

MOOSE RIVER GOLD MINE DISASTER & THREE VGH NURSES

By Gloria Stephens

THE STORY OF THE MINE

Moose River is located in Halifax County on the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia. In 1866 the village of Moose River was a lumbering district and connected to the



Musquodoboit Valley by a 'good' wagon road. About this time, John Pulsifer of St. Andrews was working in the area and he discovered gold in Mooseland.

In 1875 Icelandic immigrants were encouraged to come and settle in Markland, next to the village of Moose River.

In 1876 the area had been surveyed and was known as the Moose River Gold District. In 1879 one ounce of gold was produced per ton and in 1881 the Moose River Gold Mining Company was organized.

FIRST OPERATION



Kaulbach Shaft 1900

The Moose River Gold Mine was first used in 1881 to about 1889 and over 26000 troy ounces of gold was mined. The operation was owned by the Moose River Gold Mining Syndicate and was the largest employer in the area. The community had a school, store and churches. Several different shafts were built to the depth of about 300 feet and each shaft was given a name. It was a prosperous place for awhile until the mine closed about 1889. There was no attention given the mine for nearly fifty years and was in terrible shape as the ceiling, made of old rail ties were rotting, the shafts filling with water and the equipment in disarray.

MINE REOPENED

The mine was reopened around January of 1936 and began operation in May of that year. The new owners were from Toronto, Ontario, Mr. Herman Magill and Dr. David E. Robertson.

VISIT TO THE MINE

On Easter Sunday, April 12, 1936, three men met to descend into the mine to examine the actual condition of the mine and to confirm its workings, pending a sale of the mine. The men were Herman Magill, a 30 year old & lawyer, Dr. David E. Robertson a Chief of Staff at Toronto's Sick Kids Hospital- 52 years old and Timekeeper/Bookkeeper- Charles Alfred (Alf) Scadding- 42 years old. Magill and Alf were dressed in heavy clothes and good boots, Robertson was in lighter clothing but had suitable boots and a Grenfell jacket and rubber pants.

THE DISASTER

The Moose River Gold Mine disaster occurred April 12, 1936, and is hardly known by many today (2014) but three significant events can be attributed to this disaster.

THE ACCOUNT OF THE MEN TRAPPED

The three descended the Reynolds Shaft to the depth of 370 feet. When Alfred kept saying that he was concerned of all the different sounds in the mine and that they should ascend to the surface, Robertson ignored him but Magill said; "Let us get out of here".. Finally Dr. Robertson agreed and they started up the shaft in the mine cart/skip but when they got to the depth of 141 feet the ceiling collapsed and they could go no further.



"Pull the signal, Alf, and ride the skip with us" shouted Magill"

They were saved from the crushing rock by a large timber which went across the shaft, holding back the falling rocks. The three men managed to move to a cross-cut tunnel. Water continuously dripped on them, cold, dark, no food or water to drink. & water filling in. The future looked very bleak. They were in this condition for 11 days & nights.

Immediately the miners on the surface started action to reach the trapped men and worked day and night. The miners were from different groups of miners from NS and

other parts of the country. After six days and no sign of life, it was decided to abandon rescue efforts. Billy Bell a diamond drill operator with NS Government would not give up and he kept drilling and eventually drilled into an open space at the 43 meter level. Still no sound of life. Bill refused to stop and after another 11 hours of drilling he put a steam whistle into the pipe and sent a piercing note down the pipe—Bill heard faint tapping – yelled – “men alive”.

THE ACTUAL RESCUE



2 inch iron tube

The men were reached on the sixth day by drilling a borehole through and then a 2 inch tube was inserted to bring food, water, medications and a very small telephone, especially designed for this situation to help with communication to the trapped men. J. Allister Bowman, District Plant Superintendent, Maritime Tel & Tel constructed the telephone. The microphone was no larger than an index finger.

Listening for sounds of the trapped men



After several days Magill became ill and he died of pneumonia on the seventh day as Dr. Robertson held him. Scadding’s legs were becoming more and more useless and painful and before the rescue he could not walk, where as Robertson seemed to survive with little effect and he being the oldest.

VICTORIA GENERAL HOSPITAL (VGH) GRADUATE NURSES AT THE SCENE

The two Victoria General Hospital nurses involved at the scene were Anna Brennan (VGH class 1919) and Ada (Graham) Hopkins (VGH class 1935). They were shocked at the conditions at the mine site; a very desolate area, run-down shaft house, mud to the ankles, fog, cold and raining. Looking at the caved-in hole in the ground made ‘shivers’ go up their spine as they visualized what might be happening with the men below. The



ANNA BRENNAN



ADA HOPKINS

nurses prepared lunches for the ‘stand-by- doctors’ and did anything they could to help the workers, providing coffee, warm clothes and attending to any injury that occurred, be it minor or otherwise.. The women of the community fed the tired and dirty Draggermen. Rooms were set-up in the buildings as an office, one for beds so the workers could get a bit of rest or sleep. Everyone had rest periods in relays. No one really slept for over a week.

Finally after 11 days of a determined effort the trapped men, at 12:45 am, April 23, 1936, were greeted with wild cheers of the triumphant miners as the two men emerged from the shaft. Dr. Robertson was first up as he crawled up the shaft and walked out, Alfred had to be brought up in a special made sling because of the critical condition of his feet and legs. The body of Herman Magill was brought out later. The two men were medically assessed by Dr.H.K. Macdonald and Dr. W. Donald Rankin. Alfred, because of the seriousness of his limbs was air-lifted, along with nurse Ada Hopkins, to the VG Hospital, in Halifax. Dr. Robertson was taken by ambulance to the VG hospital, accompanied by Anna Brennan.

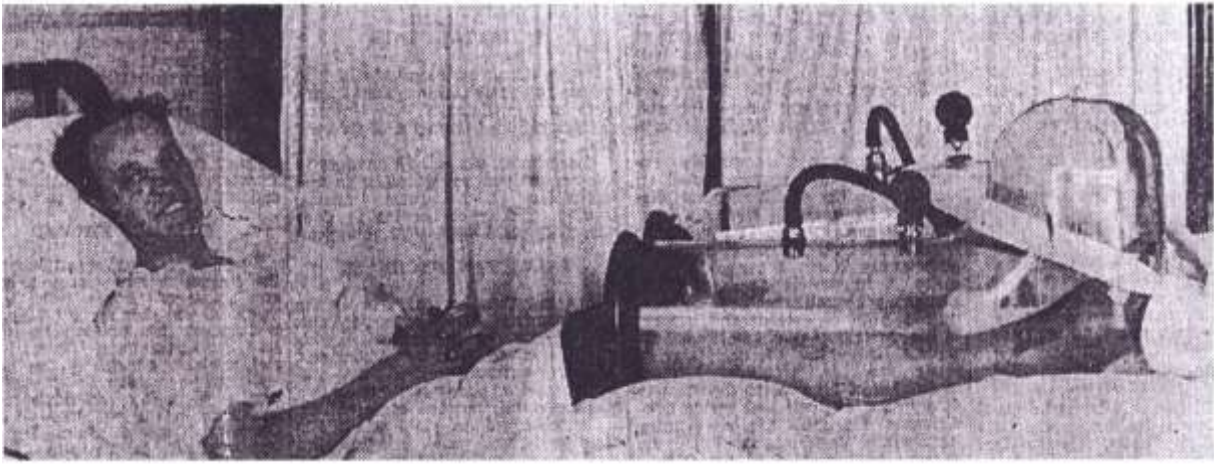


ADA HOPKINS

Ada was assigned to Alfred Scadding and went with him in the airplane to the VG hospital, arriving about 12 noon. “I went home, had a bath, changed my uniform and was back on duty for my 12 hour shift, seven days a week from April to August, and to see Alfred walk out of the hospital was worth it.”

When Alfred (Alf) was brought out of the mine his feet to above his knees were black and pieces of his pants were imbedded into the flesh. It was questionable for many months if his legs could be saved.

Alfred Scadding in the VG hospital



NOTE the *glass-boot tube* covering Alf's leg in the picture above. (more on the 'glass-boot' treatment later). Alf was afflicted with what was called then 'Trench Disease'.

Ada Hopkins and Marion (King) Carpenter (VGH class 1931) each worked the 12 hour shifts to take care of Alfred Scadding.



Marion was born in Lunenburg, NS at her Grandfather's hotel called the "King Hotel", June 28, 1908. At graduation from the VG School of Nursing she was awarded the VG Alumni "Efficiency Prize". Marion died in Northwood Nursing Home, Halifax.

When Alfred was discharged, he gave Mrs. Carpenter her VG School Ring with a note "A constant reminder of the suffering, courage and back to health of a Moose River survivor".

MARION CARPENTER

Dr. David E. Robertson, the other survivor of the Moose River Gold Mine Disaster, in the VG hospital with Ada Hopkins, VG Nurse.

Dr. Robertson suffered little from his experience in the mine and was hospitalized just for observation. He was soon discharged and returned to Toronto.



WHAT OF THE FUTURE OF THE MEN AND NURSES

What was the future of these men: Alfred had several toes amputated but his legs were saved and he returned to mining but there was a fear for many months that he may lose both legs.; Dr. Robertson returned to Toronto and continued his medical career but unfortunately he died eight years later, not from the effects of the disaster.

The nurses who were stationed at the mine site Anna and Ada continued nursing; Anna Brennan did Private Duty nursing in Halifax. She died in 1953. Ada (Graham) Hopkins and her husband, Raymond, brought up two daughters. He predeceased Ada. Ada died June 15, 1987 at the age of 76 in Camp Hill hospital and is buried in Mountain cemetery, Yarmouth.

THREE SIGNIFICANT EVENTS FOLLOWED THE DISASTER



FRANK WILLIS
INTERVIEWING

1.- THE BEGINNING OF CBC – FIRST TIME ON THE SCENE - LIVE REPORTING

The broadcaster J. Frank Willis, of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Company and Regional Director for the Maritimes, captivated the hearts of millions across North America and Europe by his continual reporting live of the events at the Moose River Gold Mine disaster. He reported for two minutes every half-hour live on the air for 56 straight hours, round the clock reporting. This was North America's first live 24 hour news coverage and changed forever the perception, influence and course of radio in North America.

These broadcasts represented North America's first major "live media event". There were close to 650 stations connected in the US and also the BBC in London. J. Frank Willis broadcasted the world's first unscripted live news. Frank had no previous journalistic training.

He had to improvise equipment, use a borrowed car as a studio and a small team to assist on the job. This was the beginning of CBC, six months later.

2. MIRACLE OF SAVING LIMBS – *THE GLASS-BOOT*

At this time, 1936, in the field of peripheral vascular diseases (PVD) as a branch of the medical services was comparatively new. Two diagnoses could be called Raynaud's or Buerger's Disease. To treat the condition of PVD various methods and measures were used such as the Sanders Oscillating Bed and the *Pavex Glass Boot*.

The glass-boot was like a large open mouth bottle sealed to the limb so that sub atmospheric pressure or suction could be maintained. This apparatus was an aid to improve collateral circulation by intermittent venous compressions.

The glass-boot was made of see through glass with a rubber ring at the top which enclosed the lower limb. The mechanism worked on negative pressure and when working was very noisy.

The Pavex Glass-Boot was used before surgical techniques and vasodilating drugs were developed to revascularize the extremities. This method saved many limbs even if somewhat of a crude method. The demise of the 'glass-boot' occurred in the late 1940's as was the Iron Lung which worked on much the same principle.

3. THE MOOSE RIVER PROVINCIAL PARK & MUSEUM



This is the plaque which is located on the cairn.

The recess at the base of the cairn, below the plaque is the 1936 borehole that saved the three trapped men



SOUVENIRS

Souvenirs of the Moose River Gold Mine Disaster can still be purchased at the museum site along with the full history of the event. This is an original souvenir from the disaster. It is a solid glass made of clay from the area, inscribed; 1936 Moose River Gold Mine with a piece of mine rock and a rock with gold flecks. This is in the writer's possession from her mother's collection of artifacts.

