayed there. This was the time of the 1930s when having a job was something to be prized."

He didn't make it over to the town of Yellowknife, three kilometres away, very often, but he remembers the Wildcat Café, gambling dens, and oysters, brought in fresh from Edmonton by Red Dusseault.

"I had never liked oysters at all, but I was gonna have six fried oysters. I've liked them ever since," said Lambert.

Leaving Yellowknife in 1941, Lambert returned to Goldfields where Cominco had opened their Box gold mine. When Box closed in 1942, Lambert joined the armed forces. He and his wife later opened a restaurant in Saskatchewan. He never returned to Yellowknife but he has good memories of his time in the North.

"The one thing about the country at that time was everybody was your friend," said Lambert.

"There was never any bad feelings with anybody that I could remember. It was a wonderful time of my life."

Of the hundreds of downtrodden prairie folk that moved north in the Dirty Thirties, few ever struck it rich. For Jack Lambert, that didn't matter. Yellowknife was an exciting opportunity that few experienced, and none, even after 70 years, ever forget.

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