Canada’s Inquisitive Prospector

Labine, Gilbert Biography

Gilbert Adelarde Labine (1880 – 1977)

GILBERT A. LABINE saw pitchblende for the first time when he was only 17 years old. The sample of radium, or uranium, ore that he saw in the hands of a lecturer in mineralogy so impressed him that he knew he would never forget its appearance and he would always be able to identify it.

LaBine did not see pitchblende again for 23 years. But when he did, quite unexpectedly, in the desolate wilderness around Great Bear Lake in Canada’s Northwest Territories, that chance discovery made history. The chance that led him to one of the world’s richest sources of uranium may well have shortened the duration of history’s greatest war and altered the fate and destiny of millions of people.

It was an accidental discovery in the main, because LaBine was looking for copper, not pitchblende. But ever since 1907, when he had his first glimpse of that rare mineral, LaBine had kept the recollection of it in his mind. Through nearly two and a half decades he remembered the shining blackness of pitchblende; he appreciated something of its value, even though its use as a weapon of war did not occur to him, and he knew what he would do if he came upon it in the course of his search for mineral treasure in many parts of Canada.

Through the ups and downs of an active life, of prospecting, of finding and failing, of borrowing, of buying and selling, Gilbert LaBine’s unexpected discovery on the ice-bound shores of Great Bear Lake led him in time to the presidency of Canada’s first uranium mine, Eldorado; of a second uranium mining giant, Gunnar; to the honor of the Order of the British Empire, and other tributes of admiration and affection.

The man who achieved all this left high school when he was only 15, (although 35 years later he was appointed to the Board of Governors of the University of Toronto). He was born in 1890 at Westmeath, near Pembroke in the Ottawa Valley.

Gilbert LaBine’s forebears were hardy men and women who came to Canada when the land was new. His grandfather, of mixed Irish, French and Scottish descent, came to Canada to be a clerk for the Hudson’s Bay Company. He was stationed first at Bytown, which many years later became Ottawa, the Capital of Canada. Gilbert’s mother was of Irish ancestry, and his father died while still a young man. The mother was left with a young and growing family to support.

Impelled by the stirring call to adventure that lurks in the heart of every ambitious youngster and by the more mundane but necessary urge to help his mother, Gilbert LaBine, accompanied by his brother Charles, left the family home when he was 16, just after he had left school for good.

The two headed for Northern Ontario. Two years before, during the building of the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway (now Ontario Northland), remarkably rich deposits of silver along the right of way. Cobalt became the centre of the richest silver mining camp in the world, and fortune seekers converged upon Cobalt from every part of the world. Gilbert and Charles LaBine were among them.

But Gilbert was not one of the fortunate few who made a fortune in silver at Cobalt. He went to work for the University Mine - the first, last and only time - with one exception - he ever worked for anyone except himself. His was an independent spirit, filled with the confidence of youth that he could go it alone. All that he needed and lacked was a grubstake, to continue his mining career, and he was willing to work for someone else until he acquired it.

At the same time, Gilbert appreciated the fact that he had cut his own formal education short by joining the silver rush, and he decided to do something about that. He enrolled in classes at the Mining Institute in Haileybury and learned everything he could about mineralogy and geology. It was there the he first encountered pitchblende.

One of the lecturers, Dr. Willet Miller, showed him a sample of pitchblende from Czechoslovakia and explained its virtues, which at that time consisted chiefly of its value in the making of radium.
Young LaBine acquired his grubstake and before the year was out he had found silver near Rice Lake in Manitoba. But he did not remain there. He was a wandering prospector in those days. He looked over the possibilities of mineral treasure in Manitoba, in the Kirkland Lake region of Ontario, in Ungava and other parts of Quebec. When he was to, he discovered a gold mine that gave him back nothing in return for his efforts. He even had a stake in the famous Hollinger mine in the Porcupine District of Ontario, but he did not strike it rich.

The next event in LaBine's checkered mining life was, although he did not know it at the time, to lead him to his greatest discovery. In 1926, LaBine found gold in Manitoba, to which he had returned. It looked so promising, after the years of almost fruitless searching, that he called it Eldorado, the name the Spanish conquistadors gave the undiscovered treasures they believed were to be found in South America.

LaBine sank a 500 foot shaft at his Eldorado mine and there he did indeed find gold. But the quality of the ore was poor, and the return was low, since gold was then being bought at $20 an ounce. Labine, a man of complete integrity, was completely honest with the stockholders who had invested in Eldorado. He told them he intended to start out again, to return to prospecting, and keep searching for something better. He was a man of his word, and once more he set out into the wilds, financed by the modest return he had wrung from his gold mine.

The first thing he did was to make an aerial inspection of Great Bear Lake, far north of Edmonton, 1,100 miles for the nearest railway, lying in a virtually empty land inhabited by only a few Indians. Great Bear is gripped by ice, to some extent at least, for 10 months of the year.

In 1930, Gilbert and a companion Charles St. Paul, set out on foot from the nearest jumping-off point. It was May, but it was like January in southeastern Canada. They dragged along sleds laden with equipment and supplies. The ice underfoot was so hard that they fastened the blades of hacksaws to the soles of their boots in order to get traction.

The glare from the sunlight on the snow-covered landscape blinded St. Paul, and he could not go on. LaBine made poultices of the leaves, applied them to St. Paul's aching eyes, and made him comfortable. Then he set out alone for a fateful three hours.

From the eastern shore, LaBine crossed the frozen surface of the lake to a small island. There he found deposits of silver. Then he looked back, across the ice, to the snowbound shore. Even at that distance, he could detect the flowering signs of cobalt - a rich deposit that before long was to become the No. 1 vein in the new Eldorado, that was to yield to LaBine and his associates cobalt, bismuth and nickel.

Not far from the cobalt lay a far greater find, and the eyes that first saw pitchblende 23 years before did not fail to see it. There it was - the gleaming black of ore that until that time had come only from Czechoslovakia and from the Belgian Congo in Africa. There it was - the precious mineral that was to mean so much to so many millions, for good and for evil, only 15 years in the future.

LaBine recrossed the ice to the shore, and chopped away the ice that partially covered his find. It was pitchblende indeed, and that location became the No. 2 and No. 3 veins of the Eldorado, from whose ore was refined the fissionable material for the first atom bombs in 1945.

In the next year, LaBine and St. Paul went back to Great Bear Lake. This time they had company - 10 men who joined with them in staking 5,000 claims. (Two years later, in 1933, there were no fewer than 13 important mining companies exploring for valuable minerals in the Great Bear country.)

In order to exploit his find, LaBine had to have capital, and this he did himself. After all, he had found silver on the little island from which he first saw the cobalt and the pitchblende. So he simply took out the silver close to the surface, blasting when necessary, and flew out 600 bags of silver, worth a million dollars, to Central Canada. As Eldorado grew in importance and wealth, the company acquired a fleet of boats to carry ore down the Mackenzie River from Great Bear Lake to the railhead and even had its own freight-carrying aircraft.
The only place in Canada where the ore could be refined was Ottawa, to which Eldorado shipped 20 tons of pitchblende.

Gilbert LaBine, however, was determined both to mine and refine his ore. He and his brother Charles built a radium refinery at Port Hope, on Lake Ontario, 70 miles east of Toronto. At the time it was built, the refinery was the largest in the world and the only one in the British Commonwealth. It was there that the LaBines saw produced their first gram of radium. The subsequent expansion of the refinery can be seen in the fact that in 1941 LaBine personally gave Lord Beaverbrook three grams of radium.

The most serious competition to Eldorado in the production of pitchblende and radium came from the Belgian Congo. The Belgians by this time had a world monopoly, and this LaBine had to break. He achieved that ambition despite every kind of obstacle. He received threats from influential quarters in London and Paris. A mysterious explosion damaged the Port Hope refinery. Even Canada seemed to be against him, because an order for material to be used in the first Canadian radium bomb, for medical use, went to the Belgian Congo, rather than to Eldorado.

But LaBine persisted and he triumphed. When the Belgian monopoly was finally broken, the price of radium dropped to $25,000 a gram from $70,000.

It took Eldorado four years to produce its first ounce of radium. In the long and arduous process, there emerged a byproduct, uranium. No one then knew what to do with it. Eldorado stored it, however, because LaBine, with the intuition that always stood him so well, thought that some day the apparently useless substance might be of some value.

By 1940 there was a glut of radium on the market, and Gilbert LaBine reluctantly closed down his operation. But it was not to remain inoperative for long. Unknown to him, two warring powers - the United States and Nazi Germany - were engaged in a lethal race. Each of them, working in absolute secrecy, was trying to be the first to have what would be regarded as the ultimate weapon, the atomic bomb.

In 1942 Gilbert LaBine was called upon, also in complete secrecy, to reopen his mine and his refinery. This he did, and this time he produced on behalf of the government the byproduct and not the product his refinery had turned out two years before.

Then, in 1944, the year before the first atomic bomb obliterated Hiroshima for the earth, the Government of Canada took over Eldorado. By this time too much was at stake to permit a private company to engage in a business such as the LaBine’s. A Crown corporation, Eldorado Mining and Refining Ltd., came into being, with Gilbert LaBine as the president. Thus, in a sense, he became an employee for a second time, the only minor exception to a lifetime of self-employment after the age of 17.

While LaBine directed operations, Eldorado continued to search for uranium deposits. The hunt for the precious substance was so vital to the war effort that Gilbert’s son Joseph, was seconded from the navy to help in the search. When he was only 14, his father taught Joe how to look after himself in the bush. Joe had been trained to work as a prospector, he had been a helper on a diamond drill operation, and he had worked in the refinery. Joe, quietly removed from a naval ship off Halifax, was sent with the late Emil Walli to look for uranium in the Lake Athabasca region. It was a top secret assignment, and it was a successful one.

By 1946, uranium was the most desired of all minerals, Gilbert LaBine desired it like every eager mining man. He found it again, too, in northern Saskatchewan and from that find came the Eldorado Beaverlodge mine, whose production had the effect of tripling Canada’s reserves.

LaBine’s third uranium discovery, again in Saskatchewan, came in 1950, the year he resigned the presidency of the Crown-owned Eldorado. He dispatched his son to establish and open up claims, and organized Nesbitt LaBine Uranium Mines.

The fourth and final uranium find was in 1952, when LaBine uncovered a rich deposit on the north shore of Lake Athabasca. From this discovery arose Gunnar Mines, the first Canadian producer of uranium that returned a profit to its
shareholders. In order to get Gunnar into production, LaBine borrowed $19,500,000, all of which has been repaid. Four years later, Gunnar and Nesbitt LaBine were combined as the Gunnar Mining Company, with assets reported to be worth $40 million.

By that year, 1960, the market for uranium had become an uncertain one, after the United States and the United Kingdom had indicated they would not renew their options to buy Canadian uranium upon the completion of contracts entered into originally. Like a few other far-sighted mining men, LaBine began to extend his company’s interests into other fields. He provided $5 million for the financing of the Canadian Petroleum Corporation, and he had Gunnar acquire interests in silver and iron ore in Nova Scotia.

In November of 1962, his health failing, Gilbert LaBine retired as president of Gunnar, to be succeeded by his son Joseph. Unhappily, the early months of his retirement were marred by a dispute, in which he himself took no part.

The new president proposed that, as part of its program of diversification, Gunnar buy a contracting firm, the McNamara Corporation, one of Canada’s largest construction companies, for $8 million in cash and 800,000 Gunnar shares. Gunnar Mining Company at that time had on hand more than $27 million in cash, bonds and short term notes, and a working capital of more than $32 million.

The scheme was strongly opposed by Gilbert’s brother Charles, a director of Gunnar.

Gunnar’s shareholders, by a vote of 2,198,058 to 450,000, approved the purchase of McNamara. But Charles LaBine, refusing to accept the decision, is taking action in the courts in an attempt to prevent the completion of the sale.

Serious of mien, quite in speech, LaBine is a man of temperate habits and considerable reticence. He is said to be difficult to get to know. He has had no personal desire to be nor interest in being wealthy. That was not his ambition. He never deliberately sought either riches or honors, although both have come to him. He has been an outstanding prospector, one of the greatest Canada has ever seen, and he has been a sound, hard-headed businessman who, after years of struggle, made a success of what he had discovered. If he has any quality that stands out above all others, it has been that of curiosity, in the best sense of the word. Unless a prospector is inquisitive, he will get nowhere, and Gilbert LaBine was one of the most inquisitive.

Article from “Builders of Fortunes”.2914,2913

From Ancestry.ca.