

The Nancy Helen Mine

Local History by Allan Stacey ©

In August of 1903 the *Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway*, working its way to the Clay Belt north of New Liskeard, had reached 103 miles from North Bay. The rest, as they say, is history. The rich silver deposits, many laying exposed on surface, were discovered and slowly began to be developed. Although word was slow reaching Southern Ontario, it wasn't long before Sudbury prospectors and developers were in the area, taking up property and doing basic development.

Amongst the Sudburians, Philip Green and Michael Meehan, in 1905, discovered a mineral location in Bucke Township about two miles north of Cobalt and sold the property the next year for \$250,000. This became the "Green-Meehan" mine that tottered along for several years under various ownerships.

Another prominent Sudburian, James Robertson Gordon, mining and civil engineer, had a less than satisfying experience in the Cobalt area. Gordon made news by setting up a diamond drill on a raft and drilling the bottom of Cobalt Lake, adjacent to the *T&NO* railway, as well as drilling Clear Lake just to the west of Cobalt. Unfortunately, his success on Cobalt Lake was clouded by years of legal wrangling between his *Florence Mining*

Company, the Ontario Government and the *Cobalt Lake Mining Company*.

Others in the area included the McBride brothers, Robert and Henry, who sold their property for \$85,000. George Glendinning, later in the Capreol area with a mystery gold mine, discovered the University mine along with two other recent university graduates. J.B. O'Brien, the railway and lumber magnate, became a millionaire with his O'Brien mine, and was later involved in the *Dominion Nickel Copper Company*. This was the company behind the Whistle mine and the *Nickel Range Railway*, northeast of Capreol. Frank Chapin, another lumberman who had ties to the Sudbury area, was a partner in the Red Rock mine.

Cyril T. Young, instrumental in laying out Capreol, tossed his school books in the Bonnechere River, arrived later in Cobalt, and worked his way up from pick and shovel to become part owner of the Right of Way mine. In 1910 he became Mayor of Haileybury and later Superintendent of *C.N.R.* Resources and Development.

Many of these prospectors and developers staked claims or explored the district, but one, John Ferguson Black, committed his time to bringing a mine to production. Black had come from Montreal towards the end of the 1890's to develop the Mount Aetna gold/copper mine in Davis township, about twelve miles north of Markstay. Black remained in Sudbury, and along with his brother William, spent much time prospecting and developing mining properties. In 1904, a Levack

area property he had an interest in was sold for \$70,000.

Anson A. Gard in his book, "The Real Cobalt", relates that Black came to Cobalt shortly after early discoverers McKinley and Darragh had located in the summer of 1903, their important claim. Black did not have \$20,000 to buy this property, but took a ninety-day option for \$250,000. Within a short time Black had five carloads of ore mined. A Chicago mining "expert" looked at the property and denounced it, thus causing Black to miss out on one of the most profitable mining properties in Cobalt.

By 1906, Black was busy developing a silver property in Cobalt, and in October of that year *The Nancy Helen Mines, Limited* was incorporated. Incorporators included John's brother William and William Ross Smyth, M.P.P. for Algoma. The Nancy Helen, as the mine came to be known, was a very small property, an island isolated in the *City of Cobalt Mining Company's* claim. Many of these mining properties were leased from the *Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway Commission* and were required, as part of their lease, to pay an onerous twenty-five percent of the gross value of the ore raised.

Development began with a shaft being sunk by hand while a small steam plant and hoist was on order. During 1907 the infrastructure around the mine began to shape up.

Over top the 89-foot shaft sat a headframe, and close by were the hoist house, rock crushing plant, power plant and cook, dining and bunk houses. To power the Rand 6-drill compressor the Nancy Helen had a producer gas plant. Producer gas plants came into vogue at the end of the 19th century. A gas composed mainly of carbon monoxide and hydrogen was produced from fuels such as low grade coal or wood in a "producer" and burned in internal combustion engines to generate electricity or directly drive machinery such as hoists or air compressors. The Nancy Helen's plant was a 100 hp Weber.

The Nancy Helen mine exploited narrow veins and as the shaft was sunk to deeper levels, stations, or landings, were cut in the shaft wall to provide access to horizontal tunnels, or drifts. By November of 1907, the shaft had reached a depth of 123 feet and two drifts had been run out from the shaft to follow a rich eight-inch vein of native and wire silver. As 1908 rolled around, the company had four cars of handpicked ore on hand waiting on satisfactory smelting arrangements. Developments continued to focus on a network of small veins on the 100-ft. level. The local newspaper, the *Temiskaming "Speaker"*, in an October article, related that the mine had completed a total of 525 feet of tunneling (drifting and crosscutting), but little actual mining of stopes.

Having exhausted the 100-ft. level with over 1,000 feet of drifting, the shaft was sunk further and another level established at 165 feet. As the year

wore on, dark clouds began appearing on the horizon. The new level was disappointing; hopes of discovering a continuation of the vein system from the 100-ft. level did not materialize. So, back up the shaft went the miners to re-examine the 50-ft. level, which had been abandoned while the focus was on the 100-ft. level. Here there was a glimmer of hope as the work force of fifteen men under T.J. Brown discovered a three-inch vein assaying 6,000 ounces per ton of silver.

When the rich ore was exhausted on the 50-ft. level, there weren't many other areas to examine. The main problem with the Nancy Helen property was its size. Its total area encompassed less than five acres, giving it the distinction of being the smallest producing mine in the Cobalt area. Some diamond drilling was done to find new vein systems, but nothing was found to warrant going back underground. The producer gas plant continued to generate electricity that was sold locally. Then, early on the morning of June 1, 1911, a fire, said to have been caused by crossed wires, destroyed the power plant at the Nancy Helen. The forty by sixty foot building that contained the gas producer plant, the compressor and a small dynamo, originally costing over \$15,000, was a total loss. The Cobalt fire chief's annual report in

February of 1912 noted that the building and contents were uninsured.

By then, John Ferguson Black and his brother William had already moved on to prospect other areas, particularly the Shining Tree area. The total production from the Nancy Helen is not definitely known, but various reports put the figure somewhere over 200 tons.

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