

From the Mineral Inventory Files

Tragedy at Gold Lake

Researching and field checking old mineral prospects and mines isn't always just about geology. Often the research provides a window into long-past eras, the conditions workers faced and the routine of their everyday lives. In the late 1800s working in the woods was tough and conditions were harsh. Protecting the health and safety of workers was mostly an afterthought. Edmund Burke offered the opinion that "those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it," so let's examine a piece of Nova Scotia's history.

Tragedy struck on 26 November 1897 at the Consolidated Gold Lake Au Mine northeast of Lake Charlotte, Halifax County (Fig. 1). The only official record of the accident I know of is a short article in the November 27 New York

Times that reads: "*Three Men Killed in Halifax; Boiler Bursts at the Gold Lake Mines with Fatal Results. Halifax, N.S. Nov. 26 – The explosion of a boiler at Gold Lake Mines, East Halifax, today caused the instant death of the manager of the mine, Daniel McPhail, and two other men, James Hennessy and John McIsaac, their bodies being terribly torn by the flying wreckage of the boiler. No others were seriously injured. Hennessy and McIsaac were testing the boiler at the time.*"

The Gold Lake Mine was a small operation. Discovered in 1867, but not developed until the mid-1890s, it only ever produced a few dozen ounces of gold from a handful of shafts (Fig. 1). Installation of a boiler was part of this

first development effort, and it was during testing of the boiler that the accident occurred.

When I first visited the mine in 1997, by coincidence almost 100 years to the day following the explosion, I found a few foundations and some quartz debris at the very southeast corner of Gold Lake (Fig. 1). I also came upon the remnants of a boiler and, 30 m to the south, the boiler's firebox. Now overgrown, both pieces were extensively damaged (Fig. 2). The twisted condition of the firebox particularly shows the power of the explosion. In addition, the surrounding area is strewn with twisted pieces of metal, including many fragments of boiler pipe showing steam-pressure ruptures (inset in Fig. 2). The accident site seems to have been left essentially as it was following the 1897 explosion.

Government reports show no formal record of this accident and the loss of three men. Times really have changed.

George O'Reilly



Figure 1. (L) Air photo showing the location of the Gold Lake Mine and position of the 1897 boiler accident relative to the mine workings. **Figure 2. (R)** Photo of the boiler firebox showing extensive damage. The inset is a photo of a ruptured pipe from the boiler, showing clear evidence of the steam explosion.