

Primary Source Materials for the History of Northern Ontario Mining Towns: The Case of Cobalt, Ontario

Doug Baldwin

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PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIALS FOR THE HISTORY OF NORTHERN
ONTARIO MINING TOWNS: THE CASE OF COBALT, ONTARIO

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Doug Baldwin

In July 1909 the entire northern half of the town of Cobalt was destroyed by fire. Fanned by high winds, the blaze swept unchecked through the ruck of flimsy frame houses that stretched along either side of Cobalt's major thoroughfare. "The fire," wrote the local newspaper, "raged like a fiend. The sparks ran like skirmishers of disaster.... Behind was the awful roar of falling buildings, in front was a blazing, surging demon of fire fanned by the stiff breeze, leaping many feet to its next vantage point."¹ More than sixty years after this conflagration, I wrote: "Despite continued overcrowding, Cobalt was spared the repetition of another such major fire.... Today, however, this menace still hovers above the town."² In May 1977, less than a year after these words were written, disaster struck once again.

This most recent fire should serve as a warning to historians and geographers interested in the development of the north. In the early years of settlement almost every small town in the north was menaced by fire. Porcupine was gutted in 1911. The settlements of Cochrane, Kelso, Matheson, Porquis Junction and Iroquois Falls were all razed during the First World War. Haileybury was completely destroyed in 1922. Like Cobalt, the majority of these towns were all quickly rebuilt out of the forest. There is no guarantee that they will not suffer the same fate as Cobalt.

There are other additional reasons for the researcher to act quickly. Because of the comparatively recent settlement of the north, there are still a great number of early pioneers who are eager to share

¹Cobalt Daily Nugget, 2 July 1909.

²Doug Baldwin, "Mining Boom Town, Cobalt, 1903-1920" (unpublished manuscript, Guelph, 1976), p. 134.



*The Cobalt Fire, 2 July 1909.
Source: Cobalt Mining Museum*



*Cobalt After The Fire, 1909.
Source: Cobalt Mining Museum*

their memories and recount their adventures. While there is no need to repeat the problems involved with oral history, it should be remembered that many of these 'old-timers' have kept a record of the past in scrap-books, family albums, newspapers and personal correspondence. The daughter of a mine manager in Cobalt, for example, had kept her father's weekly guest book which illustrated the interrelationship between the urban and the mining elite in the town. A suitable notice in the local newspaper can bring equally rewarding experiences. Yet this must be done before these people are no longer with us and their memories are swept into the spring cleaning garbage can; or, as in the case with the back copies of the Temiskaming Herald (1905-), which are stored in the damp and musty basement of the weekly journal, before the historical record just plain rots away.

Miraculously, the three major locations of historical information in Cobalt (the town hall, the township office, and the Cobalt Mining Museum) were spared in the recent fire. The wealth of past data in this old silver mining town is an example of what still remains to be uncovered not only in northern Ontario towns, but in other small communities throughout Canada.

Cobalt is waiting for its Michael Katz. There are numerous sources just begging to be codified and computerized. The assessment and tax collector rolls are available from incorporation (Town, 1907; Coleman Township, 1906) as are the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian (1907-1913) parish records. Cobalt was situated in the parish of Sainte-Therese de l'Enfant Jesus until 1913 when the English-speaking Catholics of Irish, Scottish and English extraction petitioned the Bishop for a separate church. As a result, the Catholic population of the town was divided into the two parishes of St. Hilarion and St. Patrick. At approximately the same time a Ruthenian Church was established for Catholics of Slavic origin. These parish records, along with the Municipal Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages (1907-1909), list each individual by name, birthplace, religion, age and occupation, while recording all deaths, marriages and baptisms. From these sources it is possible to discover, among other things, the extent of

interracial marriages, illegitimacy and infantile mortality rates, and to correlate these with spatial relationships and the ethnic-religious composition of the population.

The physical development of Cobalt is well recorded in the town's by-laws (1907-), lists of agreements between the municipality and various private and public firms, and in the minute books of the local Board of Health (1908-1920) and the Cobalt Water Works Commission (1910-1922). The lists of agreements are a collection of documents that range from court rulings and commissioned reports, to minute specifications for concrete sidewalks. In some instances they are accompanied by blueprints of public buildings, fire hydrant and sewer plans, and maps showing the location of mining company shafts and out-buildings within the town limits. The Board of Health Minute Book outlines the sanitary condition of the town and its unsuccessful attempts to force the authorities to clean up Cobalt, while the reports of the Water Works Commission details the struggle between the town and the mining companies for control over the only major source of pure drinking water in the area.

The Municipal Council Minute Books (1907-) provide an abbreviated summary of the town's problems and politics. The proposed work for the oncoming year is outlined, grievances between the town, the township, the mining companies and the provincial government are discussed, and abstracts of petitions to the Council from various individuals and organizations are recorded. When read in conjunction with the Coleman Township Council Minutes (1906-1915) they provide an interesting glimpse of local politics. The financial health of the community is extremely well documented in the Municipal Audit Books (1910-1913), and in the provincial audit of 1911, which provides a complete statement of Cobalt's financial condition from incorporation to the year of the audit. All sources of revenue and expenditures are enumerated, including individual business licenses and a secret fund for providing payments to undercover police officers used in discovering illegal liquor houses. Arrests and court fines are also listed, but unfortunately they are written in code.

The Cobalt Mining Museum, although quite disorganized, also contains a wealth of information on the community's social and economic development. The variety of sources include a fire insurance map of Cobalt (1920), bank credit ratings (1937-40), reminiscences, minutes of the Imperial Order of the Daughters' of the Empire (1921-23), and the annual reports of the Chapter of Women's Sewing Association (1920-29). Several scrapbooks contain illuminating correspondence pertaining to labour disputes in the mines and the relationship between the mining companies and the town. The major selling point of the Museum, however, is its vast collection of old photographs. Used properly, these pictures can add another dimension to any analysis of social and spatial relationships, dress codes, urban growth, architectural styles and construction techniques.

Locked in a dingy basement room of the Museum there is a vast amount of hitherto unseen material relating to the development of the mining industry in the district, and indirectly to the impact of mining operations on the life of the town. Correspondence between the superintendant of the Coniagas Mining Company and the Company's head office in St. Catharines (1905-1907, 1914) details technological changes, mining operations, company finances, and negotiations with the Cobalt Council and the town's citizens. The Buffalo Mines Limited Cyanide Report (1910), the O'Brien Journal of Milling and Mining Expenses (1915-18, 1927-31), the Cobalt Hydraulic Power Company (1909-10), and the Mines Power Generating Station (1911-12) are concerned with the technical aspects of the business, while the minutes of the Cobalt chapter of the Canadian Mining Institute (1907-26) deals with general mining policy. Light is shed on labour-management relations in the various companies' rent rolls, time and cash books, accident reports, copies of the constitutions of the Temiskaming Mine Managers Association and Cobalt Union No. 146 of the Western Federation of Miners, and in various labour songs and posters. Finally, the letterbook of the manager of the Nipissing Mining Company's hockey team reveals the importance of organized athletics in maintaining a measure of social control over the mine workers.

This is an example of the type of sources available in Cobalt. In general they deal with urban-social history and mining business development. What information is stored in the agricultural town of New Liskeard or the lumber community of Latchford?³ There is no guarantee that other towns have the wealth of material that Cobalt has, and we might never know if we wait too long.

³The best starting point for any such project is still Gilbert A. Stelter and John Rowan, Community Development in Northeastern Ontario: A Selected Bibliography (Sudbury: Laurentian University Press, 1972). Other valuable material for northern Ontario urban development at the turn of the century can be found in such journals as Canada First, The Canadian Magazine and the Algoma Missionary News (Church House, Toronto); in the annual reports of the Ontario Department of Mines, the Board of Health, and the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway Commission; and in such diverse sources as the Colonization Road Papers in the Ontario Archives, and the Inspection Reports of the Bank of Nova Scotia.