

A FLY IN THE OINTMENT

By David Gregory, President Okanagan Historical Society & Jennifer Douglass, Hedley Museum Secretary

Duncan Woods, a relentless prospector, was a lone wolf who had wandered all through the Old West. Finally, after two decades of dedicated searching he located one of the richest mineral claims in BC, a discovery that eventually yielded a Midas hoard of gold.

In 1898 when Woolaston and Arundel, two inexperienced English prospectors, accidentally made the first astonishing discovery of free gold in red rusty ore near the mile high level at the top of a steep mountain called Nickle Plate, that find electrified the mining world. Within months, hundreds of prospectors and tramp miners were streaming into the remote Similkameen Valley from all parts of the West.

And close on their heels came the mine-makers, American financiers from Spokane and the Inland Empire; English bankers from the great investment houses of London and a handful of Canadian speculators from the distant eastern provinces – all with their eyes fixed on Nickle Plate Mountain – and all envisioning another bonanza like the Noble Five – Silver King, War Eagle, Le Roi, Centre Star or a galaxy of other renowned mines that had been found in southern British Columbia.

But the mining magnates were not alone in their quest. There were others there too focusing on the prize and equally determined to get their share. Among these hundreds of hopefuls camped along the banks of Twenty Mile Creek was the enigmatic Duncan Woods. In his forties and with few resources remaining, his options were limited. His career had been depressing. A Canadian from Ontario, he had followed the elusive rainbow of prospecting since his twenties, first to the gold fields of the American West; to South Dakota, then to Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington, but ill luck attended him every step of the way, so finally he turned toward the North Star and crossed the border in southern British Columbia. Once again, bad fortune marched with him, first in the Okanagan district and later in the mineral rich Boundary Country. But when whispers circulated through the mining camps that massive veins carrying spectacular quantities of gold had been found in the Similkameen Valley, once again he succumbed to the old urge and decided to try his hand in the new mining district.

By 1899 he was at Hedley, a ramshackle and booming mining camp tucked into a narrow canyon under the shadows of Nickle Plate Mountain. That fledging log cabin town was crackling with excitement when he arrived. A motley and colorful crowd milled along its busy streets where paupers brushed shoulders with princes of finance, clergymen with Cyprians, old hands with greenhorns, gamblers with drifters – they were all there caught up in the unforgettable drama of the stampede.

Nickle Plate Mountain, the key, had already been heavily staked. The nucleus of the claims around the original discovery, with names like Nickle Plate, Mound, Sunnyside, Copperfield, Morning and Iron Duke were surveyed – and were soon to become the

illustrious Nickle Plate Mine. And in all directions from the main lode more than a hundred other claims had been staked. While Woods pondered his waning chances, he examined the claims map and noticed that there was a gap of open ground west of the discovery claims. Studying the mountain he saw that it was located on the western precipitous western cliffs the ground being almost vertical.

After weighing the possibilities, Woods decided to claim the unstaked ground on the off chance that the ore body from the rich Nickle Plate node might eventually trend westward. With his last few dollars he hired a sometimes packer named George H. Cahill to stake the Cliffside. The following day the ground was secured. Woods called the claim the 'Mascot' little

Duncan Woods standing beside his log cabin with the sod roof at Trout Lake, Summerland, no date.

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Hand-carved stakes such as this claim marker were set up by early prospectors to identify and delineate the boundaries of their mining claims. Once purchased, a mining claim granted the buyer the exclusive rights to explore for an extract minerals from a tract of land.

The Oro Plata claim post (L3875) consisted of 19.5 hectares (40 acres) and was located 1.5 kilometers southwest of the Mascot Fraction. The claim had no reported historic gold production. This claim post appears to have been made from jack pine.

Mining claims in the early days were much smaller.

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realizing that it would ultimately play an historic role in the annals of mining in British Columbia.

By the early 1900s a steady stream of staggeringly rich gold ore was being shipped from the Nickle Plate mine and when a forty stamp mill was built to process the ore in 1904, Hedley became a bona fide mining town. In that same year, however, several events occurred that affected the destiny of the camp for decades. The first was the realization by the Nickle Plate management that their ore body was not only massive, but that it was, as Woods had speculated, leading to the west towards the Mascot claim. The officers of the claims then made an unusual request. They asked the gold commissioner to resurvey all of the claims covering the Nickle Plate lode. It was a significant departure from accepted practice and foreshadowed the David and Goliath like struggle that would take place between the powerful mine management and the solitary prospector.

The government official granted their wishes and after the second survey had been completed Woods' worst suspicions were confirmed. His Mascot claim had, with the stroke of a pen, been reduced from 40 acres to barely 17 acres and the full claim had suddenly become a fraction. The first round had gone to the mighty Nickle Plate but their management compounded the situation by sending word to Woods that they would consider purchasing the Mascot Fraction. It was a major error in judgement. They had underestimated the tenacity of Woods. He not only turned their offer down he vowed then and there to never ever sell his fraction to the Nickle Plate Mine owners.

As the years passed, the Nickle Plate Mine continued to make overtures to the obdurate Woods and he continued to turn them down. Every month the bullion bars were shipped out by stagecoach as the gold production increased steadily. By 1914, however, the mine's geologists knew that the main ore bodies led directly into the Mascot Fraction and that the fraction was bonanza ground. On the pretext of getting to ore on their Morning Claim, the powerful company asked permission from the gold commissioner to drive a

tunnel through the Mascot Fraction. Corrupt officials granted this unheard of violation of mining law and the infuriated Woods was forced to stand by hopelessly as his gigantic adversary followed the rich vein into the heart of his fraction. The mine management then brazenly processed the rich ore through their mill and surrendered not one ounce of gold from Wood's fraction although somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 ounces were stolen from the prospector. It was a thinly disguised theft sanctioned by legal authority.

Although virtually penniless, Woods hung on grimly, refusing to surrender his old rights to his precious Mascot claim. As the years passed, the Nickle Plate became one of the most illustrious mines in British Columbia and the golden it yielded inched up toward the one million troy ounce mark. Although its steady production resulted in impressive profits for its shareholders, the mine's shrewd management never lost interest in the Mascot Fraction and continued in their attempts, some legal, some illegal, to wrest the property from the old prospector. Woods, in turn, never wavered from his vow in 1904 and refused to even consider and proposals from the Nickle Plate. It was a classic stalemate between the singular prospector and the influential mining giant.

Eighteen year later, the price of gold was officially increased to \$35 per ounce and mining activity across the province shot up dramatically and Nickle Plate Mountain and the Similkameen were among the magnets in the revival. In short order, a number of mining companies approached Woods with a confusing variety of deals for control of his fraction. Finally, in 1933, more than a third of a century after Woods had obtained his claim, he accepted an offer from a legitimate and newly incorporated company called Hedley Mascot Gold Mines Limited.

Woods, nearing 80 years of age, had finally triumphed over his old adversary. Woods, his long battle over, retired wealthy and respected. The Mascot went on to become one of the richest fractions in Canadian mining history and when it eventually ceased operation it

had produced ten tons of pure gold in more than two decades of mining.

Nickle Plate Mountain claims were first staked in 1894 but it wasn't until 1899 that the mountain had the first producing lode (vein of metal ore) on the Similkameen. By 1899, the area was covered with claims and the town of Hedley (named for R. R. Hedley, manager of the smelter at Nelson) began to develop.

Prospector Duncan Woods arrived in Hedley after much of Nickel Plate Mountain had already been claimed but he noticed that a small 40-acre portion had been missed. He claimed the land and named the fraction Mascot. In 1904 the Daly Reduction Company that operated the Nickel Plate Mine discovered that their main ore body angled into the claim that Woods had made and the superintendent, Gomer P. Jones, approached Woods to purchase it. Woods refused to sell then and as long as Jones was involved. However, Woods finally did sell his claim to a group from Vancouver and in 1933 they formed Hedley Mascot Gold.

In 1909 a New York company took over the Nickel Plate Mine, and a branch line of the Great Northern Railway was pushed through to Hedley. Between 1904 and 1930, when production lapsed briefly, 1.3 million tons of ore from Nickel Plate were mined and milled.

The John W. Mercer Exploration Company, later known as the Kelowna Exploration Company, purchased the mine in 1932 and again started gold production at the Nickle Plate Mine. In 1937, a 'mile-high' company town was built on top of Nickel Plate Mountain. It later became a ghost town when the mine closed.

Just after it opened in 1936, the Hedley Mascot Mine ran into difficulties when rumours about its operation caused a severe stock decline. A Government investigation discovered that ore samples from the

mine had been "salted" and the public had been given false information. The mine was taken over by the provincial government and one of the officials prosecuted. In 1955, the mine was officially closed.

The Mascot Gold Mine operated from 1936 to 1949. During this time 7.1 tonnes of gold was taken out. Ore from the mine was transported down the mountain to a mill on the valley floor using an aerial tramline. After the mine closed the buildings and tramway fell into dereliction.

From the 1950s through to 1986 the mines on Nickel Plate Mine Mountain were inactive. Then Mascot Gold Mines Ltd. began production from an open pit mine in 1987. Homestake Mining Company of San Francisco took over the ownership in 1992, but by 1996 ore reserves were exhausted and the company started to wind down its operations on Nickel Plate Mountain.

In the 1990s, the British Columbia government was going to burn the site down because it posed a safety risk, but Hon. Bill Barlee, then Minister of Tourism, intervened and, in 1995 allocated about \$740,000 to assemble the various portions of the site and start a stabilization program on the wooden structures and decking. In 1998, following a public bidding process, the Upper Similkameen Indian Band (USIB) was given a contract to manage the site. Later, title to the site was transferred to the USIB which created the Snaza'ist Discovery Centre in Hedley to interpret the mine site and serve as a place to conduct tours to the mine, located almost one mile high overlooking Hedley. The USIB's goal is to turn the Hedley Mascot Gold Mine into a major heritage tourism destination along Highway 3 and to create jobs for the USIB and for the wider community.

FOLLOWING PAGES

The tramway for the Hedley Mine (in red) and the tramway for the Mascot Fraction (in red).

