

Social History of Buck Lake and its Community

The BLA and the Friends of the lake are continuing to work on the final editing of the Lake Plan and are pleased to give you the third section from the social history. It is a very interesting account of the first people that came to the area, what brought them here and why they chose to stay in a location that was thought by some to be uninhabitable. As always we hope you enjoy the read and invite your, comments, additions or correction.
Lynne Hendry

After logging brought settlers into the area, mineral deposits were discovered. Apatite was discovered around Buck Lake in the 1870s, during the height of the lumbering. Mica was also discovered in the area in the 1880s. Muscovite mica was found north of Kingston it is the most common form of mica and can be split into very thin sheets. It was used in the production of isinglass. Transparent isinglass sheets were used for peepholes in boilers, lanterns, and stoves because it was less likely to shatter under extreme heat. Mica was also crushed and used as what is referred to as a dry-lubricant, especially for tank treads in World War I. Some of the mica was shipped to Buffalo; however there was also a mica cobbing operation in Sydenham. Cobbing is a process that cleans the mica crystals from the rock. The mica was then sent to Kingston and transported on the Kingston-Pembroke Railway back to Sydenham. This changed when the Canadian Northern Railway came through the area in 1912. This section of the Canadian Northern ran from Smith Falls down to Strathcona, north of Napanee and made shipping the mica to Sydenham far less time-consuming and costly. The Canadian National Railway eventually acquired this section of track and today we know it as the Cataragui Trail. Travellers may have made use of the Canadian Northern to get to Buck Lake, as there was a stop in Perth Road Village. Visitors would have travelled on the Grand Trunk Railway and transferred to Smith Falls on the Canadian Pacific.

British companies funded most of the mining ventures, but the Tetts thanks to revenue from the timber business, financed their own Mica mine. Several commercial mines opened in the area, General Electric's Lacey Mica Mine near Sydenham, Frontenac Lead Mine near Wilmer, and Richardson Feldspar Mine near Thirty Island Lake. The largest single crystal of mica ever found was at the Lacey mine and weighed approximately 330 tonnes and measure 10m x 4.3m x 4.3m¹. Closer to Buck Lake, a mine was established in 1860 on the spine of land between Slide and Buck Lake the miners were searching for gold, iron, silver, and lead. In addition to the larger commercial mines, farmers would supplement their income by selling whatever minerals they came across while working the land. We often hear of Buck Lakers discovering small mine openings on their properties. It is quite likely that this is where a farmer trying to eke out a living once extracted whatever mica or phosphorus he could find. In addition to logging and mining, trapping would have been the next largest source of commerce in the area.

Mining boomed from the 1880s to the 1890s, but in 1893 it was reported that large quantities of phosphates were discovered on the surface in Florida, meaning that it could virtually be scooped up with a shovel and it didn't need to be mined. Almost immediately, the United States imposed an embargo on Canadian phosphorus imports, causing the market to crash, leading to the end of phosphate mining in the area. Cheaper mica was found elsewhere and gold, silver, iron, and lead were never found in quantities worth extracting. The logging industry began to decline around the turn of the twentieth century. The beaver had been trapped to near-extinction and the deer population was dwindling, not to reappear in significant numbers until the 1960s and 1970s. As industry was declining, families began abandoning the marginal farmland in the area as well. Subdividing the land around Buck Lake for cottage lots started to occur in the mid-1920s and the 1930s. A number of American families purchased land around the lake for the purpose of selling cottage lots. One man in particular, Charles Meyer had a significant amount of land that was bequeathed to a local man by the name of George Matthews and eventually was passed to the Norman family who were responsible for the major transformation of Buck Lake from a community of ten families in 1860 to the some 450 of today.

1 Peter Rickwood, "The largest crystals," *American Mineralogist* 66: 885-907 (1981).