

Mining history of Ymir . . .

"one of great riches"

Following is a history of Ymir and its surrounding mines and mining activity, compiled by Nelson old-timer Dave Norcross. It was first published in the Nelson Daily News, Feb. 21, 1980.

The Village of Ymir is located 18 miles south of Nelson in the Salmo River Valley. It was first called Quartz Creek until the Great Northern Railway was built in 1893 when it became known as Ymir, to avoid confusion with other existing Quartz Creeks in the West at that time.

In old Norse mythology the name Ymir was that of the progenitor of the giants who arose through the inter-working of heat and cold in the primeval abyss. Ymir was slain by Odin and his brothers Vili and Ve and out of his body they created the World. Ymir's flesh became the land, his bones the mountains, his blood the lakes and streams, his hair the forests, his skull the heavens, and his brains the clouds. According to early records, the Hall brothers of Colville, Washington located lode claims on Wildhorse Creek near Ymir in 1885. They abandoned these claims the following year and continued their prospecting northward which resulted in their discovery of the Silver King copper-silver lode on Toad Mountain near Nelson in the fall of 1886.

By 1885 the Dewdney Trail had been built up the Pend d'Oreille and Salmo Rivers as far as the South Fork of the Salmo. Here the trail left the main river and turned eastward up the South Fork for a short distance to the junction of Lost Creek, and thence up this creek to the divide and then down Summit Creek to the Kootenay River south of Creston and on to Fort Steele. Prospectors coming in from the south had easy access into the Salmo River Valley.

It is rather surprising that the railway had already been in the valley almost two years before prospectors located claims which became important mines such as the Ymir and the Yankee Girl. The Ymir, located on the North Fork of the Wildhorse Creek in 1895 and developed by the London and B.C. Goldfields Co., was equipped with an 80 stamp mill and became the largest gold mine and mill in Canada by 1900. For a number of years the mill treated 200 tons of ore per day from which gold bricks and gold-silver-lead concentrates were produced. Production ceased in 1908.

DESTROYED BY FIRE

The Dundee mine, located in 1896 on the north side of Bear Creek on Dundee Mountain opposite the town of Ymir, had a mill operating in 1898. In 1899 both shaft house and mill were destroyed by fire. In later years this property was integrated with the adjoining Yankee Girl mine which had been located in 1899.

The Yankee Girl became a steady shipper of crude ore to the smelters. In the 1930's a modern cyanide flotation mill was built in the town of Ymir and operated for about eight years. The total Yankee Girl production became the largest of any mine in the Ymir Camp.

Other important producers were the Goodenough, Tamarac, Durango, Wilcox, Hunter V, Center Star and numerous smaller shippers whose output contained gold, silver, lead, zinc and cadmium.

HUNTER V

The Hunter V. Mine, on the south side of Porcupine Creek, was located within the important limestone band which, further south, contained the H.B., Jersey, Emerald and Reeves McDonald mines. The ore was in demand at the Nelson, Trail, Northport and Grand Forks smelters, for fluxing purposes in the treatment of siliceous gold and silver ores. The ore also carried small amounts of gold and silver which increased with the silica content in the ore.

GLORY HOLE METHOD

Mining was done by glory hole methods, or open pit as it is called today. In the glory hole operation the broken ore falls to an ore loading chute at the bottom of the pit and is removed either in an underground tunnel or hoisted up the side of the glory hole. This is how it was done at the Hunter V., using a steam-operated hoist for this purpose.

The ore was then loaded into the buckets of a short aerial tramway for delivery to the bin at the head of the main tram. From there it was delivered to the ore bin on the Great Northern Railway at Porcupine Creek Siding 2 1/2 miles away, and about two thousand feet lower in elevation.

Both trams were used to transport mine supplies from the railroad to the camp at 5000 feet above sea level, and also people going up and down. On one occasion, the mine superintendent was riding a bucket on the upper short tram. The bucket was dumped into the ore bin owing to the operator failing to stop before the dump. Luckily the bin was full of ore and the man's fall was only a few feet so he wasn't hurt. When told that he had dumped his boss into the bin, the operator said, "that will learn him to be smart".

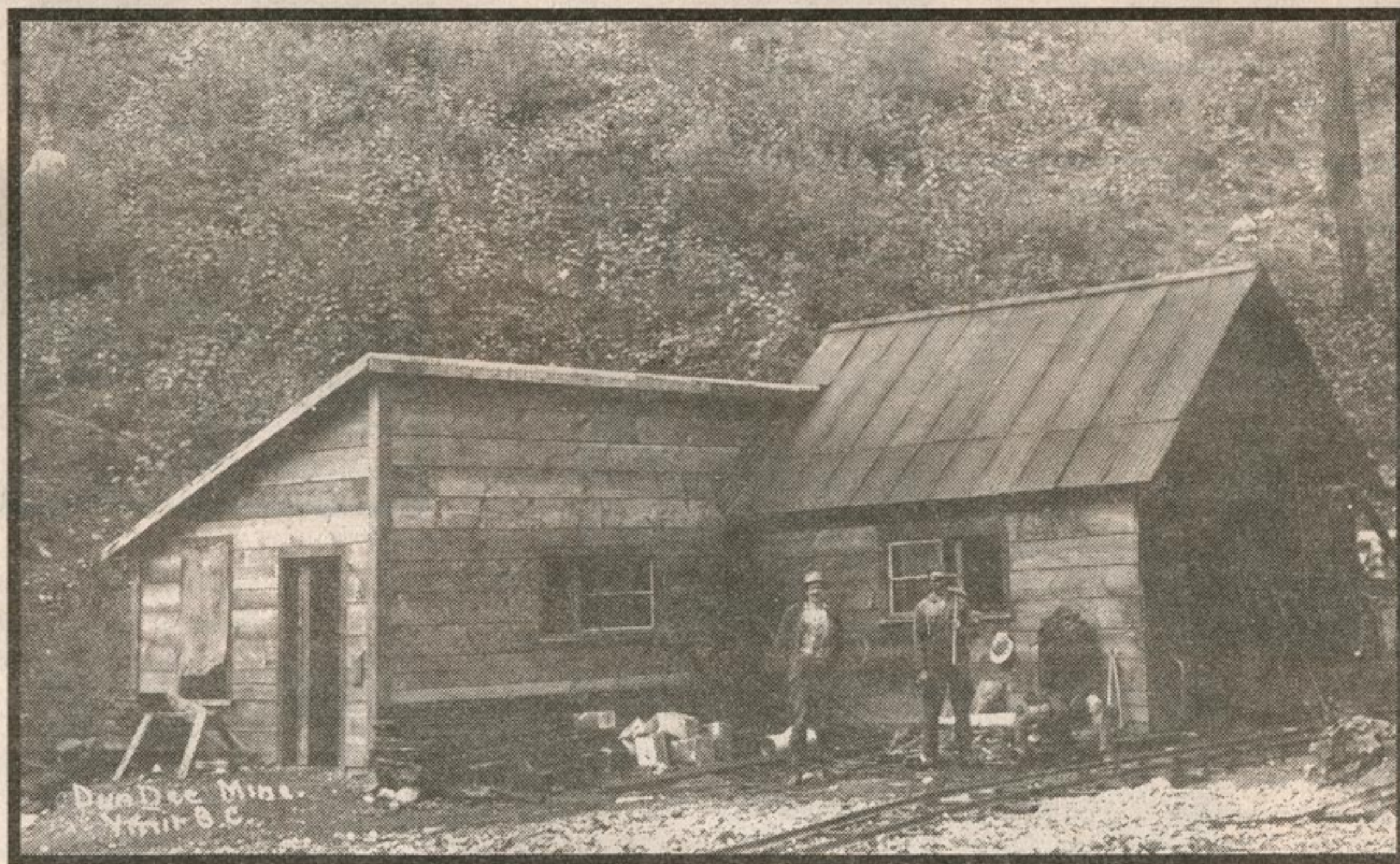
The long tramway was built by the Riblet Tramway Co., and my father, John Norcross, operated it from 1904 until June 1906. A comfortable house was provided for us so my mother, brothers, William and Albert, and myself, made the ascent by the tram to the mining camp.

The superintendent was Mr. Marshall, the foreman was John Scoley, the assayer was Cecil Crossley and the blacksmith was William Blewett. G.J. Campbell was the resident manager in Nelson. Monthly inspections were made by S.S. Fowler and A.D. Wheeler, locator of the Krao Mine at Ainsworth.

ANXIOUS MOMENTS

A number of anxious moments occurred such as the time when glazed ice on the running cable packed ice into the cable grips in the upper bull-wheel, allowing the tram to run uncontrolled for some time. Another time the running cable jumped a sheave at the upper terminal, causing several hours delay when passenger Mr. Gill of Ymir was riding the timber carriers and was quite high in the air. Although cautioned against doing so, Gill proceeded to lower himself to the ground by rope but severely burnt his hands from the friction from the hemp rope.

As small boys, we used to go down to the tram house to watch the operation. On one occasion my



Dundee Mine circa 1899

Iva Lindow photo courtesy Salmo Museum

father looked behind him to see my brother Albert ten feet in the air with his mackinaw coat accidentally hooked to the counterweight of the automatic loader. As the passing bucket released the loader he was lowered to the floor.

All sheaves on the entire length of the tram had to be oiled frequently and a most agreeable French Canadian looked after this. Not only was he concerned with the welfare of the tram but also of his own innards. He used to take a daily swig of the heavy black tram lubricating oil.

Another one-man act was that put on by the man tending the lower terminal of the Ymir Mine tramway at its 80-stamp mill. This tram, being of the single rope type, had buckets that held about 300 pounds of ore. It was the duty of this man to see that every bucket dumped its load of ore into the bin, manually tripping the bin if need be. He found that he could accomplish this by giving the latch a kick with his foot - until the time came when the cuff of his overalls caught in the trip mechanism and he ended up being carried upside down up the mountain to the mine where the operator rescued him from his precarious position. Only the good quality of his Turner-Beeton denim overalls prevented him from being dropped on his head from the cableway to the sharp rocks on the mountain side below.

From our home at the mine we had a grand view of the Salmo River Valley and it was interesting to see the daily Great Northern trains, looking very much like toys, slowly making their way to and from Nelson. From this distance the river looked like a ribbon of milk due to the 200 tons per day of quartz tailings discharged from the Ymir Stamp Mill.

I recall Christmas Day 1905 when the superintendent invited our family to have dinner at the cookhouse and the excellent meal that the cook, Mr. Peacord, put up. Before we were finished a blizzard developed that forced us to remain in the camp overnight. The next morning the storm had lessened and we were able to break a trail through the deep snow drifts to our own home. In 1906, the smelter requirements of limestone fluxing ore decreased and the Hunter V. closed down. It reopened in 1927 and the ore was shipped to the Trail Smelter which had become owner and operator of the property. The final closure was

in 1930.

The B.C. Directory for 1897 states that Ymir had 9 hotels, 12 stores, 3 assay offices, 2 barbers, 2 doctors, a teacher, a weekly newspaper and a church. 600 people lived in town and more in the surrounding area. My brother Fred was born in 1905 at the Ymir hospital, built the year before.

During dry years the Salmo river and adjoining valleys used to be the scene of disastrous forest fires, one such being the Wildhorse Creek fire of 1919 which threatened to destroy the mill and camp of the Wilcox Mine. William McIssac was watchman there and Ymir people became greatly concerned over his safety. They asked Jack Sapples (from Salmo) if he thought he could get up there in his taxi car to bring him out. Jack covered the car with wet blankets and made it, although the heat did blister the paint on his car.

PARTY OF FOUR

In the spring of 1932, I secured a working lease on the Wilcox with three partners, Jim Cullianane Sr., Jim Cullianane Jr., and Frank Moline. The Wilcox was equipped with a short aerial tramway to bring ore down to a 10 stamp mill in Wildhorse Creek Valley.

The Wilcox group of claims was located in 1896. For several years small quantities of gold ore were rawhided down the steep mountain and shipped to the Northport Smelter. In 1903 a 4 stamp mill and a tramway were installed with a Pelton water wheel to drive it. In 1902 the mill was enlarged to 10 stamps.

In 1911, new owners acquired the property and sent Arthur Lakes Jr. from Colorado to supervise an extensive development program which involved installation of a small hydro-electric plant to power a mine compressor.

This work put in sight several thousand tons of medium grade ore in the Fourth of July vein. The principal ore shoot was confined to a section of the fissure vein lying in diorite formation. The northerly end of the vein butted up against a roof pendant of schist which had served as a barrier, causing the gold ore to spread out into a tee shape for some distance.

The broken ore required hand sorting to remove most of the barren

diorite which had been broken from the stope walls by the blast. The sorted ore was then trammed down to the mill at the rate of about 15 tons per day where the stamps pulverized it to 40 mesh and the free gold was saved on the mercury-coated amalgam plates.

Approximately 70 per cent of the gold was recovered in this manner and was poured into molds for gold bricks. The bricks assayed 48 to 49 % gold with the balance being silver. Further treatment of the sands in the mill was by Wilfley concentration tables and flotation. The resulting concentrate was shipped to the Trail smelter.

Winter snowslides over the mine entrance and the road to Ymir forced us to close our operation each year in December and reopen in late March. We made use of the frozen crust on the snow to bring down sufficient mine timber for the season's needs. The mountainside was too steep to use a horse or any kind of tractor.

Upon our return to the property one spring, we found two of our tramway towers had been swept away by a snowslide and the cables left dangling high in the air. We were able to hand log several long cedar logs that grew above our tower sites and skid them down over the snow. After a lot of hard work we were able to replace the towers.

By mid-1938 we had mined and treated about 20,000 tons of ore which, by this time, had been exhausted. We were forced to give up our lease. The owners in California congratulated us on a well-run small mine and were sorry that the end had come.

During this time we had been a closely welded partnership with no disagreements and at the end were still in a partnership, looking for another mine. We did suffer a severe loss in 1935 when our elder partner, Jim Cullianane Sr., lost his life by drowning while on a hunting trip. In a partnership and especially so in mining, where the work is often difficult and in a confined space, the need for co-operation is of the utmost importance - as much so as the richness of the ore.

The great increase in the price of gold may bring renewed interest in the gold mines at Ymir. It is to be hoped so as such a well-mineralized area deserves the attention of those who today are seeking the riches of the earth.