

Charles LaBine; the Financial Brain, the “Money Man”.

Charles Leo Lawrence Labine (1888 – 1969)

CHARLES L. LABINE has been described in the newspapers of Canada as “a tough old sourdough”, a rugged individualist, one of the few remaining graduates of the hard knocks school of mining.

Although he has lived for more than 30 years in the shadow of a more nationally known younger brother, Charles in his way has been as important a contributor as Gilbert to the success of the Eldorado and Gunnar mines, for which the name LaBine is famous.

While Gilbert LaBine was the discoverer and the man to whom the world gave most of the credit, Charles was an all-important figure behind the scenes, the financial brain, the “money man”. Without his skill and persistence in tracking down funds for their development, Eldorado and Gunnar might not have become the financial successes that they did.

From the time they were teenage boys who left the family home together to seek their fortune, Charles and Gilbert were comrades. They shared discomforts, hardships, insecurity, and eventual prosperity. They were business associates in bad times and in good.

Charles LaBine was born in 1888, two years before Gilbert, at Westmeath, a small community in the Ottawa Valley near Pembroke. The LaBine boys grew up on a farm on which their father had settled. Their father died when still a young man, and Mrs. LaBine was left with the task of rearing a large family.

It may have been economics, the problem of helping to feed, clothe and shelter the LaBine family, that induced the boys to leave school at the same time, when Charles was 17 and Gilbert 15.

Where husky, ambitious lads might best find a future for themselves, even though they had not completed their schooling, was not difficult to decide at that time. It was the year 1905 and Northern Ontario, not too many miles north of Westmeath, was ablaze with excitement. The boys set out for the Cobalt silver camp, the locale of a silver “rush” along the right-of-way of the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway, then under construction to open up the still little-known country above North Bay.

The LaBines found themselves jobs in the Cobalt silver mines. The work was hard, and they did not strike it rich. They decided to go further afield, to try prospecting for themselves rather than working for someone else, who would reap the greatest rewards. They met Benny Hollinger, who had staked claims in the Porcupine district, in the vicinity of the present city of Timmins. They worked and acquired a modest stake that enabled them to continue their prospecting.

In the course of their travels, the LaBines discovered gold in Manitoba and opened there a mine which they called Eldorado. Said Charles:

“When Eldorado was incorporated in 1926, I was the first president and looked after the financing of the company’s operations, which, incidentally, did not meet with very much success.

At a couple of stormy meetings of the shareholders, an attempt was made to pass an investment bylaw which would give us the authority to use what money was left over for further exploration work. Some of the shareholders were up in arms at this suggestion and wanted to discontinue the company and distribute the finances among the shareholders.

Jack Greenburg, who was a young Toronto lawyer and the registered owner of No. 1 certificate of the company’s stock, moved that the bylaw be passed to permit the company to look for a mine. A vote was taken and two-thirds of the shares were voted in favor of the bylaw. That authorization resulted in the discovery by my brother Gilbert of the Eldorado at Great Bear Lake.”

The famous discovery was made on the shore of Echo Bay, an indentation of the lake in the Northwest Territories, 1,450 miles from the nearest railway. There Gilbert almost literally stumbled upon a rich deposit of pitchblende, another name for uranium ore, which at that time - the spring of 1930 - was used only as the raw material for the production of radium.

“Fortunately the deposit was a rich one, “ Charles said, “but it had to be, because Echo Bay was so remote and so far from a railway. It was also fortunate that the find was made when radium was in great demand for the treatment of cancer. Another factor that cannot be overlooked and which made the find so important was that the ore was free from thorium, because radium is sold on its purity.”

Although Charles was not with Gilbert when the pitchblende was found, it was his job to follow up and consolidate the opportunities that were awaiting them on the rocky banks of Great Bear Lake. But to get the ore from its hiding place within a few miles of the Arctic Circle was a problem in logistics.

“Our big problem was transportation,” Charles explained. “I had had experience with canoes, so Leo Seaberg, Shirley Cragg and I decided to take the supplies the 1,450 miles from the railhead to Great Bear Lake by canoe.”

The route they had to follow took them along the Athabaska, Slave and Mackenzie rivers, then from Fort Norman along the Great Slave river to the lake.

“We were fortunate on the trip,” Charles said. “We had some near spills, where we could easily have lost our lives as well as our supplies. It took us five hours to navigate the Bear River Rapids, with a 10-horsepower heavy duty motor on our boat, which was only half-loaded, and there was a 60-foot drop in five miles. But we made it.”

The next problem was that of production at the mine and refining the ore. The LaBines built a refinery at Port Hope, on Lake Ontario, 70 miles east of Toronto. But they had to find an experienced man to manage it.

“I had a streak of good fortune when I met a Welshman named Lillicott,” Charles LaBine said. “He put me in touch with Marcel Pochon, who was the oldest living producer of radium. He had trained under the Curies and had built a refinery in Wales for the production of radium. This refinery had shut down when the supply of ore was exhausted. Eldorado had the ore and was now able to obtain the services of a highly trained and experienced man to produce the radium.”

In order to finance the development, the LaBines mined the silver that lay in the same area of Great Bear Lake. Having had experience in selective mining and high-grading ore, Charles LaBine was able to produce 40,000 ounces of silver at 29 cents an ounce for the first shipment to Consolidated Mining and Smelting at Trail, B.C. It required 27 cases of powder, each of 50 pounds, to produce half a million dollars worth of ore, which the workers carried down a 115-foot hill on their backs.

“But that was the end of selective mining, as a plant was on the way,” Charles said. “My 25 years of experience in prospecting and selective mining surely paid off. With the plant installed, and Emil Walli in charge as mine manager, production went forward in a big way. All this was possible with the help we got from a wonderful lot of men. I will always remember how Bill Jewett of Consolidated Mining and Smelting took his transit and gave the level 28 feet above Great Bear Lake and pointed the entrance to the tunnel that was to cut No. 2 vein, 1200 section, 480 feet north, 80 feet below the hill.”

Although the LaBines were satisfied they had a find of great importance, the news was received in mining offices back east with a certain amount of caution. After visiting Charles and Gilbert at Echo Bay, Cyril W. Knight, the head of a prospecting company, wrote in the fall of 1930:

“The discovery brings to light a new pitchblende occurrence and a possible source of the valuable element radium. At the time of my visit to the property, no work at all had been done; and, therefore, an expression of opinion at this time as to the economic possibility of the occurrence would be unwise.”

In an editorial in its issue of October 10, 1930, the Canadian Mining Journal indicated what Charles was up against:

“The men, or companies, who invest capital in such undertakings are running a risk, and the men who carry out the work are risking life and limb, and it is a peculiar commentary upon human nature that it is easier to find men who will risk their lives than it is to find men who will risk their money in constructive effort.”

But Charles overcame the problem of financing and Eldorado came into being as a productive company.

The contribution that Charles and Gilbert LaBine made to the advancement of medical science was recognized at home and abroad. The brothers received the Curie medal from the governing body of the International Union Against Cancer, the headquarters of which was in Paris.

The citation accompanying the medal to Charles LaBine said that the Pierre and Marie Curie medal, which had been struck in 1938 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the discovery of radium, was conferred upon him “for the distinguished services that you have rendered to science and to humanity.”

Charles has always treasured his memories of the thrilling adventure on Great Bear Lake, even though his participation followed that of Gilbert. In his Toronto home there hangs a permanent reminder of those great days of 1930, a painting of Echo Bay by Franz Johnston.

Gunnar was another successful Labine enterprise - the first Canadian mine to deliver uranium to the refinery at a profit to its shareholders. In less than 10 years, Gunnar paid off its \$19 million of bonded debt, paid out some \$215 million in dividends, and accumulated \$32 million in liquid reserves.

Gilbert was president and Charles the vice-president of Gunnar. Charles retired from the management in 1955, but continued as a director. Gilbert remained as president until 1962, when he resigned because of ill-health.

Although he was 75 in 1963, Charles LaBine is still a strong, vigorous man, proud of his rugged physique, which would be the envy of young men years younger. He built energy and endurance through years of hard physical effort. In his youth, he thought nothing of spending nights in a lean-to, beside a campfire, in temperatures from 40 to 50 degrees below zero. He could live off the land when he had to, getting a meal when he wanted one with a fish hook or a 30/30 rifle.

As he looks back over the years, Charles LaBine sees in retrospect the great pageant of Canadian mining, from the days of the frenzied Cobalt silver rush, through the years of prospecting in almost every part of Canada from Quebec to the Pacific, to the modern era of scientific mining by great corporations. In that pageant, Charles LaBine was one of the standard bearers, a leader in the march of Canada's economic progress, of whose like few will ever be seen again.

- From Ancestry.ca.