

Slocan Treasure Vaults: The Mines of Sandon and Area

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During Sandon's heyday over 300 mines were in operation within Sandon's vicinity. It took both rail lines to handle the shipments of ore going out and supplies for the mines coming in. Entire forests were consumed in order to supply the timber necessary for the operation of the mines. Many of the miners lived in Sandon, but an additional 2,300 were residents of the camps at the mine sites. Some of the camps accommodated as many as 100 people.

The majority of the mines and camps were located above the 5,000 foot elevation. Since 1892, over 35 billion dollars (in today's value) of silver, lead and zinc have been produced from the Sandon area mines. This exceeds the value of the 3 major gold rushes- California, the Cariboo and the Klondike- combined!

All but one of the mines were underground workings. Generally a vein was followed from the surface in the hope that it would widen into a major body of ore. In the case of the Slocan Star mine, the vein widened to an amazing 70 feet of clean galena. Most tunnels were driven below the ore bodies in order that gravity could be used to the fullest advantage. When the ore extended below the lowest tunnels, a shaft would need to be sunk and the water would need to be pumped out. Almost all mines used underground railways to move the ore and waste rock to the surface. In the early days, most mining was done by hand drilling. By 1900, compressed air drills were quickly replacing the old-fashioned methods. The work was dirty, dangerous, and unhealthy. Many miners died in accidents and many died later from respiratory diseases.

As the mines became more mechanized, the needs for energy became greater and greater. Steam engines and water turbines became part of every major operation. Several elaborate power systems were built to harness the creeks. The best surviving example is the Silversmith Powerhouse located right in Sandon.

Mining at Sandon has had its ups and downs over the years. Most of the major discoveries were made during the first three decades. During periods of wartime, metal prices have typically risen as demands have increased. During these times, mining production at Sandon has also increased. The reduced activity in recent years is a reflection of poor metal prices and the fact that the most accessible ore bodies have been mined out. If prices rise substantially in the future, chances are that exploration will uncover new ore bodies at even greater depths.

Sandon will go down in history as the capital of one of the world's greatest silver mining districts. The Payne mine was BC's highest dividend payer for many years. It and dozens of other multi-million dollar mines near Sandon made a substantial contribution to the early development of Canada and the North-Western United States.