

## The History of Rossland

### A City is Born

First discovered by two prospectors from the nearby Dewdney Trail, the Le Roi mine was the claim that started the gold rush in Rossland in 1890. It was sold to Colonel Topping in lieu of a \$12.50 recording fee. He then turned around and sold it to a Spokane company for \$30,000. They began to develop the mine and the town was born. In 1898 the Le Roi mine was sold to the British American Corporation for just over three million dollars.

Once the mine came into production, Le Roi stock jumped from fifty cents a share to \$40 almost overnight. The population of Rossland exploded as gold fever attracted men from around the world and Rossland became one of the largest cities in Western Canada and a major business center in North America.

In 1911, the mine was taken over by the Consolidated Mining & Smelting Company and was joined underground with its other workings until they were all shut down in 1929.



### Cominco

The Trail smelter was built in 1896 on a bench above Trail Creek Landing (now the city of Trail) to treat the Rossland ore. In 1898 the smelter was purchased by the Canadian Pacific Railway and became the Consolidated Mining & Smelting Company (Cominco). It has since become the largest lead-zinc smelter in the world.

### The Legacy

The Cominco smelter is now the single largest employer in the Kootenays and without it, Rossland and Trail would probably be ghost towns. The Kootenays have the population base to attract new business because of Cominco. The natural unspoiled beauty and small town charm and lifestyle attracts people from around the world.

Rossland, the Golden City, is truly named for it was born out of man's insatiable lust for gold. Situated as it is in the eroded crater of a long-extinct volcano, its golden treasure laid down in prehistoric times lay hidden through the ages awaiting discovery by modern man.

In 1865 the builders of the historic Dewdney Trail pushed feverishly past the present site of Rossland without any apparent inkling of the buried wealth that lay just across from their trail. It seems inconceivable that the deep mineral stains on the slopes of Red Mountain should have gone unheeded. But it is an established fact that the trail fell into disuse shortly after completion and save for the summer encampments of berry-seeking Salish Indians the region lay undisturbed by man for almost another quarter of a century.

The day of discovery was drawing inevitably closer, however, and in 1887, Brohman and Leyson, picking their way along the neglected trail, staked the Lily May just south of the present city boundary of Rossland. The claim proved of little value and was allowed to lapse but was restaked in 1889 by Newland and Hoover. In the spring of 1890 Joe Moris, who had been hired to do assessment work on the Lily May, moved a little closer to the prize when he set up posts on the Homestake. By now Joe Moris sensed the unconscious tug of Red Mountain and in July of that same year he and a new-found partner, Bourgeois,

crossed over to the beckoning slopes and made their fabulous find. A new and exciting chapter was opened in the annals of Canadian mining.

Of the five claims staked on Red Mountain that day the Le Roi was destined to be the most famous. Given to Col. Topping, the mining recorder at Nelson, in lieu of a \$12.50 recording fee, it eventually sold for three million dollars and produced almost thirty million dollars during its life. The other four claims were the Idaho, Virginia, Centre Star and War Eagle. The latter two were destined to form the embryo of the great Cominco operation that supports the area today.



Things moved slowly at first and the camp seemed doomed more often to failure than to success. Col. Topping had succeeded in interesting Spokane capital in the Le Roi and in 1891 a trial shipment of seven tons of ore went down to Trail Creek landing by mule-back and then by river steamer and railway to Butte, Montana. Returns were eaten up by transportation costs but the results were encouraging enough to continue development. Meanwhile an option on the War Eagle had been dropped and Oliver Durante was finding results from the Centre Star far from encouraging.

In 1892, a wagon road was constructed to Northport and the Le Roi company ordered forty wagons to transport their ore direct to the railroad. Excitement began to surge through the camp and Ross Thompson pre-empted a town site which he first called "Thompson" but quickly changed to Rossland when post office complications occurred.

By 1893 a wagon road had been built down to Trail Creek Landing and the camp began to boom. Finally in 1895, the state of El Dorado had arrived. The War Eagle, recently acquired by Patsy Clarke, hit rich ore and almost simultaneously the Centre Star made a high grade strike. The Le Roi mine paid its first dividend and the camp roared into life.

Events moved swiftly and the name Rossland spread like wildfire throughout the investment marts of the world. F. Augustus Heinze came up from Montana to build a smelter at Trail Creek Landing and brought with him the remnants of Brigham Young's narrow gauge railway which was laid up the hill to Rossland and renamed Trail Creek Tramway. Not to miss out on the golden harvest, D. C. Corbin of Spokane began construction of his standard gauge, Red Mountain Railway which made the ascent from Northport through the Paterson valley. It was soon acquired by the Great Northern Railway system. 1896 was a year of commercial progress. Heinze's smelter at Trail Creek went into operation treating Rossland ores, and the West Kootenay Power and Light Company was incorporated to supply the mines with electrical energy to be developed at a proposed hydro power plant on the Kootenay River at Lower Bonnington. Meanwhile, Rossland's first domestic electric lights winked on in January, energized by the temperamental steam plant of the Rossland Water and Light Company.

By 1897 the population had increased to 7,000 and the town could boast 42 saloons and 17 law firms. The time was obviously ripe for incorporation and in April of that year Col. Scott was elected first mayor of the Corporation of the City of Rossland. Mining activity continued to expand and the Le Roi Company caused a stir by falling out with Heinze and constructing a smelter of their own at Northport, much to the jubilation of the Red Mountain Railway.

By 1898 the list of active mines included along with such giants as the Le Roi, Centre Star and War Eagle, the Black Bear, White Bear, California, Josie, Annie, Nickel Plate, Spitzee, Iron Mask, Enterprise, Columbia-Kootenay, Jumbo, and dozens of lesser properties.

The Canadian Pacific Railway Company, eager to share in this wealth, purchased Heinze's Smelter and converted his railway to standard gauge. Daily ore trains crept cautiously down grade to both Trail and Northport and straining locomotives pulled the squealing empties back up the hill for more. The West Kootenay Power and Light Company pioneered long distance transmission to deliver power from Bonnington Falls to the Rossland Mines. In the same year the Le Roi became involved in its famous international litigation which eventually terminated in its sale to Whittaker Wright's British American Corporation and the signing of the "million-dollar cheque."

Production boomed and Rossland prospered until, in 1901, the whole operation was paralysed by the Miners' Union Strike. The long strike was no sooner settled when the area suffered another setback through the disastrous collapse of Whittaker Wright's infamous financial empire. The bursting of this bubble and scandal that followed seriously shook investors' faith in Le Roi and other Rossland mining stocks to the point where they never fully recovered. Nevertheless, the year 1902 proved to be the peak-production year for the Rossland mines. However, the handwriting was on the wall. The rich ore values were beginning to pinch out and lower grades were being encountered at deeper levels. It was the beginning of a gradual but steady decline.

In 1902 the City of Rossland also suffered the first of a series of disastrous fires that eventually destroyed most of the business section. This was followed in 1905 by a major devastation when, on a December day, the Centre Star powder house exploded.

The year 1905 also brought about the amalgamation of the War Eagle and Centre Star mines to form the embryo Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company which was destined to grow into the giant Cominco metallurgical operation that supports the area today. The Le Roi mine steadfastly refused to join the consolidation and continued as an independent until the final meeting of the directors in London in 1910 wound up the company affairs. In 1911 The Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company purchased the Le Roi assets and combined it with War Eagle-Centre Star operation. As time went on the majority of producing properties found that entry into the consolidation was the only economic salvation for their sagging ore values. Eventually all were joined underground and operated as one large mine from the Centre Star shaft which, with its 2,200 feet of length, was the deepest shaft in Canada at that time.

Slowly the town declined as production fell off. In 1922, the Great Northern saw fit to pull up the rails of the faithful Red Mountain Railway and, in 1927 and 1929, the second and third great fires laid waste the business section. Finally in 1929, the last man left "the hill" and after forty exciting years of operation with a combined output of almost 165 million dollars, the treasure vault on Red Mountain was closed.



By 1930 the City of Rossland had reached its lowest ebb. With a population reduced to 3,000 and faced with the Great Depression of the thirties the future looked grim. However, the Golden City was not to be condemned to the fate of a ghost town. The advent of modern highway transportation and the stability of the great Cominco plant at Trail combined to turn Rossland into an ideal residential town, with its working population comfortably commuting the steep valley climb pioneered by Dewdney and his trailblazers three-quarters of a century before.

In 1934 the fever of mining returned again for a brief period when the Cominco holdings were thrown open for leasing as a depression relief aid. Old timers and youngsters alike returned to the mountainous waste dumps and yawning upper level stopes to scratch out a million dollars in the first year. The spirits of the past walked the slopes of Red Mountain again but their stay was brief. By 1942 the Second World War was occupying the efforts of all concerned and the last of the leases were closed for good.

Today the Golden City looks to a new future in the white gold of her winter ski slopes and in a reawakening of her historic mines. Remnants of the past have all but disappeared. Only the weather stained waste dumps give mute evidence of the hundreds of miles of worked-out tunnels and caverns below, while the relics and pictures safely housed in the Rosslund Historical Museum remind the new generation of the golden past.

*Information provided courtesy of the Rosslund Historical Museum*