

George Hunter's aerial picture shows the Con Mine in the foreground, and the growing new town of Yellowknife beyond.

The original Con campsite featured only a couple of tents on the lakeshore. Supplies were landed on a tiny dock by plane and barge (picture at right).



# YELLOWKNIFE

## *a Capital Place*

*By Jack Fisher*



**I**N 1788, a Connecticut Yankee established a trading post on Great Slave Lake.

In 1935, a student was working his summer with a mapping party of the Geological Survey of Canada when a discovery was made.

On January 18th 1967, a Federal cabinet minister made a long-awaited announcement.

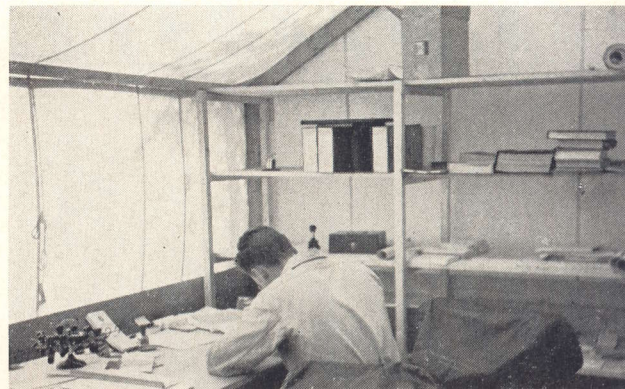
The Connecticut Yankee was trader Peter Pond, who helped in the early settlement around Great Slave Lake; the student was Neil Campbell, who later joined Cominco's geological staff. Today, Dr. Neil Campbell is chief geologist for Cominco American Incorporated. The discovery, that day in 1935, was gold.

And the cabinet minister is Northern Development Minister Arthur Laing, who announced that Yellowknife is the new capital of the Northwest Territories.

Old Yellowknife was a settled community when this picture was taken. There are eight planes docked at various points around the townsite.

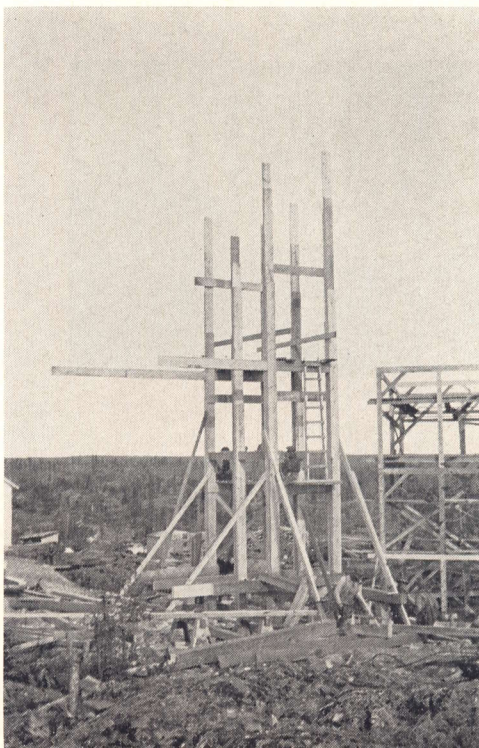


In the summer of '37, Eric Caldicott, now chief accountant at Montreal, was hard at work in the office-commissary-staff house tent.

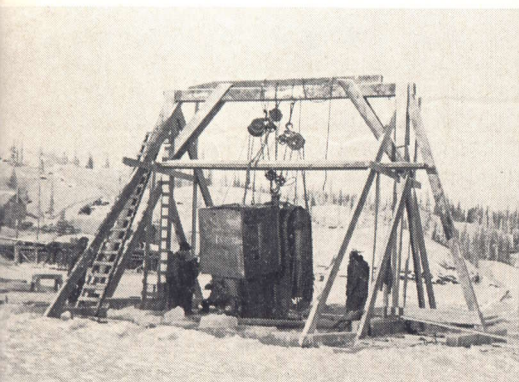


The Con headframe was only this big on September 11th, 1937. Below left, Sonny Arden's cat is pulled out of the lake. His Indian swamper, following behind the cat, looked into the hole and asked, "Are you down there, Sonny?"

PHOTOS BY BODINGTON,  
HUNTER, SANKEY, HOWE,  
BRENNEN, FISHER



Charlie Sankey (right), now chief design engineer, caught breakfast one August morning in '38, along with timekeeper Ralph Willing.



To which a former Yellowknifer was heard to comment: "That's very nice, but about 20 years late."

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Yellowknife didn't appear on the maps of 35 years ago. It didn't exist. The closest settlement was a village of the Dog Rib Indians on what became Yellowknife Bay, and the only white visitors were occasional prospectors and trappers.

It had been known for many years that there was gold to the north of Great Slave Lake, but there had never been any commercial production. Then, in the summer of 1935, a geological survey party of the Dominion of Canada, headed by Dr. Fred Jolliffe, and including student Neil Campbell, set up camp on the northern shore. The party found gold on what are now the AYE claims.

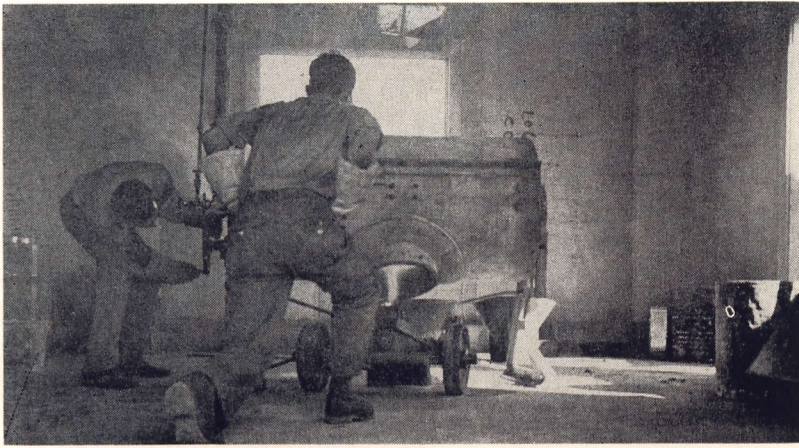
The story of the discovery got out, and one of the mining people to hear

about it at Fort Smith, in the fall of 1935, was Cominco's W. G. "Bill" Jewitt.

Mr. Jewitt called in his northern prospectors, starting a flurry of claim staking over a wide area. One of the areas obtained by Cominco was the spot which was to become the first gold producer, the Con.

Cominco was well ahead of everybody else in sinking a shaft at the Con. This was done under the supervision of mine captain R. J. "Bob" Armstrong, now Cominco vice-president, exploration.

W. M. Archibald, who was at that time the vice-president in charge of mines, was a regular visitor to Yellowknife. The head of Cominco's aero department when it was formed in 1929, Mr. Archibald flew his own plane, often seen at the makeshift dock below the Cominco claims. On the basis of initial



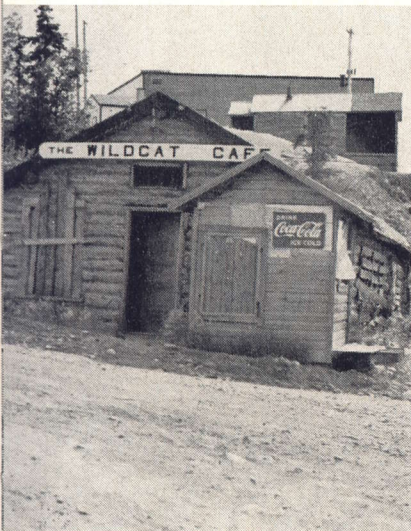
The first gold ever poured in the N.W.T. was in the Con Mill. Fred Walton, now Bluebell mill superintendent, is closest to the camera.



Everybody lined up to lift the 72-pound first ingot including Tony Stubbs, seen with Jack Hogan and Bill Miller in the upper picture, and construction superintendent Charlie Howe, below, with Eric Caldicott, Muriel Hamilton and Tony Stubbs.



Now a derelict cabin, the Wildcat Cafe was the heart of the early Yellowknife community, and many Con pioneers were regular visitors. The Commerce was the first bank in town.



gold resources, he recommended the immediate construction of a 100-ton mill, but made it known that Cominco should make every effort to increase its reserves by further exploration or acquisition. A team of exploration engineers and geologists was sent north to comb the area.

One of these, arriving in the summer of 1937, was Jim Donaldson, now a design engineer at Trail.

"We found Tudor Ommanney and Eric Caldicott at the camp busy ordering supplies for mill construction," Jim recalled. "The camp was basically two exploration tents and a frame shed for storage."

The site of the 'old' town of Yellowknife was not much bigger that summer. "An old prospector called Joe Morrison had the first cabin on the island part of the townsite. Apart from him, there were the Canadian Airways Ltd. and MacKenzie Air Service buildings (there had been a staking boom over a 100-mile radius for a year or so at that time, and aircraft were a big item), the Wildcat Cafe, Harry Weaver's log cabin general store, and Vic Ingraham's cabin."

The name Vic Ingraham is synonymous with Yellowknife. Son of a prominent Boston family, Vic had a brother who became contractor to Cominco's hydro plant at Bluefish Lake. Vic himself was a prospector at 18, was running arms in White Russia at 19, and eventually came to Bear Lake in the freighting business. Losing both legs and his fingers in a boat explosion and in the ensuing prolonged exposure in icy weather, Vic was given a cabin at Yellowknife by sympathetic friends.

He started an unofficial liquor store, and was soon able to apply for a beer parlour licence in a bigger building. Some years later, he built the half-million dollar Ingraham Hotel on the new townsite, selling his interest in it subsequently when planning to retire. He then built a beer parlour and cocktail lounge near Victoria, again successfully, and died there a few years ago.

Vic Ingraham's ashes were flown to Yellowknife and scattered over the town. The plane was filled with Yellowknife oldtimers, and was piloted by a former bush pilot who knew him well. He was the late Grant McConachie, president of Canadian Pacific Airlines.

Vic was one of a host of remarkable men who have been associated with Yellowknife's colourful 30-year history, and not a few have been Cominco men. But let's get back to Jim Donaldson's story.

"The summer of 1937 was a busy one. Boats were coming in all the time. The mill was built mostly by Peace River farmers, dusted out of their holdings, and



Some of the people who knew Yellowknife in its early days were (from left) Jim Donaldson, Charlie Sankey, and Neil Campbell. Jay Colthorpe was district superintendent there for many years, and W. G. "Bill" Jewitt (right), seen with Clare White at Con, was one of the central figures in the staking and development of Con.

good workers they were. One of them built a raft from his chicken coops and brought all his worldly goods, chickens and all, up the river system to Con. Then he used the wood to build his cabin. That's resourcefulness.

"By this time, Con ore reserves had been bolstered by the purchase of a major interest in the Ryan Mine (now the Rycon). Mr. Archibald also moved quickly in an effort to acquire the unexplored Giant claims. Mike Finland, Leo Telfer and Bill McDonald were in on that, but we didn't get the property."

(That was a pity. Giant Mine went into production years later, and has been the biggest gold producer in the North since then. Other operating mines in the Yellowknife area today are Discovery and Tundra, both smaller than Giant and Con.)

"To get ahead of my story a bit," Jim went on, "I should tell you the story of Neil Campbell's second find—the deeply hidden displaced portion of the Giant orebody which later kept Con operating. (The details were written up in a Cominco Magazine feature in December, 1957.) Neil did a superb job of geological sleuthing. He mapped the shoreline for four miles, examining every outcrop microscopically. Based on his predictions, Con and Negus got together on a drilling program. They found Neil's gold, right on the button.

"Anyway, in 1937, both the Con and the town of Yellowknife were growing fast. There were only three white women there then — construction superintendent Charlie Howe brought his wife in, and so did the camp doctor, Oliver Stanton. In town, Vicky Lepine operated a laundry, effectively guarded by a huge Great Dane.

"That Christmas, the community had a big party in the barber shop. We all had our annual quota of two cases of liquor to draw from (obtained through the police at Fort Smith), and as the party progressed, so more bodies were pushed out of the way under the pool table.

"The town policeman, a tall taciturn Scot called Casey McHale — he later married Vicky Lepine — passed the word at the party: Jail for the first man that staggered. Well, Casey was the first, so it didn't matter."

An airstrip, surveyed by Cominco people, was built on the sandy soil of an inland flat area. This meant less isolation during freeze-up and break-up, but was not really adequate. When the Federal Government built a permanent field, the strip was transformed into a golf course, and the fuselage of a crashed passenger plane became the clubhouse.

"The decision to move the townsite inland presented some problems," said Jim. "The planners had to find places to build away from rock, and that wasn't

The Yellowknife Hotel (right) was formerly the Ingraham, built by one of Yellowknife's most colourful figures.



easy. I had a plan to adapt some sounding equipment in use at the lakeshore, but that wasn't adopted. The townsite was laid out much as you see it today. But at that time it was a little strange to see street signs nailed on spruce trees, where nothing else existed.

"But again I'm getting ahead. I should mention that first gold brick at Con. It was a 72-pounder, and everybody lined up to take turns hefting it. That was the first gold poured in the Northwest Territories.

"That gold was Tudor's responsibility. (Tudor Ommanney is now Cominco's assistant comptroller.) He loaded it on a canoe and headed up the bay to Yellowknife where Harry Weaver had now opened a post office. Harry took the gold all right, but stayed up all that night with a rifle in his hands.

"Cold? Sure it was cold. We played hockey under the northern lights, but always quit when the temperature got to

30 below. One winter there was no snow right at freeze-up, and we skated for miles across the bay using sheets for sails.

"There were two cars in Yellowknife in the early days. One was owned by Carl Jensen of the Wildcat Cafe. There were no roads, though. Just two cars in hundreds of miles of ice. But it was bound to happen — they collided that second winter."

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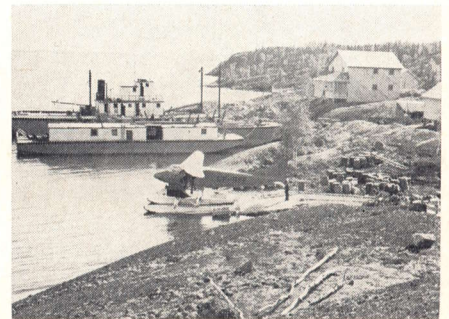
What has happened to Yellowknife in the past thirty years that it should now become the capital of N.W.T.?

"It's the biggest town in the Territories," explains Jay Colthorpe, who was Cominco superintendent of mines at Yellowknife from 1955 to 1966, "with a population today of around 4,000. When the civil service moves in, the population should go up to perhaps seven thousand.

"The businessmen in Yellowknife have done a tremendous amount of work in getting the government to agree to



LEFT—Mrs. Henry Giegerich, wife of the wartime Con superintendent, sends Red Cross parcels via Edmonton, helped by Dolly Mercredi and a few canine friends.



RIGHT — Cominco vice-president W. M. Archibald's plane was often seen at the Con dock.



RIGHT—The earliest picture available of Yellowknife shows some cabins built in 1937.



LEFT—Jim Donaldson went fishing with Paul Elliott, later Sullivan Mill superintendent.



RIGHT—A wintry shot of Bill Jewitt fuelling his light plane on the ice of Yellowknife Bay.

moving the capital from Fort Smith. They've held big conventions in town, and just look at their investments! It has been quite a gamble for these people to build a modern community based almost entirely on a few gold mines. But their gamble has paid off now.

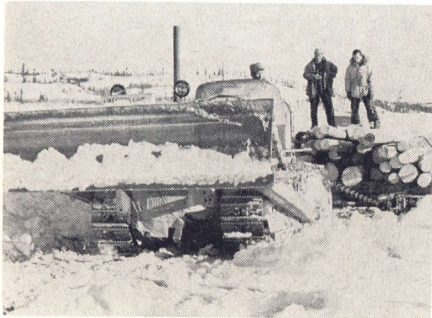
"It's a solid town, Yellowknife," Jay continued, "with a real air of permanence. There are quite a few second generation Yellowknifers working there now.

"You could point to a few milestones that have brought the town to its present status. The gold first, of course, then the aircraft and the airport. A really big step was the extension of the Mackenzie Highway to Yellowknife from Hay River in 1960. Then the railway to Pine Point. Our warehouse stock at Con has dropped from an 18-month supply to three months.

"All these factors have contributed to the stability of Yellowknife. Mr. Laing's announcement has assured it."



*ABOVE—The Hudson's Bay Co. store, left, dominated old town's waterfront. The Bay today is new town's biggest store.*



*LEFT — Dolly Mercredi's cat helped haul wood as much as 100 miles to Con's boilerhouse.*



*RIGHT—Looking north, this more recent picture of old town takes in the Giant Mine in the background.*



*LEFT—Settling down, Con employees took time out to build a tennis court.*



*LEFT—The hockey rink at Con was a chilly spot, even when the sun shone.*



*RIGHT—The Town Hall of the Municipal District of Yellowknife is one of many attractive buildings in the new town.*