

The Gold Mines Built Yellowknife



Yellowknife was founded as a gold mining camp in 1937 and has risen to become a great capital city, looking to the bright future and reflecting on its glorious past.

The gold that lay beneath our city streets remained a buried treasure for millions of years. Not even gold hungry prospectors of the Klondike gold rush could smell the wealth when they passed through this area in 1898 and earlier. A federal assay report that identified gold in one man's sample could not provoke a mining rush to the shores of Great Slave Lake - this area was too remote!

It took years for people to bring themselves north. First came the fur trappers, and then the official government surveyors set up camps and made maps, followed closely by the bush pilots. Finally the prospectors and the mining companies arrived. In 1933, two men made the first free gold discovery up the Yellowknife River. The following year the Burwash discovery was made across Yellowknife Bay. By the end of 1935 enough gold had been discovered to prompt serious work. The Con Mine, developed by Cominco, became the NWT's first gold producer with the pouring of a brick on September 5th 1938.

By 1938 Yellowknife was a bustling boomtown catering to the needs of the mining companies and independent prospectors of the region. Nestled on the shores of the big lake, Yellowknife was a community of tents, log cabins, and an assortment of pioneer characters.

World War II stunted the economic growth of the settlement and dampened the spirits of many people. As workers left to join the war service and operating costs skyrocketed, the gold mines closed. But Yellowknife was not to fade into the history books. In 1944 it was announced that massive gold deposits had been located on another property - the Giant Mine. By 1946 the gold mines were back in gear and new mines were being promoted, developed, and put into production.

The gold mining industry has had its ups and downs over the years due to fluctuating prices of world markets. But all mines must come to an end eventually, and for Yellowknife this reality has begun to set in. The Con Mine, after 65 years in operation, closed at the end of 2003. The Giant Mine, a producer since 1948, will close in 2005. A rough estimate suggests that the NWT gold mines have produced over 15 million ounces of the yellow metal, most of which was extracted from the volcanic rocks of the Yellowknife mines. A vast network of gold mining tunnels, stretched far below the city's streets, has provided employment for Yellowknife residents for over 65 years.

Community character is often set by its history. For Yellowknife, the influence that the gold mines have had will likely never be forgotten. The town has changed a lot over the years, but some things remain constant. Named capital of the Northwest Territories in 1970, Yellowknife has managed to retain the character and spirit of a small northern town built on gold.

A Yellowknife Mining Chronology



1898 - E. A. Blakeney, on his way to the Klondike, picks up rock samples at Yellowknife Bay. These are later assayed in Ottawa and are found to contain gold, but Blakeney is long gone by this time.

1929 - Two large groups of prospectors are camped at Yellowknife Bay but fail to spot any gold!

1933 - Johnny Baker and Herb Dixon paddle down the Yellowknife River and make a gold discovery at Quyta Lake. This date is generally viewed as the birth of the gold camp.

1934 - Johnny Baker finds more gold, this time on the east side of Yellowknife Bay. The Burwash Mine operates from 1935-1936, but the underground miners can't find any more gold.

1935 - Members of the Geological Survey of Canada find gold near Jackfish Lake. This prompts a 'blind' staking rush up the west side of the Yellowknife Bay as winter snow sets in. The Con and Negus Mines will be future gold producers as a result of the claims staked.

1938 - Yellowknife is a boomtown with gold discoveries all over the region! The first gold is poured at the Con Mine in September.

1944 - World War II has forced the closure of the gold mines. Geological investigation of the Giant Mine property reveals and confirms a massive gold bearing deposit beneath Baker Creek.

1945 - Hundreds of companies are formed during the post-war gold boom in Yellowknife, spurred on by the great results at Giant Mine. Many of them are fly-by-night duds or promotional scams.

1948 - With great pomp and ceremony, the first gold is poured at Giant Mine.

1952 - Yellowknife's beloved Negus Mine is closed when the ore runs out. Only the old log cookery and recreation hall remains today.

1970's - The gold mines are dying due to rising costs and an artificially low price of gold. The market price is allowed to inflate, ushering in a new era for gold mines in Canada. Giant Mine goes open pit, and the Con Mine sinks a new shaft - the Robertson. At 6100' depth, the shaft is one of the deepest in Canada. The 250' headframe is a skyline monument.

1980's - Old gold mines are resurrected by an all-time high price of gold. The Ptarmigan Mine, located on the Ingraham Trail, reopens after being closed since 1942.

1992 - A bitter strike at Giant Mine claims the life of 9 miners, killed in a deliberately set explosion. A Miner's Monument at the city's Prince of Wales Heritage Centre provides a lasting memorial to those who perished in one of the most tragic incidents in Canada's labour history.

1999 - Giant Mine owner Royal Oak Mines Inc. goes into receivership and the mines future is in doubt. The owners of Con Mine come to the rescue and buy the site, mining the ore and processing it at Con.

2000 - The NWT Mining Heritage Society is formed to begin plans for an NWT mining museum, using buildings at the Giant Mine site.

2003 - Con Mine's last day for hard rock miners was November 28, 2003.

2004 - Giant Mine ceases mining operations on July 7, 2004 and the last of the Yellowknife gold mines close.

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