

Tom Johnson and the Geraldton Gold Rush by Ernie Bies January 20, 2014

If Hearst had a Prospector's Hall of Fame two local gold seekers would be enshrined. Both have been commemorated with Historic Plaques documenting their discoveries. One is Gus McManus who discovered gold at Red Lake Ontario in 1922. He then had to take a short leave of absence from his new job as the first Mayor of Hearst to restake his claims when the gold rush started a couple of years later. The other is Tom Johnson, a full time prospector living in Hearst, who discovered the Little Long Lac gold mine which opened up the Geraldton Gold Fields.

Edgar J. Lavoie's book entitled "...and the Geraldton Way" published in 1987 by Geraldton's 50th Anniversary Committee, details the first ten years of the development of the town. This book also documents Tom Johnson's quest for gold and his connection to the birth of Geraldton which I will summarize below.

Originally from the Ottawa Valley, Thomas A. Johnson began his prospecting career in 1911 having staked his first claim in the Timmins area. Surviving the trenches of WW1, though suffering chlorine gassing, he returned to Canada after the war. He joined his parents and family who had moved to Hearst in 1916. Self taught, he pursued his passion for prospecting throughout Northern Ontario and into Manitoba.



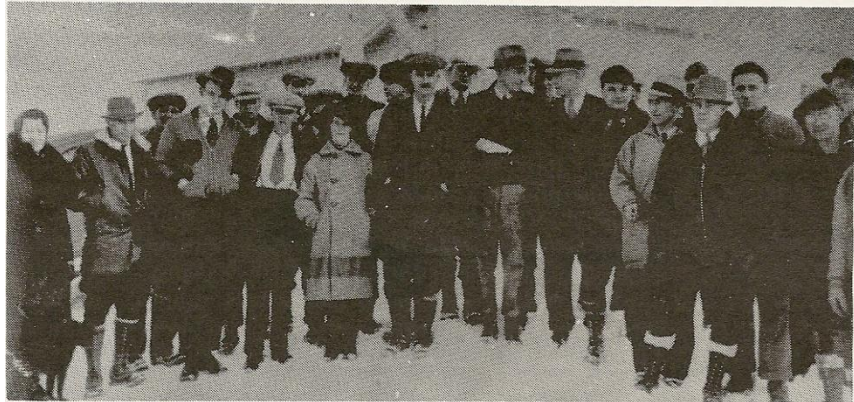
He was one of hundreds of prospectors who were scouring Northern Ontario searching for the big strike. Among them was Tony Oklend, originally from Lithuania, who had come north during the construction of the Canadian Northern Railway and stayed to try his hand at trapping and prospecting. He chipped some gold out of a boulder on the shore of Lake Kenogamisis in 1918 which yielded the princely sum of \$700. It did not make him rich but did keep him searching till the right partner came along.

Another gold seeker was Hardrock Bill Smith who had struck out in the Red Lake gold rush in 1925 but hearing of Oklend's find decided to try his luck at Lake Kenogamisis. Working for the Hard Rock Prospecting Syndicate in August of 1931 he and his partner Stanley Watson made the discovery that was to become the Hard Rock Gold mine in 1935. Smith immediately wired two prospector friends named Fred MacLeod and Arthur Cockshutt who came running from Amos Quebec and staked claims adjacent to his. The MacLeod-Cockshutt mine also became a reality in 1935. A small rush occurred and soon Tom Johnson, who was working claims near Nipigon, felt the pull to Lake Kenogamisis. Grubstaked by Smith Ballantyne of Kapuskasing he and partner Robert Wells found that much of the shoreline had already been staked. In October 1931 they came across an outcrop in the lake that they decided to investigate on an impulse. In about 3 feet of water they found gold in the loose quartz on the bottom. The Sudbury Diamond Drilling Company was persuaded to do some exploratory drilling but they soon abandoned the work. The following May Johnson found two new promising sites on nearby Magnet Lake which again were explored by the Sudbury Diamond Drilling Company, this time with more success. Johnson did not stop there.

In June of 1932, he partnered with Tony Oklend and they decided to revisit the Lake Kenogamisis area where Oklend had found his \$700 worth of gold fourteen years earlier. After a few days exploring the shoreline with no results Johnson again tried his luck out in the water and on July 5th, 1932 they found some very rich gold bearing quartz. After staking 12 claims Oklend went to Port Arthur to register them and discovered that three adjacent claims were open for re-staking, which were quickly added to their holdings. Johnson contacted his friend Percival Hopkins in Toronto to assist in seeking financial backing to develop this promising claim. Hopkins convinced S. J. Fitzgerald, president of the Sudbury Diamond Drilling Co. to visit the site and consider investing. Fitzgerald and his Vice President, Jos. Errington did make the trip and by now Tom and his brother Bill had traced a vein ashore. The investors and prospectors immediately shook hands on a deal which made them all very rich men. That fall drills outlined the ore body and the Little Long Lac Gold Mine became the first operating mine in the area causing a staking stampede. While others had found potential gold mines before him Tom Johnson's was the first productive mine.

Not ready to retire Tom kept prospecting and found another gold bearing site on the lake later in the summer of 1932. The next summer he discovered the Dik Dik mine on Atigogama Lake, near Jellicoe and in 1935 the Tombill mine was incorporated involving Tom, his brothers Bill and Ed and future brother in law Charlie Ellis.

Tombill Mine



J.A. "Jim" Pike, resident manager of the Tombill mine, holds the first gold brick, March 1938. Left of Pike are Tom Johnson, Mrs. Thelma Johnson, and her husband, Edwin. In the back row, between Pike and Tom Johnson, is W.R.G. "Bill" Johnson. The three Johnsons are brothers. Arthur Kendall, manager of Northern Empire mine, stands third from the right of the photo, wearing a fedora and dark jacket. (Thelma Johnson)



At the same time a boom town was developing as bunkhouses appeared at the mine sites, businesses set up shop and families began flocking to the Little Long Lac Gold Camp. It became obvious that a new town site was needed.

In late 1932 Ontario Land Surveyor L. Mooney laid out a company town site which was registered on May 17th, 1933 as Geraldton

Plan M-104. The name was a composite of Fitzgerald and Errington, the president and Vice President of the Sudbury Diamond Drilling Company and top management of the Little Long Lac Gold Mine. Incorporation followed and the first council was elected on Sept. 21, 1937, with W.Foster Draper out polling H.Bruce McConnell, 428 votes to 245 to become the first mayor. The new town also absorbed adjacent settlements Johnsonville and Jonesville.

As the price of gold rose from \$22.67 to \$35 an ounce, the mines in the Geraldton Field produced a total of 2,901,664 ounces of gold with Tom Johnson having a hand in 3 or 4 of them. The MacLeod-Cockshutt Mine became the biggest producer, with 1,546,980 ounces extracted between 1935 and 1970. The Little Long Lac Mine followed with 605,449 ounces between 1934 and 1953, reaching underground to a depth of 3,952 feet.

The historic plaque located at Geraldton reads: “THE GERALDTON GOLD CAMP. Discoveries of gold in the vicinity of Lake Kenogamisis in 1931-32 mushroomed into an extensive gold-mining field in this region. Prospector Tom Johnson, mining promoter Joseph Errington and geologist Percy Hopkins played important roles in its establishment. Geraldton was founded and grew into the principal community. Of the twelve mines operating at the field’s peak of activity about 1940, Little Long Lac and the MacLeod-Cockshutt are probably the best known. By 1971, when all operating gold mines had closed, the camp had produced gold valued at more than one hundred and fifty-six million dollars. Geraldton’s commercial and service industries with pulpwood-cutting and logging operations in the region have helped to offset the loss of mining.” This ensures Tom Johnson’s place in the history of Hearst along with our famous moose, lumbermen and hockey players.

