

History of mining in Ross township

By G.A. Wallace

Ross Township is the locale of Canada's only magnesium producer. The impact on the local economy has been most beneficial. A brief review, therefore, of the geology of the township and its mineral occurrences will be of interest.

Ross Township is underlain by precambrian rocks which have an estimated age of one billion to three and a half billion years. Thus it is part of the Great Canadian Shield which has proven to be the host rock for a wide variety of minerals. Northwesternly of a line drawn roughly from Haley's to Forester's Falls the chief rocks are granite and granite pegmatite. In the southeasterly part dolomite and limestone of Grenville age prevail. It is from a very pure deposit of dolomite that magnesium is obtained.

Renfrew County has long been famous for the variety of its minerals and some occurrences in the past have been worked solely for the recovery of mineral specimens. Since precambrian rocks are very old they have been intensely folded and metamorphosed, bent and cracked by later earth movements. The result is that mineral deposits which have been found in the granites in the county (and in Ross) have little continuity.

A variety of minerals have been found, however, in the granites in Ross. They include the following: (A) An asbestos occurrence in lot 8, Conc. 9. Although the fibres were of commercial length they were inseparable and therefore non-commercial.

(B) Apatite, fluor spar, and zircon were found in several pits in lot 4, conc. 6. The crystals exposed by trenching were only of mineralogical interest.

(C) An apatite occurrence on lot 7, conc. 9 produced about one ton of crystals in 1883. A few crystals of purple fluor spar and black spinel were also reported to have been found.

(D) Clay suitable for brick-making was excavated in lot

8, conc. 8. A brick-making plant was built by James Johnston in 1895 and bought by J.E. Waite in 1898. It operated during the summer months into the 1920's. Both brick and tile were made.

(E) Fluorspar occurs in a very small pit, approx. two ft. by four ft. by five ft. in the northwest corner of lot 14, conc. 5. It has no economic value.

(F) A graphite occurrence was opened up in a very small prospect pit on lot 9, conc. 10.

(G) Marl is present on lots 13 and 15, conc. 2. The most important is that in Green Lake on lot 13. Several attempts have been made to utilize marl from this deposit. However it appears there was too much clay material and organic matter mixed with it to make it suitable for commercial use.

(H) Molybdenite was found in lot 22, conc. 2. A trench was dug with a length of 1 ft. and a width of about seven ft. It is also reported that a shaft was excavated to a depth of about 40 ft. Altogether about 18 tons of ore have been shipped from this deposit.

(I) Crystalline Dolomite has been mined on lot 25, conc. 3; lot 20, conc. 5; lot 19, conc. 6; and lot 10, conc. 10. These outcrops of varying purity extend for a distance of about eight miles from the vicinity of Haley's in the south west of the Forester's Falls area in the north east. On lot 10, conc. 10 J.M. Jamieson operated a kiln where he produced lime from white crystalline limestone. Over the years some of the outcrops have been mined for lime, for terazzo, for building stone, for tombstones and in later years for the production of magnesium on lot 20, conc. 5. This later deposit was chosen because the magnesium content of this ore was slightly higher than in any other local deposit.

The foregoing information re: mineral occurrences in Ross Twp. was printed in the Fifty Third Annual Report of the Ontario

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The Queen's Line Quarry

This outcrop of crystalline dolomite is situated on the east half of lot 19, conc. 6. Several operators removed building stone from this site in the 1890's and after 1900. It is reported that some was used in the Monroe Block in Pembroke and in the Roman Catholic Church at Osceola and in a school in Sault Ste. Marie.

Lot 19, conc. 6 was obtained from the Crown in 1875 by James McQuaid for \$80. The lateness of this transfer to private hands says something about the unattractiveness of the parcel to earlier settlers.

In 1878 William Wallace purchased the ground from McQuaid and in 1899 sold it to Charles Bilson for \$1000. In 1901 Caleb C. Symons obtained from Bilson a lease on all minerals for \$50. per year over 20 years. However after about 10 years Symons gave up his option. In 1911 Arthur Drysdale and John Arbic made an agreement to rent the quarry site from Sarah and John Bilson for \$100. per year for five years. Before this lease had expired some people with larger dreams became interested in this deposit of pure crystalline dolomite. The rock became known as "White Marble" or "White Granite".

In 1913 land was assembled for a railroad right-of-way from Haley's and in 1914 contractors built the grade on which the CPR laid rails. A 4 inch wood-stave pipe was laid along this route to carry water from Olmstead Lake to the quarry site. In 1915 the White Granite Co. of Canada bought from a Mr. Powell 3.06 acres at the quarry site plus the railroad right-of-way for \$125,400. The White Granite Co. proceeded to build a mill building, a machine shop, and buildings to house the steam and diesel power plants. Facilities for housing and feeding the staff were also built.

The "White Granite" was drilled and wedged in such a way as to produce cubes of rock 6 ft. by 6 ft. by 6 ft. These heavy blocks were then lifted out of the excavation by a steam-powered "jammer" or hoist and transferred into the mill building where diamond-toothed saws cut one-inch thick slabs from the blocks in much the same way as a butcher cuts slices from a piece of ham.

An unforeseen problem developed. The crystalline dolomite was by nature not amorphous but had bedding-planes and fractures in it. The one inch slabs shattered easily reducing their value. Not more than 300 tons of the rock was processed and much less was shipped. Several attempts were made to keep the Company solvent by selling stock. To keep the operations going, but to no avail. In 1916, in April, The White Granite Company was "wound up" in The Supreme Court of Ontario.

Many of the assets were sold and approx. \$24,000 was paid to a host of creditors, most of them getting 20 cents on the dollar. The railroad rails were quickly lifted by the CPR as World War I was still being waged and steel was in short supply.

In the 1920's the mill building was torn down and re-erected as a barn on a farm at the east end of Pembroke. The frame staff-houses were sold to local farmers for \$75, each. A long wooden trestle which had been erected on the Albert Wallace farm and over which a train had passed only three of four times was torn down when it became a hazard to livestock. The 4 inch wood-stave waterline remained in the ground and was used by Dominion Magnesium Ltd. when it began operations in 1942. The Quarry site ultimately fell to the township for taxes.

To be continued...

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