Progress of Mining in British Columbia in 1917

Total Production of $37,000,000 Kept Down by Labour Strikes and Costs of Material and Labour—Decrease in Gold Output Due to Increasing Cost of Operations.

The annual report of the Minister of Mines for the year ending December 31st, 1917, has recently come from the press of the King's Printer, Victoria, and reflects great credit on the Minister of Mines, the Honourable Wm. Sloan, the Provincial Mineralogist, Mr. Wm. Fleet Robinson and the district engineers who commenced work under the Mineral Survey Act during the year. The preliminary estimate of the Provincial Mineralogist, which we published early in the year, proved an excellent estimate of the provincial production, since his preliminary guess was $37,182,500 against a definitive total of $37,010,392.

Mr. Robinson in summarizing the progress of mining during the year says in part:

The gross value of the mineral production for 1917 was $37,010,392, a decrease from that of the year 1916 of $5,280,070, or 12.5 per cent., but an increase over that of the previous record year 1912 of $4,569,592, or 14 per cent. The gross value of the metallic minerals recovered in 1917 was $27,284, 474, which represents a decrease from last year of $4,779,040, a percentage decrease of about 15 per cent.

The decrease in total value of the 1917 mineral production as compared with that of the previous year would appear at first sight to show a very serious decline in the mining industry; this condition, however, was not due to any decline in mining itself, but to the cumulative effect of several adverse influences acting on the mining industry as a whole. It must be remembered that the year 1916 was a record one of high metal prices and of demand for metals, which therefore made that year a banner one for mining, not only for British Columbia, but for the whole American continent. In comparing the 1917 production with any previous year excepting 1916, it is seen that the 1917 output easily exceeds any other; for instance, it is nearly $5,000,000 greater than the former record year of 1912.

The adverse influences which retarded mineral production in 1917 may be summarized as industrial troubles, reduced metal prices in the last quarter of the year, a very much lessened demand for lead and zinc for munition purposes, and the economic conditions which severely handicapped the mining of gold.

Industrial troubles in 1917 were more frequent and extensive than usual; in the early months of the year a protracted strike in the Crows Nest district not only cut down the output of coal and coke, but forced the copper and lead smelters to close for lack of fuel, and, as a direct cause, stopped mining in the most productive parts of the province. These troubles were followed by the closing of the mines at Rossland for several months, with the consequent curtailment of gold production. Apparently in this case, although there was some disagreement between the miners and operating company, and a strike seemed imminent, the properties were closed down before such actually took place.

The great decrease in gold production this year is mainly due to the heavy falling-off in the Rossland output, which camp usually makes over one-half the total yearly output of the province. Early in November labour troubles again occurred at the Trail smelter, which closed the whole plant until practically the end of the year; this in turn stopped productive mining during that time throughout East and West Kootenay.

Metal prices during the year 1917 were favourable to the stimulation of productive mining, as, while there were many fluctuations in price, the general averages were as a rule quite as good as in 1916. The average price of zinc for 1917 was considerably below that of the previous year, but to offset this both silver and lead were considerably higher, while copper was practically the same. During the last quarter of the year the market price of lead declined materially, as the high prices prevailing in the earlier months of the year had so stimulated production as to cause a surplus of lead in the market, with consequent lowering of price. Due to the curtailment of orders for lead by the Imperial Munitions Board, the Trail smelter was forced to decrease its output of lead as no Canadian market was available; a considerably larger production of lead could have therefore been made but for the inability to market it.

Details of the market prices of metals will be found under the discussion of each metal, but it may be noted here that the rise in silver from an average of 50 cents an ounce in 1915 to nearly 86 cents at the close of the year 1917 has proved very beneficial to the silver-lead mines of the Slocan.

The higher cost of labour and Supplies—especially powder—has made the cost of new development very high, but in spite of this much work has been done.

Gold mining also suffered from the increased costs of labour and supplies, with no corresponding increase in the value of the metal produced, thereby causing a smaller margin of profit, and, in many cases, making it unprofitable to mine gold.

But for these untoward circumstances the hope anticipated at the commencement of the year, that the mineral-output of the province for 1917 would reach the $50,000,000 mark, would probably have been realized. Taken in the aggregate, our mineral production and development in the year 1917 and the future prospects of the industry are conditions for congratulation at this time.

The value of coal produced in 1917 shows an increase of $230,588 as compared with the previous year, but the coke production shows the large decrease of $646,920. The coal production in the Coast District was considerably greater than in 1916, but labour troubles materially decreased the output in the Crows Nest of both coal and coke; it is in this latter district that most of the coke production of the province is made.

Had it not been that the Crows Nest Collieries, through a series of mishaps—accompanied by a serious shortage of labour due to the war, followed by a labour strike—were unable to make as large aan output as expected and intended, the coal and coke production would have been much greater; but as it was, there resulted such a shortage of coke as to partially close the copper smelters, and these in turn compelled the copper mines to very much curtail their outputs.

The outputs from metal-mining and coal-mining are intimately related to one another, as any increase in production from the former causes an increased production from the latter for fuel for smelting, power, and transportation purposes. On the other hand, a stoppage of production of coal and coke immediately curtails the metalliferous production.

Quantities and Value of Mineral Products for 1915, 1916, and 1917.

	1915		1916		1917	
	Quantity	Value	Quantity	Value	Quantity	Value
Gold, placer, ozs.	38,500	$ 770,000	29,025	$ 580,500	24,800	$ 496,000
" lode "	250,021	5,167,934	221,932	4,587,334	114,523	2,367,190
Silver ..... "	3,366,506	1,588,991	3,301,923	2,059,739	2,929,216	2,265,749
Lead .....lbs.	46,503,590	1,939,200	48,727,516	3,007,462	37,307,465	2,951,020
Copper ..... "	56,918,405	9,835,500	65,379,364	17,784,494	59,007,565	16,038,256
Zinc ..... "	12,982,440	1,460,440	37,168,980	4,043,985	41,848,513	3,166,259
Coal .....tons	1,611,129	5,638,952	2,084,093	7,294,325	2,149,975	7,524,913
Coke ..... "	245,871	1,475,226	267,725	1,606,350	159,905	959,430
Miscellaneous products.....	.....	1,571,181	.....	1,326,273	.....	1,241,575
		$29,447,508		$42,290,462		$37,010,392