

Black Donald Mines

By Bill Graham, Editor: *The Madawaska Highlander*

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At one time, a vibrant community named Black Donald Mines flourished in Brougham Township. Today there is no evidence of it—it has been literally removed from the face of the earth. The name Black Donald is now used for a lake but once referred to a mining village located on the shores of White Fish Lake, 13 kilometres from Calabogie. Like the village, White Fish Lake was also removed from the map with the creation of the hydro dam at Mountain Chutes in the mid-1960s. The back water from the dam flooded 8500 acres and placed both the town of Black Donald Mines and White Fish Lake under 80 feet of water.

All that is left are an historical plaque, a few old photographs; a book entitled *The Black Donald Story* by Rita Quilty and the memories of a few people who lived there. One of those people is Garry Ferguson who was born there and has many boyhood memories of the place. He shares some of those memories in an accompanying article.

When you look out over Centennial Lake, which was formed from the back flow of the hydro dam, it is hard to believe that hundreds of people lived and farmed on land that is now lake bottom. Local ghost towns, like Glenfield, can be visited and a feeling for what the vil-lage was like can be imagined. But no one will ever visit Black Donald Mines. It is lost forever.

BLACK DONALD CREEK

Before Black Donald Mines and the village that sprung up around it, there was the settlement of Black Donald Creek. The village was created by the river drivers who built their shanties and homesteads on the shores of the Madawaska and White Fish Lake. The assessment rolls from as early as 1871 show that Black Donald Creek was probably a French speaking village. When the graphite mine opened around the turn of the century many left the river for the less dangerous work in the mines. It is another lost village.

BORN FROM GRAPHITE

The village of Black Donald Mines existed because of the discovery of a large and high grade seam of graphite that was discovered in the vicinity of White Fish Lake in 1889. The story goes that a homesteader named John Moore literally tripped over rock containing graphite while



Mill block at Black Donald Mine (1905)

searching for his cows. It took until 1895 to interest “money people”, but in that year Moore sold the mineral and surface rights to the Honourable George McKindsey for the princely sum of \$4,000. This made Moore and his wife very well off compared to their neighbours. However, the very next day McKindsey sold the same rights and land to a group of men who would form the Ontario Graphite Company for \$42,000. The interest of “money people” had definitely been engaged.

Graphite is used for lead pencils, stove polish, metallic paints and especially as a lubricant for heavy machinery. The graphite at Black Donald was one of the largest deposits in North America and was extremely pure—84% pure. The graphite was also in the flake and compact form at one site; which was very unusual. Graphite mines usually produced one form or the other, but not both.



Power house for Black Donald line at Mountain Chute on the Madawaska

During the first year of production, the Ontario Graphite Company produced 100 tons of refined graphite and 200 tons of crude. In these first few years, the company treated the ore chemically at their plant in Ottawa. However, in 1902 a three-story refinery was built at the Black Donald site and a 400 horsepower power generation plant was constructed two miles to the south-west on the Madawaska River. It is amazing to consider that the village of Black Donald Mines had electrical power for the mine and all the residents in 1902 and electrical power didn't reach the neighbouring townships of Griffith and Matawatchan until the early 1950s.

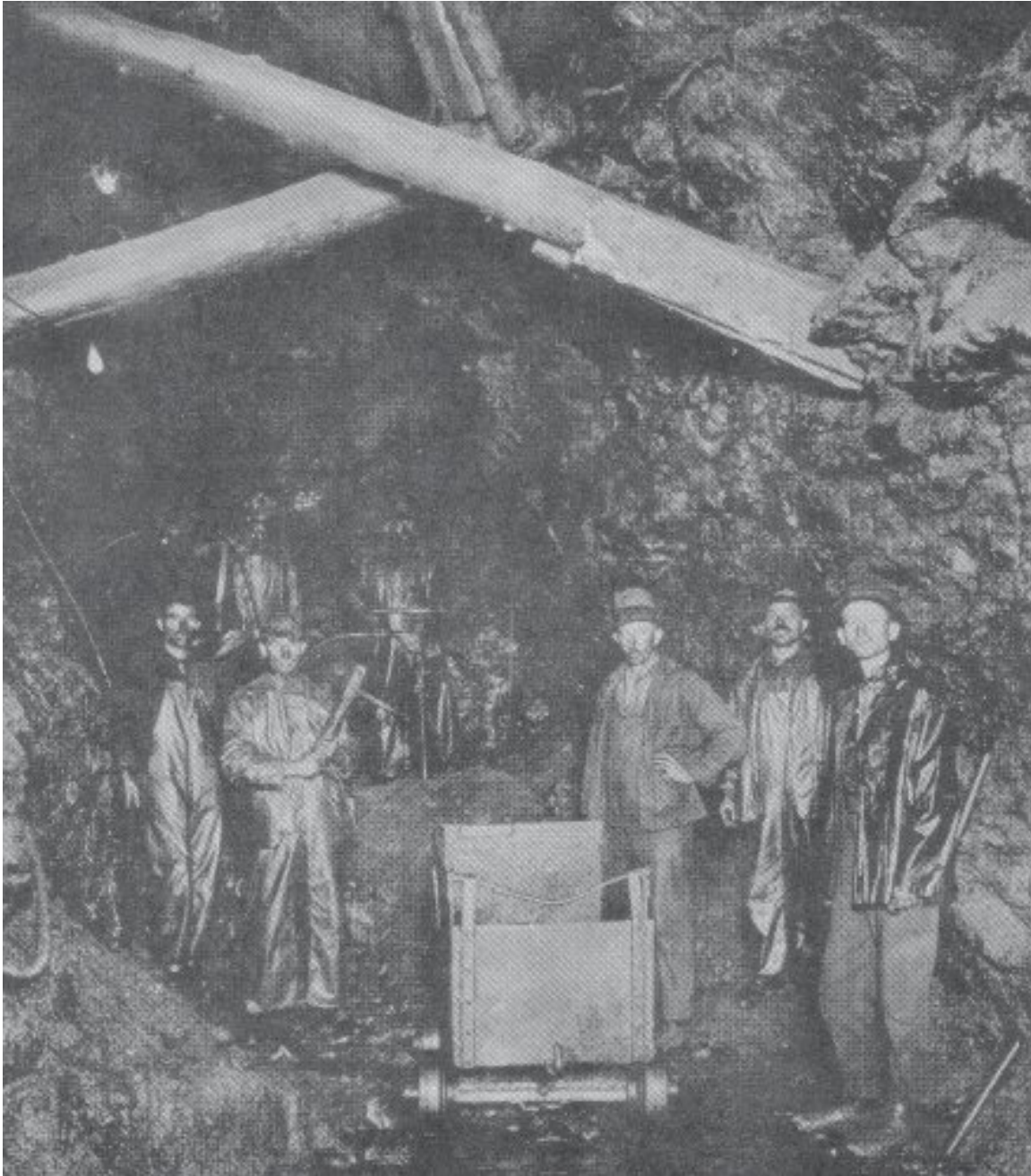
A SELF-SUFFICIENT TOWN

According to the *Canadian Foundryman* in 1919, there were 77 buildings in Black Donald Mines. They included a threestory refinery, boiler house, compressor house, hoist house, warehouses, a blacksmith shop, machine shop, garage, three barns, a granary, unloading storehouse, superintendent's house, kitchen, dining room, three sleeping houses for the single men and 36 dwelling houses for the married men and their families. There were 118 workers at the mines.

There was also a commissary building, which handled food and supplies, a barber shop, public school house and a Catholic church. For entertainment in later years, the village boasted an amusement hall where plays were staged and motion pictures were screened. The seating was removed for the Saturday night dance. It became a magnet for attracting the local farmers and homesteaders from miles around.

MANY UPS AND DOWNS

With over a half century of mining in its history the village of Black Donald Mines had many ups and downs. The years of war during 1914-1918 and 1939-1945, were good years for Black Donald since graphite was in increased demand. However, there were other years when the mine was closed seemingly for good, only to be reopened when the demand for graphite rose. There were other years when the mine, which followed the seam of ore right under White Fish Lake, caved in. Collapses in the mine happened in 1902, 1905 and again in 1950. The cave in of 1950 sealed the fate of the village of Black Donald Mines. Luckily it happened on a Sunday and no one was killed. Within two years mining operations came to a standstill and without the mine as an employer the town also diminished.



Right stope of mine 700 feet from mouth (circa 1934)

Gradually the town was deserted and Ontario Hydro moved in with plans to buy property for a multi-million dollar dam project. They recognized the potential for hydro electric power that was demonstrated in 1902 at the same site. From 1959 onward Ontario Hydro implemented their plan for the Mountain Chutes dam. Property that was to be flooded by the headpond of the dam was purchased, buildings were bulldozed and the land was cleared.

When the dam was built and flooding commenced it took six months to fill and enlarge White Fish Lake. Eighty-five hundred acres were flooded, in some places to a depth of 150 feet. In 1967, the new lake was renamed Centennial Lake in honour of Canada's 100th birthday. A new landscape had been created, but Black Donald Mines was lost forever.