

Wawa - Gold Town - Ghost Town

The discovery of gold in Wawa came at the same time as the Klondike gold rush. Prospectors flocked to Wawa and within two months, three hundred claims were staked around Wawa Lake. In less than a year, Wawa's population rose to over 1,000. The grandiose plan of "Wawa City" included over one thousand small lots.

An early Michipicoten historian reported, "there were picturesque characters in the town, men who had roamed all the corners of the earth. It was a curious conglomeration but more or less law-abiding, for the real reckless times did not start until the railroad came in." The account goes on; "when the Michipicoten branch of the A.C.R. was being built in from the Michipicoten Harbour to the newly discovered Helen Mine & construction gangs, the flotsam and jetsam of humanity made Wawa their headquarters; the town assumed the appearance of a wild west mining camp. Blind pigs (illegal bars) were everywhere; whiskey peddlers were as thick as blackflies, and one of the largest buildings in the district was being run openly as a rather notorious dancehall."

Gyp-artists abounded. One of their most profitable schemes was selling placer claims. In 1898 stories began to circulate that placer gold had been found on the shores of Wawa Lake. The Bureau of Mines exposed the fraud but "suckers" were determined to be taken. Placer mines were staked and set up in places where placer mining was an impossibility. These mines were purely for sale to the ignorant. It was clear to more experienced prospectors that "the bar was the only real placer mine in the district." Every night the bar took in approximately \$600. and on Christmas about \$1400. The hotel, in fact, was about the safest mining venture on the digging.

By September of 1899, in addition to forty-five claims actually being worked, there were also bigger companies in the field. Only large gold mining firms could afford the immense expense of moving any kind of machinery into the gold fields. For instance, it cost \$3800. to take a seven ton boiler from Michipicoten Mission to the Sunrise Mine on the Surluga Road, a distance of some five miles.

The expense of sinking mine shafts was also exorbitant. The 4 x 6 foot Mackey Shaft cost \$70. a foot and sank eighty-five feet below lake level. Investors soon lost confidence.

Suddenly, everyone wanted to leave, and 1100 people left before freeze-up in a bigger rush than the one that prompted them to the area in the first place.

The Sault Star reported in 1920: When the bubble burst it was abandoned and today its buildings stand a mute reminder of those hectic times. The modern visitor to Wawa, will walk down the main street-known in flush days as "Broadway", and be surprised to see what appears like a regular town, but with no signs of life-an unlovely, forsaken place, and yet, in a fashion, picturesque.

Of the several score of houses along the street some are in total ruins, others in fair condition, especially the sturdy lockup which is reported to have done a rushing business. There are buildings formerly used as general stores, the post office, blacksmith shop, a Catholic and Protestant church and there is even a hotel, a good sized hostelry, in its time rivalling any -thing in Northern Ontario. A sign on its portals proclaims, "Balmoral". By 1931 Wawa consisted of five buildings containing forty-five people.

The increasing price of gold during depression days led to a return of life. Many residents of Wawa first lived at Goldpark, as the settlement at the Parkhill Mine on the Surluga Road was known. Even when the mines reclosed at the beginning of World War Two, prosperity was assured through the flourishing Ore Division of Algoma Steel.

Today, many of Wawa's claims are still held because it is believed that Wawa and Michipicoten will once again take their place among the gold-producing centres of Northern Ontario.

-by Donald Pugh
(Courtesy, Sault Star)