

Men of iron, drills of steel

Driving a tunnel through a mountain of granite rock

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One of the most crucial jobs in the Slocan mines was also one of the most difficult, unhealthy and dangerous: hand-drilling holes in solid rock with a length of steel and a hammer. These holes would then be filled with explosive charges which would be detonated, blasting out chunks of rock and pushing the tunnel a few feet ahead. Once the smoke and dust settled, "muckers" would come in behind the drillers to haul out all the chunks of loose rock; the valuable ore would be separated and sacked, and waste rock would be discarded onto the tailings dump. Meanwhile, the drillers would be back at work, hammering more holes in the rock to accept the next round of charges, in a never-ending cycle. In smaller mines, of course, the driller, mucker and sorter were one and the same person, but many of the larger mines had crews of dozens of men, which allowed for specialization.

In drilling a hole for the charge, the miner would start with a one-foot piece of sharpened drill steel, striking it with a hammer, then giving it a slight turn to loosen the rock chips and keep the steel from binding in the hole. As the hole deepened, a longer drill steel would be substituted, until the final drill, which was usually between four and five feet long. Working by flickering candle-light in the early years, and later by carbide lamps, the drillers often worked above their heads for 10 hours a day, with rock fragments cascading over them. Frequently, the dust particles they inhaled would lead to silicosis in their lungs, which meant a slow, agonizing death by drowning years later, as the aging miner struggled to breathe through the fluid that filled his inflamed chest.

If the tunnel was being driven through harder rock, the driller often worked with a partner- one man would hold the drill steel in place while the second man would swing the hammer. After a set length of time, the two men would switch, with the holder becoming the striker, and vice-versa. If the miner was working alone, he used a four-pound (1.81 kg.) hammer; a two-man team called four an eight-pound (3.63 kg.) hammer.

Traditionally, many of the early miners were Welsh or Cornish in origin, and gained the nickname "Jack", or "Cousin Jack". Because of this, if the miner was working alone it was called "single-jacking" while a two-man team was said to be "double-jacking". Needless to say, the man holding the steel had to trust the hammer-man implicitly, for one slip-up could mean being maimed for life. Many of these miners became extremely adept at working as a team, drilling holes several feet long in a matter of minutes.

This drilling prowess soon became a matter of pride, wagers and tournaments. In the late 19th and early 20th century, large rock-drilling competitions were held in mining camps all over North America, often with purses in the thousands of dollars, and even greater amounts hanging in the balance on side-bets. Often these competitions could bring far more money than weeks or even months of work underground, and miners trained for them with all the seriousness and dedication of an Olympic athlete. Top-level single-jackers and double-jackers would frequently travel half-way across the continent to attend an important tournament, and winners would return to their home towns as conquering heroes, often thousands of dollars richer.

Two men from Sandon- a Swede named Algot ("Erik") Erickson and a Scot named Angus McGillivray- won the international championships more than once, causing much chest-puffing pride among their comrades in the valley. Erickson, a gentle man whose strength in later years was to earn him the affectionate nickname "Iron Man", would later repeat this feat in partnership with another Swede, Joe Johnson of Silverton.

In order to train without distraction, Johnson and Erickson moved in together in an abandoned log cabin on the Bosun Ranch, north of Silverton. The owner's young son became their "official" time-keeper, and Johnson and Erickson were reported to be so proficient with the hammer and drill steel that they could average better than a blow a second, with hardly a break in the pace when they switched positions to take each other's place. The training paid off for the two, as they were able to support themselves for a considerable time with their winnings before they finally returned to working in the mines.

Pneumatic drills have long since replaced hand-drilling in the mines, but to this day there is a large granite boulder on Bosun Ranch, full of holes drilled into it almost a century ago by these two Swedish steel-drivers. A similar boulder currently sits outside the Sandon Historical Society Museum, a silent witness to the days when hardened muscles, lightning-swift reflexes, a hammer and a length of drill steel could bring fame, wealth and relative leisure into the life of

a hard-rock miner.