

Have you heard of the Cabin Branch Mine?

As we begin the new year of 1983, it seems appropriate that as we look to our future plans for life in Dumfries, we also take a look at what is past. When I first began writing this column, one of Dumfries' special people, former Mayor Alton Mountjoy of Main Street, shared with me an address entitled "The Cabin Branch Mine" that he presented to a meeting of Historic Dumfries, Virginia, Inc. With his permission and since this has been a quiet week allowing plenty of space, I would like to share his research with the readers of this column. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. Proceeds from this column will be donated to Historic Dumfries, Virginia, Inc. in Mountjoy's name.

CABIN BRANCH MINE
As one walks through Prince William Forest Park today, one can hardly realize that some seventy-five years ago this forest was a mining community employing several hundred workers, bringing substantial financial benefits to Dumfries and the surrounding areas. Men from as far south as Stafford County walked to this mine each day, worked ten hours, and then walked home.

It was about 1890 that pyrite was found in Quantico Creek. A shaft was sunk to verify the presence of the ore, and the test proved positive. From 1908 to 1920 more than 200,000 tons of pyrite was sold for more than \$1,168,513.

Schist, containing quartz and hornblende, make up the rock of the mine area. The pyrites in lens-shaped deposits are among the schist. The Cabin Branch lens is 1,000 feet long and up to 14 feet wide, sitting on an angle of sixty degrees. Sulphur content of the mine ore is forty to fifty percent, considered quite high. Because of its similarity in appearance to gold, pyrite is sometimes called "fool's gold."

Pyrites are mined for the manufacture of sulphuric acid. The 1916 pre-war price was \$4.64 per ton; the 1917 price rose to \$15.75 per ton. Virginia has outproduced all other states as of 1917, with 37 percent total U.S. production.

Cabin Branch Mine was a total



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operation almost self-sufficient. It was a major source of income for Dumfries during its production years.

The mine had three shafts, Numbers 1, 2 and 3. Numbers 1 and 3 were vertical, with Number 2 on an incline of 25 to 55 degrees. Number 3 shaft was the deepest - 2,400 feet according to two sources. A document written in 1917 reported the depth to be 1,800 feet, which leaves the possibility that there was an expansion to 2,400 feet before 1920.

A narrow-gauge railroad connected the mine to the wharves on the Potomac River at Barrows Siding about seven miles distant. Contrary to some reports, this narrow-gauge railroad was not part of or connected to the R.F. & P. Railroad. At the mine site this railroad connected the shaft, the crusher mill, and other buildings. Three steam engines ran on the tracks: the Dewey, the Virginia Creeper, the Dinkey - named because of its size. Also at the mine was a skiff, named because of its shape, to haul ore up an incline to the head from where the ore was gathered before being processed.

There were about seventy buildings at the mine, including a black-

smith shop, a carpenter shop, workers quarters, a sawmill, a commissary, a superintendent's house, and the Detrick House. Today little remains to show evidence of a once thriving economy.

The mining procedure was explained in great detail as Cecil Garrison reminisces.

The first step was to construct the necessary buildings and to begin to sink the shaft. Unlike some of the other mines in Virginia, Cabin Branch shafts had to be totally supported by timber due to the composition of the country rock. About every 110 feet or so a horizontal "level" would be cut into the pocket of ore. These levels had to be supported by timbers.

Transporting the ore in each level was accomplished by hand pushed wagons on tracks. These wagons were pushed to the shaft where they would be dumped into a bucket suspended by a cable from an eighty foot high "pithead" built directly over the shaft opening. This bucket was not only used to haul ore, but also to transport the workers to and from the different levels. Various bells signified the different loads: men, empty, or ore. When the bucket reached a certain section of the pithead it would automatically dump the ore into a waiting railroad car.

At any one time there were 200 to 300 men working at the mine, above and below ground. The underground mining process went on 24 hours a day, with three shifts per day. Huge circulating fans and water pumps ran continuously to keep the underground network clear of poisonous gases and seeping ground water.

On each level worked a "crew" which was supervised by a blaster. This blaster would get paid for the number of feet he could progress in one day. The blaster with a good

crew could make quite a good salary. Some of the men in each crew were: the "driller," who drilled the holes for the dynamite; the "muckers," who loaded the ore into the wagons; the "timberman," who made sure the roof was properly supported; and the "powderman," who carried the dynamite from the powder house to the level where it was needed.

After the ore was brought up to the surface, it was transported by the narrow-gauge railroad to the ore bins. From the ore bins, the pyrite was hauled up the incline or runway to the head frame where the milling procedure began.

The milling procedure is generally explained as follows. The produce was divided into three classes: lump, spall, and fines. Lump was first grade that required no sorting. Spall was first grade ore broken to pass a two and a half ring and freed from fines by screening. Fine ore was under three-eighths inch in size in the milling practice at the Cabin Branch Mine. The ore from the hoist was dumped on a two and a half inch grizzly. Oversize ore went to a lump storage bin. Hand sorting separated the slate from first-class lump which went to a spalling floor. The finer impure ore went to a roll-jar crusher. The larger lumps were broken by hand and shipped without further

treatment. The undersize from the grizzly was treated in a three compartment Hartz jib or sieve. Clean pebble ore was shipped as such. Middlings from the jib were treated by roughing rolls of two grades and were treated in two-compartment jibs.

The hand sorting process mentioned was performed by young boys for fifty cents a day. This is where Cecil Garrison started his day at the mine.

The jibs or sieves were devices which separated the country rock from the ore by vibrations and a washing procedure. Jigs were located in the mill, and all of the treatment was done in the mill. All primary crushing was done in the crusher house.

From the mill the ore was loaded on the narrow-gauge or railroads and delivered to the docks at Barrows Siding near Possum Point.

I think we all know that the Cabin Branch Mine was the major supporting industry of Dumfries for a thirty year period from 1890 to 1920.

Through railroad deeds and other records, one may gather that the Cabin Branch had ownership from 1899 to 1916, and the American Agriculture Company from 1917 to 1920. The original owners were the Detricks and the Bradleys and their

families.

Around 1919 or 1920 it was found that a higher content of pyrite could be mined more cheaply in Spain than in the United States. During this period of economic uncertainty, the miners went on strike for a pay increase from \$4.25 per day to \$4.50 per day. The superintendent responded by closing the mine down, saying that he would let the Cabin Branch Mine fill with water and the frogs jump in before he would reopen it.

Occupation of the area by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the early 1930's resulted in complete dismantling of the mine. Building materials were used for the cabin camps, and the slate dumps were used for roadbed materials.

The economy of Dumfries was greatly enhanced by the operation of this mine. The Town of Dumfries profited as families moved in, boarding houses opened up, and stores did a thriving business.

Today Cabin Branch Mine is only a memory to be recorded on the pages of history.