

Sunny Bank, Our Ancestral Home
By Andrew Patterson (1995)

Chapter 11

The Miller Brothers

The Millers of Gaspé were always industrious, sea-faring people. Descendants of Henry Brian Miller, who moved to Sunny Bank in 1838, were no different. They were highly involved in the whaling and lumbering industry, which were Gaspé's main industries in the earliest days of settlement. He had three sons, who all remained in Sunny Bank, and fourteen of his grandchildren likewise raised their families here. Two of these grandchildren, Alfred and Frederick, were the first to discover the source of the copper-bearing stones which led to the discovery of Gaspé Copper Mines, or Mines Gaspé, as it is currently known.

As other Gaspésians were heading west for prosperity, the Miller brothers dreamed of finding success right here in Gaspé. During an interview with Alfred Miller in Aug. 1970, I heard the entire story. When asked, "When did he first get interested in prospecting?" he responded, "I don't know, but I do remember the time of the Klondike gold rush. By gosh I got interested... I was about 19 years old you know, and if I'd have had money, I'd have went. After that I was always interested in prospecting and geology."



Alfred Miller

Then Mr. Miller went on to describe finding the first samples that he picked up in 1909. I had picked it up when I went up, some timber cruisers went up, way up the York. We got to the lake, no not York Lake, a little lake below York Lake. And we stopped on the gravel to have lunch right where the brook comes down from York Lake... And of course, I was interested in looking at the rocks everywhere then and I got looking at the rocks and by gosh I seen they were different... I began to notice copper in them."

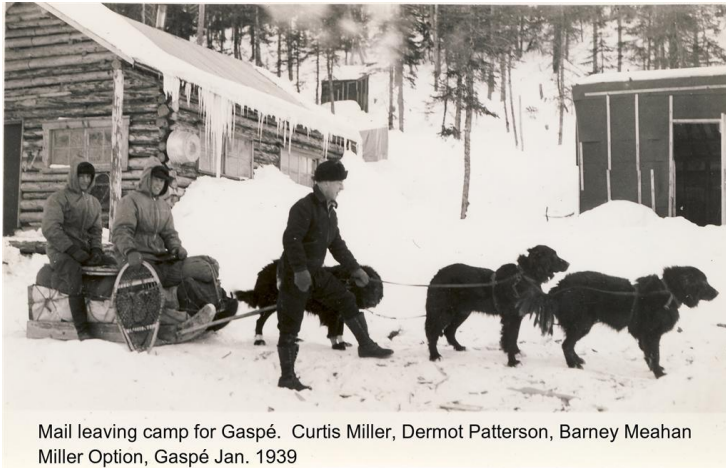
For the next decade Alfred and his brothers were busy raising a young family and seasonal work was fairly easy to come by. In 1921, when work was very scarce Alfred, Sydney, Frederick, Angus, and Theophilus decided to follow up Alfred's original find. In his words, "We was tracing it up the brook and we got just about to where the town is now, Murdochville, you know, and our grub gave out. We had to go back to Gaspé and Angus, of course he didn't come back. He got kinda discouraged with it I guess. But Fred and I, I remember, we were going to come back. So, we went up and all we had for shelter was a pair of blankets we rigged up for a camp, and that was getting on in September. Well, we had a dust of snow while we were there..."

“We started up the first morning we were there. We had our little bite to eat in the morning for breakfast, and we started up the brook and we ran into a brood of partridge. And we were riggin’ up a snare to snare the partridge up in a tree. Of course, partridge were very tame up there. They were mostly spruce partridge. We were getting the snare ready and Fred happened to look up and see the bare rocks on Copper Mountain. “Alf,” he said, “Look up there. That’s where we want to be.” So, we dropped the snare and we headed up in the mountain. I guess that partridge may be living yet.”

They then went up and found green colored malachite, copper bearing rocks, in the outcrops. They spent a few days looking around. They then staked claims until their food ran out. They went back to Gaspé for supplies and returned immediately. They continued staking claims through the winter, with a trip in December and a couple more in February, on dog sleds.

To retain their claims, they were obliged to spend a certain amount of time and money on them each year. So, during the early 1920’s, they returned to the headwaters of the York River frequently. Some of their brothers got involved again. When the land was completely staked out and adequate maps prepared, samples were gathered.

These were taken for analysis and a small mining company became very interested. After visiting the site and drilling a few holes, they agreed to purchase the claim. However, the 1929 depression arrived and the company declared bankruptcy.



Mail leaving camp for Gaspé. Curtis Miller, Dermot Patterson, Barney Meahan Miller Option, Gaspé Jan. 1939



It was several years before they could interest anyone else in their find. They methodically returned each year to maintain their claims until Noranda Exploration Company bought an option on them in 1937. A year later they began drilling. Again, progress was interrupted, this time by the Second World War. After the war, interest returned, and by 1952 crews began work. One crew was busy blasting out the main shaft, while another surveyed the site for the town and began building houses for the workers. On Dec. 9, 1955, forty-six years after Alfred's discovery, the first copper anode was poured.

Mines Gaspé has supported as many as 2000 workers at a time during its 43 years of existence. Strikes, fires, and low copper prices have darkened some of its history, but it continues to be a major employer in a depressed part of the country. In 1990 the Mines Gaspé payroll was over \$26 million with 563 workers in their employ. Native Gaspésians make up 90% of the work force, but it is getting progressively more difficult for English people to find employment in Murdochville.

Presently [1995] about 70,000 tons of copper anodes are produced annually, in addition to an average of 3000 ounces of gold and 800,000 ounces of silver. Over 2000 people currently live in the Town of Murdochville.



Addendum: In October, 1999 Noranda closed the mining operation but continues to operate the smelter by importing copper concentrate from South America. Soon after, in April, 2002 Noranda permanently closed the smelter, ending one of the Gaspé Peninsula's major sources of employment.