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WEEKEND EXTRA

Britannia museum hails new era

Tribute to B.C. mining history is ready to reopen after a dramatic makeover

BY SCOTT SIMPSON
VANCOUVER SUN

Just the other day, Kirstin Clausen had one of those moments that museum curators live for.

An elderly woman came into the office/gift shop at the Britannia Mine Museum. She was downcast to learn that one of the museum's newly restored buildings, containing the story of the venerable mining town and its people, was not yet open to the public.

Clausen couldn't say no, so instead she said, "follow me" and gave the woman a personal tour of a building that will be unveiled later this month, as part of a grand reopening of the museum and its arrival as a major-league British Columbia tourist destination.

Clausen was not aware of it, but the woman was one of 60,000 people who had lived at Britannia at one time or another during its 70-year history as a copper producer. That history extended back to 1904. Before the Second World War it was the biggest copper mine in the British Commonwealth.

Due in no small part to Britannia's isolation at the northeastern end of Howe Sound — road and rail service arrived only in the mid-1960s — the residents shared a rich community life and the visitor was anxious to see how the museum had chosen to recount it.

The elderly woman walked over to one of the biggest photo-and-story displays in the building, pointed to a teenage girl seated on a wooden throne and wearing the Britannia "Copper Queen's" copper crown, and said, "That's me."

"I really had no idea who she was," Clausen recalled. "When those things happen, that's why you believe in museums. It's important to have a place where stories are remembered."

Clausen has accumulated a few stories herself during a 10-year tenure as the mine's curator: furnace breakdowns, power failures, a 20-storey copper mill whose status as a national historic site was belied by its decrepit appearance and, nearby, one of the worst environmental disasters in North America.

When the Britannia mine sputtered to a close in 1974, there were no federal or provincial laws compelling the owners to clean up the site. Storm water flowing through abandoned mine tunnels generated an acidic, toxic broth that flowed into Howe Sound. Up to 700 kilograms of copper and other heavy metal sludge per day were discharged into the marine environment.

It made the sea bed barren at the

outflow of Britannia Creek and threatened salmon populations a few kilometres north in the Squamish River system.

As recently as 2001, the Outdoor Recreation Council of B.C. named Britannia Creek the most endangered stream in the province.

What was needed most, Clausen recalled in a recent interview, was leadership.

The Winter Olympics were coming, and international media would be driving the Sea to Sky Highway right past the Britannia town site, past thousands of broken window panes at the mill, and for those who looked just a bit deeper, past the most compelling reason in B.C. for environmentalists to oppose new mining projects.

It was a bottleneck for the industry, and the museum as well.

"Often I would hear someone say, 'Oh, there is so much potential here' — and I was sitting in an office that had inadequate heat, and there were power outages all the time, and we couldn't do anything because of contamination," Clausen recalled.

At the initiative of the provincial government, a \$30-million water treatment facility, commissioned in 2006, began removing the toxic sludge from the flow of the creek. It is adjacent to the museum, and continues to serve as one of its exhibits.

Reflecting a global boom in the price of metals and minerals, notables in the B.C. industry including individuals Ross Beaty and Lukas Lundin and heavyweight companies such as Teck Resources and Hunter Dickinson found the financial resources to support a reimagining of the mining museum. Contributions from industry and the provincial and federal governments total \$14.7 million to date, of which \$9 million have been spent on facilities and amenities.

Heritage buildings have been moved onto new foundations in a cluster at the base of the mill and there are boardwalks, plazas and children's play areas. More improvements are planned.

The grand reopening is next weekend, Sept. 18 and 19.

"A whole bunch of people have been toiling away for years in the background and they are celebrating that moment. Most of us don't really know what journey they went through," said Michael McPhie of the Hunter Dickinson Group, co-chair of Britannia Beach Historical Society and vice-chair of the society's fundraising committee.

"It has the potential, and now represents a very new, refreshed, hopefully engaging opportunity for people to see how important minerals are to society, and that we've learned from the past.



The Britannia Mine Museum features a 20-storey mill building that towers over the village.

BILL KEAY/PNG

ROAD TO THE MINE



The Britannia Mine Museum is sporting a new look with new displays. Executive director Kristin Clausen has a blast showing off the new centre.

BILL KEAY/PNG

• Tickets: Adults \$21.50 including HST, students and seniors \$16, youth \$13.50, kids five and under are free.

• Museum is at Britannia Beach along the Sea to Sky Highway (Hwy 99) 10 minutes' drive south of Squamish.

• The museum has attracted \$14.7 million in government, corporate and individual donations and is putting finishing touches on the first phase of a major redevelopment of a national heritage site.

• The Britannia Mining and Smelting Co. opened in 1904. By 1929 it was the largest copper producer in the

British Commonwealth.

• Over its 75-year lifespan as an operating mine, Britannia employed 60,000 people.

• The mine, notably its mill, was in 1988 designated a National Historical Site and is one of the last remaining gravity-fed copper concentrator mills in North America.

• Established features include the Mill Building, a 20-storey structure that towers above the village and is easily seen from the highway.

• Underground mine and train ride: visitors can ride a train inside a mine tunnel that is burrowed deep into the mountain.

• New features include the A-Z Administration Building, a restored heritage building, which recounts the life of the Britannia Beach community during its 70-year life as a mining town, and the Beaty-Lundin Visitor Centre, which contains several mining exhibits, a theatre, gift shop and Canadian Mining Hall of Fame.

"It was a big part of B.C.'s history and economics during its time. But then it became quite a poignant environmental legacy for a number of years. Through the funding from

industry and the participation from government and the community, the environmental issues have been addressed.

"There are some things I wish never

happened, as an industry person, but we learned from those. We don't hide from them."

ssimpson@vancouver.sun.com

Grand opening weekend of the rebranded Britannia Mine Museum Saturday, Sept. 18 and Sunday, Sept. 19

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