

# Trethewey's Coniagas Ranch

Today the Alouette River flows west from 216th Street to Neaves Road, roughly the same route it has taken for eons. For the past 105 years the lands along this section of river have been owned by Coniagas Ranches. So what has been happening on these lands for the past century and where did the name Coniagas come from?

The Trethewey family had been tin miners in Cornwall, England, before immigrating to Canada. They first lived in the Muskoka region of Ontario before venturing west in 1881 to settle in the Fraser Valley town of Mission. The family made their first small fortune by subdividing and selling lots in Mission before starting up a logging operation on nearby Harrison Lake. With a background in mining, the father James chanced to discover silver outcroppings on the east side of the lake. He called his discovery the Providence Mine and it was a reasonable producer, but when the silver vein went under the lake, the father and his sons sold the mine for \$25,000. Son William G. Trethewey chose to invest his share of the money in real estate. He purchased a portion of the Hudson's Bay Company's old Fort Edmonton from William Groat in the spring of 1903, for the princely sum of \$100 an acre for the purpose of putting in a subdivision.

It was while he was in Edmonton that Will read in the papers that "pieces of native silver as big as stove lids and dinner plates" had been discovered in northern Ontario. He immediately took the CPR train to Montreal and met with government geologist Willet G. Miller, who told Will he was leaving for the source of the discovery. Will quickly outfitted himself, purchased a miner's license, and accompanied the geologist on the train ride. The next day the two men were visiting Fred LaRose's discovery claim, the second largest silver discovery in Northern Ontario.

Legend has it that Trethewey asked what had already been staked and then struck out to discover two of the richest silver mines on the same afternoon. It was the 10th of May 1904, a day that Will would never forget: "I walked almost straight to the Trethewey Mine. I had no axe with me, and there were fellows down at the camp that would have made a wild rush up there if they had known, and I might have lost my mine. So I hid it as well as I could by throwing sticks and moss over the rock where I had chipped it." He arrived back at camp, took tea with the other members of the group, and then casually walked

off to chop down a tree: "I started out walking slowly with my axe over my shoulder until I got out of sight and then I hit the ground only on the high spots." He put in his stake post with his name and licence number and then incredibly found another discovery on a nearby cliff face. Will Trethewey had just made two of the richest silver claims in Canada in a single day! A pinkish bloom on the rock known as "cobalt" was a sure sign of silver, and Cobalt was the name given to the local town of the Trethewey and Coniagas Mines. The name "Coniagas" for Will's second mine was concocted from the chemical symbols: Co for cobalt, Ni for nickel, Ag for silver and As for arsenic. Will immediately wired home and asked his brother Joe to join him at the mines. Joe took a train east, and Will offered him a 1/8 interest in Coniagas Mine. The ore was so rich at the two mines that the huge slabs of almost pure silver could be peeled off the side cliffs "like boards off a barn." Will Trethewey became a multi-millionaire as soon as the first trainloads of ore were processed in the American smelters. Will and Joe sold out their shares in the mines after only two years, while the mines still had many productive years left. Speculation is that Will made as much as \$10 million from his two claims.

Joe Trethewey used a small portion of the proceeds of Coniagas Mines to buy three parcels of land along the Lillooet River in 1905. The Lillooet River was officially changed to the South Alouette River in 1915 to avoid confusion with the other BC Lillooet River system. The three parcels consisted of approximately 250 acres north of the South Alouette River between the current 216th Ave and Neaves Road. Joe had bought the farm with the intention of giving it to his son Joseph Edgar; they named the lands Coniagas Ranch after the mine.

It would be 16 years before Edgar (Joseph Edgar) would return to Haney to operate his farm. Two years were spent at Agricultural College in Guelph and then 14 years managing his father Joe's Chilco Ranch in the interior of BC. Chilco Ranch was one of the largest ranches in BC at the time. Edgar returned to Coniagas Ranch in 1921 with his new bride Margaret (née Church).

He chose to establish a large sheep and cattle ranch. Hardhack was ploughed under and fertile alluvial soil was uncovered. Chinese labourers, working with wheelbarrows and shovels, built up protective dykes that were later raised higher by the use of machinery. Joe spent the next seven years between logging operations at Alice Arm and improving the productivity of the farm while building up the protective dikes.



Several of these 15"-diameter, 14-pound plates were commissioned by the Trethewey family in 2004 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of the Trethewey and Coniagas silver mines in Cobalt, Ontario.



**Above**  
**Royal Canadian Air Force Flight Lieutenant Richard B. Trethewey.**

**Below**  
**A Mesopotamian cross Fallow deer at the Coniagas Ranch.**



After his father Joe's death in 1927 Edgar had to leave the farm again to take over his father's businesses in Abbotsford. Edgar couldn't see to sell his cherished farm, so it was leased out for the next 12 years.

It wasn't until 1939 that Edgar and Margaret moved back to the farm with five children: Richard, Allan, Bill, Phyllis and "JO."

As Edgar was away more often than at home, most of the family duties of raising a family and running a farm were left to the very capable hands of Margaret. Not only was most of the family food and preserves provided from the farm and Margaret's kitchen, but much of the food for the logging camps was also provided from the mixed farming activities of Coniagas Ranch. During the war years Margaret had some extra help from youths evacuated from Britain to Canadian farms. Margaret was an active community leader, promoting many youth activities; she is especially noted in Maple Ridge for her inclusive horse programs. The first pony club in British Columbia was started by Margaret along with the Maple Ridge Riding Centre, which opened in 1955. Margaret promoted many young riders upon her very fine Arab horses, notably Nuri Sinbad and his son Pharaoh, whose versatility made him a show ring success in hack, western, jumping and dressage contests. Another Arab, Ferishal, had a long show career while trained and ridden by Barbara Marsden McCauley; he won consistently in open jumping shows, open hunter, show hack, hunter hack and dressage. He was the Western Canadian Dressage Champion for the Medium Test. He placed each of the three times he was shown at the all-breed Royal Winter Fair in Toronto and won a Vancouver three-day event. At age 13 Ferishal competed at the 1962 Pebble Beach three-day event (California) as a member of the San Fernando Rey team. Ferishal was a full hand shorter than any other horse entered, the only stallion and the only Arabian at the event. His efforts helped his team to a Bronze medal. Ferishal's offspring of purebred and part-Arabians continued his winning legacy for years to follow.

Coniagas Ranch's current owner Sharon Stewart (Margaret's granddaughter, Richard and Leslie's daughter) also had a good eye for Arab stallions. She imported two-year-old Magic Domino from England in 1990 after an exhaustive search for the Crabbet bloodlines owned by her grandmother. Domino achieved status as a Canadian Trakehner approved stallion and a Canadian Sport Horse phase one approved stallion while in Canada. Magic Domino is now in Tennessee, where he continues to be one of the top Arab stallions in North America.

In 1965, after 13 years in the Air Force and 8 years in the family business, Edgar's eldest son Richard returned to take over the farm. Richard transformed the farm into one of the larger berry farms in the Fraser Valley, producing mostly strawberries and raspberries along with some vegetables. Coniagas Ranch was one of the early blueberry farms in the area holding Farm # 3 at the local blueberry co-op. In later years the berries and vegetables (with the exception of the blueberries, which are still in full production) gave way to hay and cattle. The cattle were wintered in the BC interior and grazed on the lush summer grass of Coniagas Ranch. Richard also used the farm to follow his passion of bird propagation. In the seventies Richard built facilities at Coniagas Ranch to spearhead programs to reintroduce and enhance a number of waterfowl species back to the local area and around BC. Included were Canada geese, gadwalls, harlequin ducks, scaup, scoters, wood ducks and a project with sandhill cranes. Richard's volunteer work with Ducks Unlimited has greatly enhanced waterfowl habitat in British Columbia. A favourite project was the art folio "Waterfowl of North America," conceived and directed by Richard. This one project raised over a million dollars for conservation. For this, Richard received a lifetime achievement award from DU.

In 1987 Richard turned over the reins of Coniagas Ranch to his daughter Sharon Stewart and her husband Ken. In recent years the sight of farmed deer and nursery stock has taken over from strawberries and hay. The conservation nature of the farm continues today with a number of river projects with the Alouette River Management Society to enhance the fish production on the section of Alouette River owned by Coniagas Ranch. One stand of Cottonwood trees on the farm holds one of the larger heron nesting sites in the Fraser Valley with over 90 nests. The private conservation area established along the river has become a refuge for many fish, bird and animal species.



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