

Big Stuff in a little town at the end of the road: Industrial Artifact Conservation at the Keno City Mining Museum, Yukon Canada

Valery Monahan, (Museums) Conservator, Yukon Government

BigStuff 2013, Ottawa, Canada September, 2013

Yukon Territory is famous as the location of one of the largest industrial/mass migration events in modern history: the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898. Gold lured thousands of would-be miners into one of the most remote areas on Earth. In what became the Elsa/Keno district of central Yukon, gold prospectors discovered an enormous silver ore body. For seventy years, increasingly industrialized silver mines operated in this cold and mountainous region. From a height of production in the 1950's until its shut-down in 1989, United Keno Hill Mines Limited produced 150 million ounces of silver, 490 million pounds of lead and 370 million pounds of zinc.¹ Most miners and their families lived in the company town of Elsa, Yukon while the older village of Keno City was home to those unwilling to live in a company town.

The 1989 mine shut-down, at first temporary, was rapid. Most miners left the Yukon. The Elsa town-site was mothballed: some homes still full of belongings and tools left where they lay. A few Keno City residents chose to stay in their little town, at the end of the road, in a mountainous wilderness dotted with mining structures and aging machinery. The Yukon Government maintained electricity and road access into Keno after the population dropped below 20 year-round residents.

With mine jobs gone, culture/tourism seemed a reasonable employment option. The area has dramatic scenery, hunting and fishing opportunities and a decades-long history of industrial heritage scattered across the landscape. In 1990, the Keno City Community Club created a regional mining museum to preserve and interpret the region's silver and gold-mining heritage. Since its opening, project funding for the museum and related heritage research have become a small, but important source of seasonal employment. The museum joined the Yukon Museums Program, receiving annual funds from Yukon Government with access to variety of services, including conservation.

Since opening, the museum has acquired many industrial objects which now occupy purpose-built sheds, and (less ideally) yards around town. No one in Keno City has formal museum training and the Museum has one person on staff. Like many community-based museums, the museum has a history of prioritizing acquisition over plans for long-term care. Residents of the community: former miners, retired heavy equipment operators and mechanics are ideal candidates to undertake basic industrial conservation work, however.

In 2008, the Yukon Museums Program brought George Prytulak (then) Canadian Conservation Institute Industrial Artifacts Conservator to Yukon to teach two-day workshop "Care of Industrial Objects" in Dawson City and to assess several large industrial objects at program museums. The Keno City Mining Museum's Bay City power shovel was assessed. After receiving their copy of the assessment report, the Keno Community Club (de facto board of the museum) began remediation of the shovel.

The report also helped begin an industrial conservation conversation in Keno that continues to this day. In 2010, the museum applied for and was granted funds to construct a new machine shed, and moved the power shovel and several other large pieces under shelter. No-one from Keno City had been able to attend the 2008 Dawson City workshop, but I shared information from it and discussed industrial artifact care whenever I visited the community. In 2012, the museum applied for and was granted funds for industrial object remediation. At the beginning of that summer, I spent three days with residents Paul Findley and Joe Wolf, using simple check-list forms which acted to document artifact condition and provided direction to simple tasks that would enhance artifact preservation. In August, Joe left to pursue a degree and Evan Rensch joined the work.

Artifacts were compared with database records, photographed and given new accession tags (if necessary). Everything was brushed out to remove soil, loose corrosion products, leaves, or garbage which obscured details and acted to hold water. Objects stored outside had encroaching plants removed and pooled water drained. Once this basic cleaning had been done, supports could be examined and added/replaced as needed. Remnants of original fuel or oil were drained, when possible.

Here are some of the improvements made to dredge buckets, skips and a compressor, currently stored outside.

Industrial artifact work is labour-intensive and repetitive, but it requires close observation which can have surprising benefits. After just a few hours of work in an older museum shelter that has recently been fully enclosed, Tom and Joe noticed a pattern of sinking wooden supports and moss-covered earth. They dug channels and added stones to improve drainage. Museum Director Yvonne Bisette talked to the Yukon Dept. of Highways and Public Works to see if grading of the nearby roads could be adjusted to keep more water away from the shelters. I hope to see less green "lawn" in that shed in the future. Cleaning revealed name plates and other identifying marks that had been obscured on some artifacts since acquisition. "Mystery" machines were identified and separated components matched and moved together. Information learned during cleaning will be used to flesh-out artifact records and the museum can use this to enhance interpretation in the future.

Artifact cleaning can have many benefits. This Classifier is a turn-of-the-century automated rocker box. It probably started its Yukon working life in the Klondike gold fields, coming to the Elsa/Keno district in the decades after. Whoever brought it to the museum in the early 90's must have had serious horse-power. It appears to have been dragged right from a stream bed, filled with channel gravel and silt. The price of gold averaged \$300-\$400/oz. in the 90's. In the summer of 2012, an ounce of placer gold was worth \$1600 cash. Because it was too heavy to easily move and adjacent other machinery inside a shed, the Classifier was cleaned with hand-shovels, brushes and buckets. There is a rumour in Keno that someone may have done a little gold-panning after everything was cleaned out.

It is my hope 2012 summer project work will set the stage for a more comprehensive approach to the care of industrial artifacts at the Keno City Mining Museum. The new artifact assessment forms identify work still needed for artifacts already in the collection and can help calculate the time/labour/cost of basic remediation for new acquisitions. This information will help the museum set priorities for long-

term care, make more informed decisions about which pieces to put under shelter and will support grant applications and other fund-raising initiatives needed to carry out the related work. It should also provide the museum with arguments against the kind of random industrial artifact collection that has gone on in the past. The pressure to collect can be very strong in small communities, however, and that situation has been worse in Keno in recent years.

In 2006, with silver prices on the rise, the mining assets of United Keno Hill Mines were purchased by Alexco, a Colorado-based mining corporation. They began large-scale silver mining on Keno Hill in 2011. Work has included demolition of some buildings in the Elsa town site and nearby ore processing stations. Older machinery and infrastructure was removed as mines were brought back into production. Mine company managers were quite sure that the museum would love to have all this “stuff”. The museum’s ability to care for the results of this kind of generosity is quite limited, however.

In a final update, this August, with the price of silver falling again, Alexco closed all operations on Keno Hill “for six months”. It looks like Keno City may now go back to being a quiet, tiny town, full of big stuff at the end of the road.