



Outland Camp.

From Bust to Boom

Snow Lake on the verge of big changes with new industry, bigger population

BY HEATHER HUDSON

The town of Snow Lake, Manitoba has seen its share of change in the 60 odd years it's been around. But the best might be yet to come.

A mining town through and through, Snow Lake knows a thing or two about boom and bust. It was formed in 1947, almost 30 years after gold was first discovered on the east shores of Wekusko Lake. Within 10 years, the town had ballooned to more than 650 people and boasted a hospital, a four-room school, curling rink and community hall.

But when a town grows up around one main industry, it is susceptible to the ebb and flow of production. Residents have watched a near constant parade of companies opening and closing mines in their environs. This means progress and population count have been more of a stop and start than a steady climb in the small, picturesque town. At one time, more than 2,000 people set down roots here. But by 2008, Snow Lake was in a depressed state and today the population hovers at around 1,000.

In boom times, the school and hospital were upgraded, a hockey rink, trailer park and more housing were built and other improvements made. But with only one mine in production since 2004, there seemed to be little hope of a town resurrection.

That is until recently. Just last year, Alexis Minerals purchased New Britannia Gold Mine, renaming it Snow Lake Mine. The Chisel North Mine and Concentrator Mill were also reopened. Both good news, but it wasn't until the construction of Lalor Zinc Mine, owned by HudBay Minerals, began last fall that people started to sense a boom headed their way.

"The Lalor mine has the potential to put and keep Snow Lake on the map," says Jeff Precourt, chief administrative officer for the town of Snow Lake.

"It's an absolutely huge mining project. There have been a lot of bold statements made about Lalor, including that it's the largest gold mine find in Canada in the last 25 years. It's very exciting."



Business district of Snow Lake.

Indeed, by all accounts, Lalor is shaping up to be a massive project. Development has been under way since last fall and production is expected to begin in Fall 2012 when the ramp from Chisel North mine is complete. Up to 1,200 tons of ore per day are expected to be extracted via Lalor's ventilation shaft. The total estimated project cost for Lalor is \$704 million, one of the largest private sector projects this province has seen in many years.

With production of that scale going on just 15 km outside of Snow Lake, what does this mean for the quaint little town with the pristine lakes and unspoiled habitats? Precourt says the implications are huge.

"Our population projections for the next several years have us reaching up to 2,000. That means we have a lot to do to prepare for that kind of influx. We continue to look at expansion and rehabilitation of town facilities, including road replacement and maintenance, water and sewage facilities."

But perhaps the more pressing question is where are the future employees of the Lalor mine going to live?



Images of the new Lalor Mine site.



While Precourt and the town work on devising more permanent and sustainable solutions, the Outland Camp on the outskirts of town has been housing and feeding up to 200 mine employees at a time and is currently operating at half capacity.

Cauline Armsworthy, the camp's manager, says they are currently housing 90 men in six dormitory-style quarters. "We're expecting some peaks probably in the fall. I don't know exactly the numbers but it's going to be substantially more than 90. We can handle it. It's very friendly and personal around here; I'm like a den mother to a huge brood."

Armsworthy herself is a Snow Lake native, but left the town at 18 in pursuit of a job. "At that time, there were no jobs for females in Snow Lake," she explains. She's been back in her place of birth now for 17 years.

Camps have long been the housing solution for remote work sites, particularly in the mining and forestry industries. It's been especially ideal for a boom and bust community like Snow Lake. But from the perspective of the town and its people, a camp brimming with transient workers is not ideal.

"As far as the town is concerned, it's definitely preferred for mine employees to be part of the community and have regular housing in town. There's more stability and definitely advantages to have more people in the community from an economic and recreational standpoint," says Precourt.

"Also, there are sometimes negative perceptions from members of the public as far as rowdiness and depreciating property values for houses by the camps go, whether any of that is true or not. Ideally, we would like to see mine employees live, work and participate in community life so we can take advantage of economies of scale with internet service providers, for example, and ramp up the numbers of our minor hockey league."

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It's mid-August at Outland Camp and Michael Nigh takes a load off after another 12-hour day at the Lalor site. As superintendent for PCL Constructors, he and his 60-man crew have been in and out of this camp from March, on a rotation that has him on-site for 30 days followed by seven days at home. He's been living this lifestyle for the past five years and says he knows his way around a camp.

"The best thing about the [Snow Lake] camp is that it's new, very clean and considerably smaller than any camp I've been at.



You get to know the people who work here by name, so that's nice."

Nigh says his experience at Snow Lake has been different from the other camps where he's been stationed over the years. "It's great that it's in a small community where there's a golf course and a lake for fishing. We interact a lot with the townspeople of Snow Lake. A lot of the guys get together and tell us about good fishing spots, a lot of us go out golfing on men's night."

If there's any wariness on the part of the townsfolk, he and his crew haven't experienced it. Armsworthy isn't surprised.

"I think people in town were apprehensive at first, but a lot of the men go to the golf club and they meet people here and they're going to local establishments. They definitely boost the economy of Snow Lake and when people in town get to know them they realize they're not just the contractors up on the hill, they're actual people who go to work every day.

"For the most part, Snow Lake has welcomed them very positively."

Will Snow Lake's natural beauty and friendly, small town feel entice miners to settle down here when Lalor is in its production stage come 2012? Precourt sure hopes so.

"Because Lalor has a fairly long life span – probably decades – we definitely think there's potential for a population increase. That's ideally what the town wants: people to put down roots and become permanent residents while working at the mine."

If there is a boom as big as expected, you can bet that Precourt and the town will be ready.

Don't close the history books on Snow Lake just yet – there's another chapter yet to be written. ♦

Photos courtesy of Daniel Weirnerman, HudBay Minerals Inc.