

THE URANIUM MINE THAT WAS NAMED FOR A MOUNTIE

The location of Saskatchewan's first uranium discovery (Nicholson Bay), and the first active uranium mine in that province (Nicholson Mines Ltd.), were both named for a long-serving Mountie.

John D. Nicholson grew up in Atlantic Canada and joined the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) in 1885, serving mostly in Saskatchewan and Alberta. In 1899, he was granted "leave of absence without pay" in order to join the Lord Strathcona's Horse & 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles and serve overseas in the Second Boer War (1899 - 1902). After the war, Nicholson resumed his work with the renamed Royal North West Mounted Police (RNWMP), where he volunteered for northern duty and served until his first retirement, in 1911.

When the Alberta Provincial Police (APP) force was created in 1917, Nicholson joined and was made Assistant Superintendent. He was also appointed Chief Detective for the APP, and organized its Detective Division. He served in the APP until his second retirement in 1927.

Once again needing something to do in 'retirement,' Nicholson turned to prospecting



A/Supt. John D. Nicholson (Alberta Provincial Police) is shown seated to the left in this photograph circa. 1925. Also shown is Superintendent Bryan (centre) and Inspector Bavin (right). (Provincial Archives of Alberta, Photo A4821.)

in northern Manitoba, northern Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories. Along the way, he discovered new mineral deposits and became engaged in barging supplies on the Athabasca, Slave, and Mackenzie Rivers, as well as on Lake Athabasca. This put him in exactly the right location when, in 1929, the Mineral Belt Locators Syndicate offered him a job as their field manager for the area.

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Nicholson was aware that there was an interesting occurrence of iron-rich hills near the shore of a small, unnamed bay between Cornwall Bay and Fish Hook Bay on the north shore of Lake Athabasca. This location had previously been staked for iron mining in 1920 and 1921, but the deposits had not turned out to be worth developing and the claims had been abandoned. Nicholson sent his staking crew there in 1929, and he began developing the site in 1930, looking for base metals. They found copper, nickel, and uranium minerals, of which they considered the copper to be the most valuable and, for a time, this location became known as the 'Nicholson Copper Property.' Unfortunately, their timing coincided with the North American slump in the capital markets. As a result, Nicholson was unable to raise enough money to properly develop a copper mine, although he did barge-in additional supplies and continued to work on the property over the next several years.

In 1933, gold was discovered in nearby Lodge Bay prompting a mineral exploration rush. Upon learning of this, Nicholson re-established his old claims in the fall of 1933 and prospected the site yet again, this time searching for gold. Local prospectors had pointed out pitchblende (a uranium mineral) showings to him on his property, and Nicholson later recollected that he found "Free gold, as well as more *pitchblende* and *niccolite*" on his claims (niccolite is a nickel mineral). In 1935 he created J.D. Nicholson Mines Ltd. to develop the claims. Nicholson continued to develop his gold mine, with both surface and underground workings, but it eventually became clear that it would not be economic. In 1937, he joined the Gold Rush to the Northwest Territories but his prospecting days were about to come to an end.

In 1939, with Canada at war, the RCMP found themselves short-handed, and increased their recruiting efforts. Although John Nicholson was by then seventy-six years old, he offered his services to the RCMP and was accepted. He resigned as President of Nicholson Mines

in 1940, and became a Mountie once more. He served in the RCMP security intelligence service, doing anti-espionage work, until 1942, when he retired for the third and last time, on the eve of his eightieth birthday. He received the Queen's and King's medals, as well as the RCMP Long-Service Medal. He died in Victoria, in 1945, but his story does not end there, because activity was about to resume at the Nicholson Mine for a new reason.

During the Second World War, an international race had begun, to find uranium and to try to develop atomic weapons. The Canadian government had pursued secret uranium exploration activities across Canada, and attention soon focused on the Beaverlodge region north of Lake Athabasca, which turned out to be rich in uranium deposits. Pitchblende had already been discovered at the Nicholson Mine so, while prospecting continued in other locations, the Nicholson Mine was re-started, this time to mine for uranium.

By 1948, additional prospecting at the Nicholson site had exposed additional pitchblende, and diamond drilling had yielded encouraging underground results. Nicholson Mines started shipping "shaft-sinking equipment and supplies" over the frozen Lake Athabasca during the winter of 1948/49.



Head-frame under construction in 1949, at the Nicholson Mine (Courtesy of Glenbow Museum Archives. Photo NA-4510-30).

At about this time, probably triggered by the renewed exploration and development activity, that formerly unnamed bay on the north shore of Lake Athabasca was named for John Nicholson. Nicholson Bay has been so identified on official maps of the area since at least 1949.

Development continued into the early 1950s at the Nicholson Mine, with more blasting and drilling, two mine shafts, and considerable lateral work done underground. With enthusiasm running high, the company was reorganized into Consolidated Nicholson Mines Ltd. and preparations were made to begin continuous mining. From 1954 through 1956, mined uranium ore was stockpiled until winter each year. Then, when the ice thickness could support the weight of ore-carrying trucks, it was transported, at a rate of about 227 tonnes per day, along a 29 km ice-road over Lake Athabasca and Beaverlodge Lake to the Eldorado mill (near present-day Uranium City) for processing.

The main uranium production ended in 1956, when the economic limit of the orebody was reached, although a smaller company, KLK Mining Co., mined the highest-grade remnants between 1958 and 1959. This final phase

of mining ended in 1959, when the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada stopped stockpiling uranium, causing the market to collapse. By this time, the Nicholson Mine had produced approximately thirteen thousand tonnes of uranium ore which, after processing by Eldorado, would have yielded approximately 50 tonnes of uranium oxide 'yellow-cake.' The yellowcake was sent to Eldorado's refinery in Port Hope, Ontario. Although the fate of the refined Nicholson uranium has not been declassified, it could have been used by Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. for Canada's nuclear reactor program or it may have been sold to the United States or the United Kingdom for their nuclear programs.

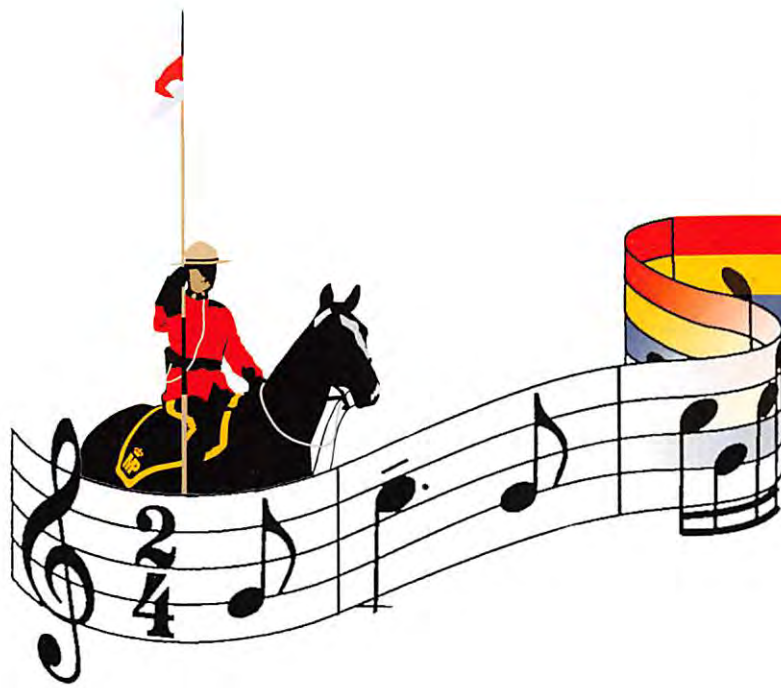
From time to time, between the 1960s and '80s, what had been Nicholson Mines Ltd. changed hands, and the mine itself was re-evaluated for renewed uranium production but without finding any further economic potential, and the mine has remained abandoned. It is perhaps fortunate that the Nicholson site is in such a remote location. Visits to the site are not recommended, due to a wide range of residual hazards, including mine openings, deteriorating buildings, mine equipment, debris and, of course, radioactivity.

Laurier L. Schramm

A/Supt. John D. Nicholson had a remarkable career, having served with the NWMP, 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, RNWMP, Alberta Provincial Police, and the RCMP. Along the way, he found time to found one of Canada's first uranium mines near a relatively unknown bay, both of which now bear his name. Although relatively short-lived, the Nicholson Mine played a significant role in helping Canada become one of the largest uranium producers in the world.

Further reading:

- Schramm, L.L. and Ogilvie-Evans, P., *"The Nicholson Mine. Saskatchewan's First Cold War Uranium Mine,"* Saskatchewan Research Council and Amazon.com, 2018, ISBN: 978-0-9958081-4-0.
- Horan, J.W., *On the Side of the Law: Biography of J.D. Nicholson*, Institute of Applied Art Ltd., Edmonton, AB, 1944.



FRIENDLY NOTES

Friends Of The Mounted Police Heritage Centre

Les Amis Du Centre Du Patrimoine De La GRC

NOTES AMICALES

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PROUD
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COLLECTIONS
UNIT



**GROUPE DES
COLLECTIONS
HISTORIQUES**



ANNOUNCEMENT

PILLARS OF THE FORCE

RESPONSE TO COVID 19 POSTPONMENT IN MARCH

We are now six months later but pleased to announce:

VIRTUAL GRAND OPENING

SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

We are bringing the Ceremony to you, right across the country since you can't come to us.

TIME OF BROADCAST

10:00 A.M.

Regina Time

On Friends of the Mounted Police You Tube channel

STAY TUNED!

Further DETAILS will follow via various social media sites, newsletters and our website <https://rcmphcfriends.com/pillars-of-the-force/>