

A long search for 'big mine'

Mineral-hungry explorers looking for "the big mine" have probably put ten times as much money into Mt. Washington as has ever been taken out of it, says a Department of Energy, Mines and Resources spokesman.

A number of companies have worked on mineral showings on the mountain since the first pioneers moved to the Comox Valley.

In the 1930s, adits and short mine tunnels were driven into the ground to test the value of mineral showings. The initial exploration work for the Mt. Washington copper mine started in 1956 and continued steadily until 1964, when a mill and mine were built. On Dec. 5, 1964, the Mt. Washington mine was

opened with much fanfare. Canadian newspapers reported 500 people in attendance, including B.C. ministers and Japanese dignitaries among them.

The mine only operated for two years--from December 1964 to November 1966--but in that time 396,000 tons of copper ore were taken out.

When the mill shut down in March, 1967, it had produced 19,540 tons of copper concentrate. The most visible signs of the mine almost 20 years later are

the concrete foundations of the mill, visible from the road going up to the Mt.

Washington ski hill, and the open-pit mine, four and a half miles from the mill, with its 134,000 tons of waste and overburden piled beside it.

Although the copper being mined was a type that naturally leaches into surrounding water, biologist Bill McLean says that the open-pit mine has produced a chain reaction that noticeably increases the leaching. The pyrites in copper, when exposed to air and water, oxidize and produce a very powerful sulfuric acid. Bacteria that thrive on acid promote even more corrosive action, he explains.

There was enough copper leaching into waters around the open-pit mine that Esso Minerals spent two years doing exploratory work in the area. Waste management director Wayne White said that Esso contemplated using a method of leaching and a tin-can system to recover the metal, similar to what had been used at Britannia Mines near West Vancouver. The regional manager of Esso Minerals, Charles Aird, says, however, that Esso gave back the mining option to Mt.

Washington Copper in 1982, as a cause not worth pursuing.

World copper prices have become so depressed that the Northern Miner's bureau chief, David Duval, says he doesn't expect another copper mine to be started in B.C. anytime in the next half century.

There are other metals

United Way

(Continued from page 1)

has collected 115,000, with more to come.

Fundraiser chairman Delbert Doll said a number of loose-ends are yet to be pulled together, and the results of payroll deductions will not be known for some time.

He said contributions are still coming in.

Even though the official campaign is over, Doll said contributions are still welcome. Those who are unable to make a direct cash contribution at this time, are encouraged to make a pledge

in Mt. Washington, though. A minor gold rush has brought about 25 companies into the mid-Island area, exploring for gold. One of the companies, Better Resources Ltd., spent two months this summer at the Mt. Washington mine site doing diamond drilling for gold.

Better Resources direc

tor James Bristow, a former engineer with Placer Development, says the company has about 160 mineral claims in the area and has found an area quite high in gold. The diamond drilling is mainly being done about 3,000 feet southwest of the old copper-mine site, near an old showing of gold that was explored in the 40s.

from other rivers. It now has 20,000 adult salmon per year returning to it.

But that sort of restocking is impossible if it is copper pollution that is the root of the Tsoolum River's problems. And he isn't hopeful about a clean-up job. "It's a huge job," he says.



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