

Researching the history of Pine Point Mine

The Pine Point mine operated from 1964 to 1989 and was one of Canada’s largest and richest lead-zinc mines. The mine brought many changes to the South Slave region and the communities of Fort Resolution and Hay River. The closure of the mine also had a major impact on the region, resulting in the layoff of hundreds of employees and the demolition of the town of Pine Point.

Since 2008, researchers John Sandlos and Arn Keeling from Memorial University of Newfoundland have been studying **the history of the Pine Point mine**. This research has been undertaken with the help and co-operation of the K’atl’odeeche First Nation, Hay River Métis Council, Deninu Kué First Nation, and Fort Resolution Métis Council. **Thousands of government documents** related to the exploration, development and closure of the mine were collected. In May 2010, with the help of community researchers we **interviewed residents** of Fort Resolution, K’atl’odeeche and Hay River about their experiences and memories of the mine and the town of Pine Point.

What did we learn from documents?

Archives and documents provided lots of information about the mine’s history, including: early development; town and railway construction; aboriginal involvement in Pine Point; and closure and environmental impacts.

Early development

- the lead and zinc deposits at Pine Point were well-known to Dene people living and using the land in the area.
- **1898**: the independent fur trader at Fort Resolution, Ed Nagle, staked the first mineral claims at Pine Point.
- **1899**: the Canadian government extended Treaty 8 to include the South Slave region because of the interest in mineral deposits.
- **1920s**: Ed Nagle’s son, Ted, staked more claims around Pine Point on behalf of Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company (Cominco).
- **1931**: the Canadian government created a reserved area around Pine Point to permit Cominco to develop their mineral claims
- **1948**: this reserved area was extended to a 500 square-mile concession that kept other companies from staking claims. Local First Nations were never consulted about these concessions or mineral claims in their traditional territories.

Town and railway construction

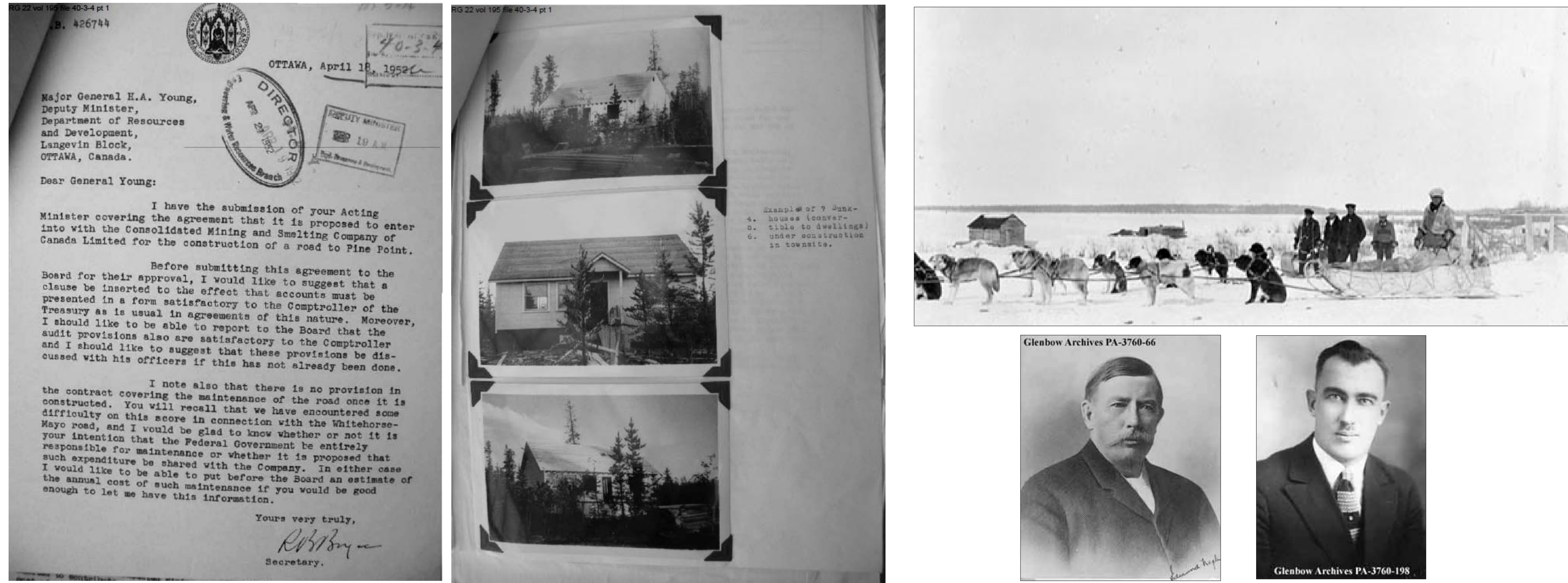
- **1950s**: the Canadian government provided nearly \$100 million in subsidies for the Pine Point development, including the Taltson River dam and the Great Slave Lake Railway.
- **1962**: the Canadian and Northwest Territories governments provided \$500,000 in loans for the construction of the town by Cominco.

The History of Pine Point Mine

Early research results and update

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We collected thousands of documents like these from archives in Yellowknife and Ottawa to understand the history of the development of the mine and related facilities such as the Great Slave Lake Railway and Taltson River Dam.

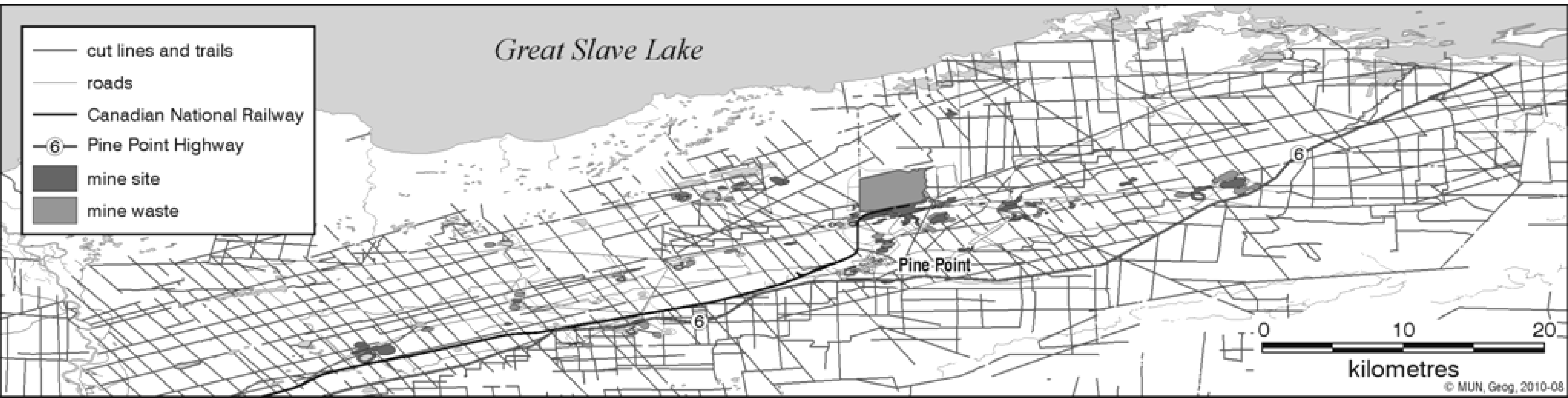
Top: Dog teams hauling supplies to the Cominco camp at Pine Point, Northwest Territories; below: Ed Nagle, who ran a trading post at Fort Resolution in the late 1800s, and his son Ted, who worked for Cominco.



An air photo of the Pine Point town site from the NWT Archives in Yellowknife.



As many people know, water from the tailings area at Pine Point is still treated to remove zinc before discharge.



Map of the environmental impacts of the Pine Point Mine. Map by Charlie Conway

Aboriginal involvement

- Northern Affairs officials believed the mine would help aboriginal communities struggling with game shortages and low fur prices.
- many aboriginal people worked cutting seismic lines, brushing, or on road and town site construction, but few people found steady work at the mine before the 1980s.
- transportation and housing at Pine Point were major problems for aboriginal participation, especially for Fort Resolution people.

Closure and environmental impacts

- **1989**: upon closure, the mine was decommissioned according to a government approved plan.
- local communities and land users have raised concerns about water quality, safety and habitat changes at the extensive Pine Point site.
- **1995**: studies conducted by Dr. Marlene Evans looked at water quality, lake sediments, and fish in Great Slave Lake. These studies concluded there was no long-term human health or environmental risks from mine pollution, although they noted some elevated heavy metals in sediments, and mercury and arsenic in fish organs.

Oral history and community perspectives

In over 40 interviews, community members shared their memories of and opinions about Pine Point. These interviews will be stored with the First Nation in each community. Some of the important things people talked about in the interviews were:

- **Work**: many people recall working at the mine or on related construction, including line cutting, brushing, roadwork, surveying and claim staking, diamond drilling, machine operating and general labouring.
- **The Town**: some people shared good memories of Pine Point town. In the early days, workers lived in bunkhouses; later, families moved to Pine Point. Other people remembered discrimination and alcohol problems in the community. When the town closed, people had to move and a source of cheaper gas and groceries disappeared.
- **The Land**: many people shared stories of how their families used the lands between Buffalo and Little Buffalo River. People continued to trap and hunt, even while working at the mine or construction. There is still hunting and trapping activity in the area, although some people talked about the impact of the mine, roads and cutlines on animals.

Next steps

We will continue to study and write about Pine Point and aboriginal experiences of the mine. We will compare these experiences with other mines in the North, and will report our findings to the communities on a regular basis.