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## Bob Heath and a Little Bit of Red Mountain History

by *Charity Winters*



Many people have wondered about the history of Red Mountain and of the stories of the mining days that surround one of Seldovia's favorite recreation spots. It seems incredible to think of human beings living so far away from civilization, away from roads, supplies, and community. Yet the traces of those that once tackled the rough, though beautiful, landscape of Red Mountain to pull valuable metals from its depths can be seen in the scattered trail of old cars, broken cabins and rusted metal remains. All of it simply adds to the mystery for those who are interested in the who, what, and when of so long ago.

Into a small piece of this puzzle fits a man named Bob Heath. A local only in the summer months, Bob had an interesting family history to share with me that brought to light many aspects of the history of Red Mountain and Alaska as well. We'll go as far back

Jakolof. The family lived in a small cabin while four other mineworkers (all family acquaintances) lived in a bunkhouse. Helen fed her family and the men with the help of a hired woman named Daisy Miller. She also homeschooled her three children. Bob, 7 years old at the time, and his sisters spent almost all of their free time outside. In the summer they played in the creek and in winter in the endless white snow that left a smooth covering over everything you could see. Most of the time the snow was so cold that it became like a hard crust, making it difficult to walk on. Bob's dad made the kids crampons so they could get around. One of Bob's favorite memories of his times on Red Mountain was of he and his sisters climbing up as high as they dared and sliding back down on pieces of cardboard.

Robert Heath and his men mined through the winter of 1942-

as the 1920's in this story – when Robert Heath met Helen Franklin. Robert (Bob's father) had moved to Alaska in about 1918 to work and to attend the University of Alaska in Fairbanks for a period of time. While he was there, he worked a gold mine and began to court a young woman named Helen Franklin. In those days, courting meant a 10-12 mile trek in snowshoes from the mines to town and back for Robert! Helen was a native of Alaska, born in Fairbanks after her parents had relocated there from Dawson City during the Fairbanks gold strike in 1902. A hardcore Alaskan woman, Helen and some of her college friends floated part of the Chena River to celebrate their graduation from the University of Alaska in 1929. Bob has a fascinating picture of his mother on this trip. She's about 20, standing next to a native Alaskan, a bamboo parasol over one shoulder and a small revolver hanging at her side. But back to our story – in 1933 Robert and Helen were married.

Bob and his two sisters, Gael and Lynn, were born in Fairbanks. As America got involved in World War II in 1941, all mining that was not essential was shut down. Heath was out of a job as a gold miner. An enterprising young man with a family to provide for, Robert bought into a chrome deposit at Red Mountain and began the Chrome Queen Mine. The Heath family arrived in Seldovia in the fall of 1942 where Bob was enrolled at the one room schoolhouse for one week before his family headed out to the mountain. Bob shared an interesting story of one of his first memories of Seldovia. Arriving at low tide, a cargo net was lowered onto the boat. The whole family was then lifted to shore via the net! At that time, there was no road from Seldovia to Jakolof so the family took a boat to Jakolof Bay. The family made the trek out to Red Mountain from Jakolof in a trailer pulled by a CAT. There was no running water, no electricity and no phone. Contact with the outside world was made using a radio; supplies were brought in by boat and picked up at

1943, stockpiling the ore at Jakolof for the government to take. When the Japanese invaded the Aleutian chain in 1943, Robert began to fear for his family's safety. He decided to move them to Fort Collins, CO, near his family. He then returned to finish mining the deposit. In all, the Chrome Queen Mine produced 6,650 tons of chromium.

Bob grew up in Fort Collins and attended the Colorado School of Mines, following in his father's footsteps to become a mining engineer. There he met his wife, Daunine Houska and the two were married in 1960. He and Daunie spent a few years at Flaming Gorge Dam, Utah, and other dam construction sites before moving back to Fort Collins. There they raised three daughters, Stephanie, Jennifer, and Christine and Bob eventually established the Heath Construction Company. After about 30 years of building all kinds of municipal buildings, commercial buildings, and schools Bob is 95% retired as a minor silent partner to his son-in-law. His three daughters and their families still reside in the Fort Collins area.

Childhood memories of Red Mountain were always at the back of Bob's mind and in 1987 he finally paid his first visit to the old mining site since 1943. He hiked the trail to the valley from Jakolof Bay and found that nothing was left of the old building and mine structure. But Bob was attracted to the town of Seldovia. From then on, he and Daunie came up every year and stayed in the apartment over the store (what is now Bay View Suites), and other B&B's. In 2003 they bought the little cabin where they now live 2-3 months out of the year. The little cabin has been a work in progress, slowly coming together under Bob's expertise in building. He and Daunie are both drawn to the secluded and relaxing lifestyle of Seldovia but also feel that they are there because of the exceptional community of neighbors they so richly enjoy each summer.

### Red Mountain - Chrome Queen Mine - 1942-1943





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