

# MOOSE RIVER GOLD MINES

## A park with a story to tell

By Tom Mason Photos by Kelly Bent



This pond once held the tailings that were separated from the gold ore. Today it is one of the focal points of Moose River Gold Mines Provincial Park.

It is one of the smallest and most isolated provincial parks in the province. But Moose River Gold Mines Provincial Park is a memorial of sorts: a tribute to an event that, for a few days in 1936, put this quiet corner of Nova Scotia at the center of world-wide attention: a mining disaster that became one of the biggest international media events before World War II.

There is something about a mining disaster that captures the public's attention like few other news stories: the feelings of helplessness; the painfully slow efforts to reach miners who may be hurt or dying; the elation when survivors are found; the frustration and defeat when a search is called off.

Mining disasters have placed Nova Scotia on the international media stage a number of times: Springhill in 1956 and 1958, Plymouth in 1992. The Moose River mining disaster was a small one in comparison: just three people trapped with two surviving. But Moose River had the distinction of being the first mining disaster to capture international media attention, one of the first events of any kind to be broadcast live around the world, and a major victory for broadcast journalism in its battle against print journalism.

On Easter Monday, April 13, 1936, three men went down into the Moose River Gold Mine. Dr. D.E. Robertson was the head surgeon at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children and part owner of the mine.

He and his partner, lawyer Herman Magill were inspecting the mine with the company timekeeper, Alfred Scadding. The three were at the 141-foot level when the main shaft collapsed.

For six days the entire radio-listening world waited as hourly reports told of the progress of the rescuers. Finally a diamond drill broke through to where the cold, wet men were trapped and communications were established with them; too late for Magill, who died of pneumonia a few hours later. For four more days the rescuers dug, until just after midnight on April 23 when the news flashed around the world that Robertson and Scadding were rescued.

Moose River Gold Mines Provincial Park preserves the site of this dramatic piece of history and serves as a memorial to Magill and all other Nova Scotian miners who've given their lives in the search for mineral wealth. Visitors to the park can picnic beside a tailings pond, which once held heavy minerals that were washed away as part of the gold mining process. A large stamp mill — a machine used to pulverize ore in order to release the precious gold inside — is also preserved on the site. The abandoned mine shaft is fenced off and isolated from the public.

In the minds of most Nova Scotians the term "gold rush" conjures up visions of the Klondike, the Chilcoat Pass, Dawson City and the stories of Jack London and Robert Service.

Most are vaguely aware of gold mines that once existed in Moose River or Waverley, but few know the extent to which gold was mined in the province over the last 150 years. Three times — in the 1860s, 1890s and 1930s — miners hauled enough gold from Nova Scotian rock to classify as gold rushes. In 1897, as rumors filtered south that a little Yukon creek called Klondike was producing fantastic amounts of gold, Nova Scotian miners quietly



A memorial to Herman Magill and a tribute to the miners who risked their lives to try and save him and his companions.

extracted 30,000 troy ounces of the yellow metal from their own bedrock.

Gold remains an important part of the province's mineral wealth, says DNR geologist Don Weir. But mining activity fluctuates based on the price of gold on the international market. "When the price of gold is high, we see a lot of mining activity in the province. Right now the price is high, so there is a lot of interest in gold. There has been a lot of exploration going on in the last couple of years."

In fact one mining company has been drilling exploration holes right in Moose River Gold Mines Provincial Park itself, but Weir says it's unlikely that the old mineshaft will ever be opened again. "Old mineshafts are just too dangerous. If they decide it is worthwhile mining in the area again, they will probably sink a new shaft somewhere else."

More tests are needed before gold mining comes to Moose River again, if it ever does. But Moose River Gold Mines Provincial Park will remain a memorial to an event that made the world a little bit smaller and, for a few short weeks, made the tiny community of Moose River, Nova Scotia a household name.

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Stamp mills like these were once used to separate gold and heavy metals from the ore.