

When royalty goes underground



Con Mine manager Alex Richardson showing off a gold brick to Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip (Duke of Edinburgh) as Princess Ann and Prince Charles watch during a visit to Yellowknife in 1970.

MINERS'

Tales

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



Mine workers remember visits by Royals, dignitaries and prime ministers

The arctic has always held an attraction for southern politicians, celebrities, and dignitaries.

Its beauty, culture, and geography has made it not just a tourist novelty, but important in national strategy and foreign affairs. In earlier years, Yellowknife's gold mines were at the center of attention, and were part of a regular "tour circuit" for prominent northern visitors, including prime ministers and royalty.

Con and Giant Mines have both played host to different royal tours. In 1954, the Duke of Edinburgh (Prince Phillip) did a quick surface tour of the two local

gold mines, the start of a long history of royal delegations, especially to Con, where the large Cominco organization was eager to showcase their little gold mine in the sub-arctic.

When royalty came to town, it was a big deal. Everybody came down to sneak a peek, and there are few who don't have stories about it. Moreno Lodovici remembered when Phillip and Queen Elizabeth came to Yellowknife in 1970, and participated in celebrations at McNiven Beach on Frame Lake. The kids, Prince Andrew and Edward, played

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innocently on the sand. "I was surprised because there was no security at all!" says Lodovici.

Spence Robertson, a student at Con that summer, was instructed to clean up the parking lot, raking up rocks and cigarette butts.

"If the rock is too big, haul it away," his boss told him.

They seemed overly cautious of clumsy monarchs. Stacks of supplies in the mill were fastened down to pallets, and bins full of steel balls for the mill were glued together. Old asbestos siding tiles, badly weathered, were simply covered over with a new layer. Con was transformed overnight into the cleanest, safest industrial facility in Canada, all for the benefit of our British overlords.

Ray Merrifield was the assistant milling superintendent at Con, and remembers Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's visit in 1961. A CBC news crew was there to document the occasion, and the PM got to see the pouring of a gold brick. Ray was given security detail to make sure the brick didn't get lost as it was passed around the big crowd.

"I had to run around, ducking under people's legs and over their shoulders to keep an eye on it," Merrifield recalls.

"I later got phone calls from friends who saw me on the news doing that, and they thought I was going crazy!"

Memorable event

Governor-generals of Canada have made the tour as well, starting in 1947 with Viscount Alexander of Tunis, considered by some our countries' most charismatic GG. He was a British war hero and the majority of men working at the mines at that time were also veterans so it was a particularly memorable event. In 1953, Vincent Massey toured Con. This is a well-known name up north because our local Legion is named in his honour.

On two occasions, royalty toured the underground depths of our local gold mines. In 1975, Prince Charles rode the shaft sinking bucket of the Robertson Shaft, then under construction.

Merlyn Royea wrote about the event in the Yellowknife Tales book: "We proceeded slowly down to the bottom. I was a little worried that all the trench coat and black shiny shoes guys in the hoist room watching the hoistman would make him nervous as he was lowering us down, but there wasn't even the usual bouncy stop at the bottom."

At the bottom of the 9x25 foot shaft, which was about 3,000 feet deep then, Prince Charles was offered to try

his hand at operating the rock drill. This was followed by explanations of the shaft sinking procedure but there wasn't much else to do in the cramped working space, so the entourage was hoisted back to surface. Greeted by the press at the shaft collar, Charles had little to say, except how "bloody" cold and wet it was down there.

Giant Mine had an opportunity to host an underground tour of its own in 1987, this time with Prince Andrew, Duke of York, and his wife Sarah "Fergie" Ferguson. Noel O'Sullivan was mine foreman and he led the tour.

"Six months ahead of the visit, the police and the private investigators were there (and they wanted to know the route) and wanted to know who would be accompanying them," says O'Sullivan.

"It's funny now in hindsight that they had an Irishman take them underground!"

Fergie didn't enjoy it much.

"I think she was more of a problem than an asset to the tour," O'Sullivan laughs.

But Andrew was full of questions, and O'Sullivan, a veteran miner, had all the answers as the entourage traveled by jeep into the mine.

This was the last statehood tour of our gold mines. When the Queen came back in the 1990s, no gold was poured in her honour. If royalty ever does return, perhaps they would like to see our diamond mines. They are the new flagships of Canadian Arctic mining, and we should be proud to show them off.

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, with help from Peter Condor, mill superintendent, hoists up a gold bar during a visit to Con Mine in 1961. Ray Merrifield, who supplied this photo, is on the extreme right.

(photo courtesy of Ray Merrifield)

