

The Miller Brothers

By Andrew Patterson

Early in the 20th century, with little modern equipment and no roads to travel, the Miller brothers of Sunny Bank discovered what would become one of the most lucrative industries of the Gaspé region. Born into a family of nine boys, Alfred and Frederick discovered an outcrop of copper-bearing stones which led to the discovery of Gaspé Copper Mines, or Mines Gaspé, as it was recently known.

Richard Miller of Sussex, England, arrived in Gaspé about 1818, married Frances Annett and together they had a family of 10 boys and 3 girls. The Millers were always industrious, sea-faring people. They were highly involved in the whaling and lumbering industries, which were the primary sources of income in the earliest days of settlement. One of Richard's sons, Henry Brian Miller, moved to Sunny Bank in 1838. Henry had three sons, all of whom remained in Sunny Bank, and fourteen of his grandchildren likewise raised their families there. In the early 1900's when other English Gaspésians were heading west looking for work, the Miller family still dreamed of finding prosperity right here in Gaspé. Due to their determination and hard work the Miller brothers succeeded in doing just that.

In August, 1970 I had the privilege of interviewing Alfred Miller who at that time was 90 years old. 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."

Then Mr. Miller went on to describe finding the first copper samples that he picked up in 1909 while lunching on the river bank. "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 young families and seasonal work was fairly abundant. However, in 1921 when work was very scarce five brothers, Alfred, Sydney, Frederick, Angus, and Theophilus decided to follow up Alfred’s original find. In his own 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 [food] 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.”

The two brothers climbed to the outcrops and found green colored malachite, copper bearing rocks. They spent a few days browsing the area and then staked claims until food ran out again. Several times they returned, staking claims through the autumn and 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 each year working them. So, during the early 1920’s, they returned to the headwaters of

the York River frequently, and some of their brothers got involved again. When the land was completely staked out and adequate maps prepared, samples were gathered. Subsequently, these were analyzed and a small mining company became very interested. After visiting the site and drilling a few holes, they agreed to purchase the claim. Unfortunately the 1929 depression arrived and that company went bankrupt.

Several years passed before the Miller brothers could interest anyone else in their discovery. Nevertheless they methodically returned each year to maintain their claims, and their persistence finally paid off. In 1937 Noranda Exploration Company purchased an option on their claims. Drilling began a year later and again progress was disrupted, this time by the Second World War. After the war Noranda continued drilling, and in 1952 intensive work began. One crew was busy blasting out the main shaft, while another surveyed the site for the town and began building houses for the workers. In the early 1950's large quantities of copper bearing rock began emerging from the mine. Meanwhile construction began on the smelter, one of only two in the province of Quebec. On Dec. 9, 1955, forty-six years after Alfred's initial discovery, the first anode was poured.

Mines Gaspé has supported as many as 2000 workers at a time during its half century operation with native Gaspésians making up 90% of the work force. Strikes, fires, and low copper prices have darkened some of its history, but it continued to be a major employer in a depressed part of the country until its closure in 2002. In 1990 alone the Mines Gaspé payroll was over \$26 million with 563 workers in their employ. In the later years about 70,000 tons of copper anodes were produced annually, in addition to considerable amounts of gold and silver. What began as a young man's dream became the lifeblood for many Gaspésians who were able to remain in the land they loved.