

Drilled with Rifles

By Joe Barreca

Between Kettle Falls and Colville on Highway 395, there is a rock quarry north of the road by mile marker 235. If you look carefully at a spire of rock jutting out of the cliff above this quarry, you will notice a round hole about 2 feet across. That hole dates back to around 1890 and the discovery of the Silver King Mine, the reason Nelson BC is the town it is today.



In summer of 1886, Charlie Brown, son of a Ferryman and merchant in old Marcus, left with a party of 13 men, that included Osner and Winslow Hall and their 6 sons. Ultimately those sons would have enough money to burn from their discoveries that they could afford to waste expensive ammunition trying to drill a hole through this rock by shooting the same spot over and over with their rifles. But things didn't start out that way. They headed up to the Salmon River prospecting a tributary now called Hall's Creek. They cut over a hundred miles of trail prospecting all summer long without striking a claim. As winter moved in, the food was gone and they started packing up to leave. The boys went out to round up their horses, but they couldn't find them. They sat down and vented their disgust by kicking away vegetation. One of them picked up a rock and chucked it at a pine squirrel as it ran by. Under that rock was a vein of copper-silver ore.

Despite their immediate excitement, they were still had to disguise their discovery and leave without staking a claim till the next year. The Hall boy's mother was Indian as were the two hunters in the party. On their way out they encountered another Indian who was paddling downstream in a hurry with a stash of grub he had stolen from a white man's camp upstream. They convinced him to sell it to them and packed it up for their long trip home.

Back in the Colville Valley, assays proved that their strike was rich and many made plans to follow them when they set out in the spring. With a flourish, they filled up merchant Brown's biggest boats and paddled up the Columbia to the bottom of the Little Dalles where they unloaded again to make the portage around the narrows. But they didn't make the portage. Instead, they hid in the bushes and watched as a hoard of neighbors scrambled to catch up. They packed up a line of horses they had arranged to be waiting there and went around to Metaline on the Pend Oreille horse trail. Their lead and the trail they built the previous summer secured first choice of claims all over what today is "Toad Mountain" (So named because as Charlie Townsend was filling out a location notice on a claim and pondering what to call the region, a big toad hopped out from under the log he sat on.) The Silver King and associated claims soon attracted a crowd of miners, 3 to 400 of whom lined the banks of Ward Creek in 1888 at what became Nelson BC.

The original party of 13 hired a manager, John McDonald, who forcibly bought out the two pure-blood native hunters of the 1897 discoverers. He arranged passage by steamboat, wagons and rail for the ore and raised investment capital in England and Scotland. Millions of dollars poured into development of the mine and millions more into development of transportation and all the elements of commerce in the area. In 1893 the original discoverers and operators of the Silver King were bought out with cash, stock and stock dividends.

Over the next few years they squandered most of the money. By 1897 the mine itself was worked out. Much of the money went to building up the Colville and Marcus areas and the Hall boys gained a reputation for playing fiddle at all the local dances.