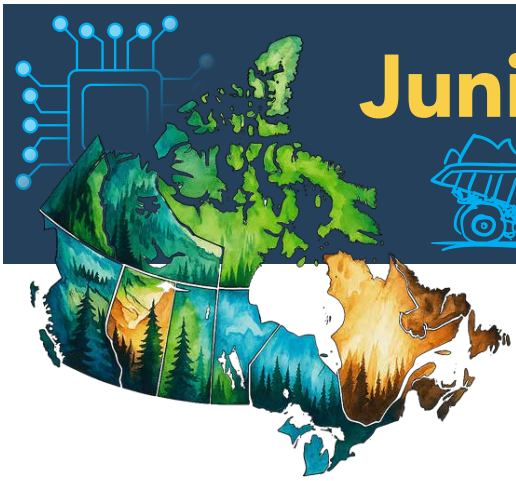
# Junior Explorers Challenge

STORY



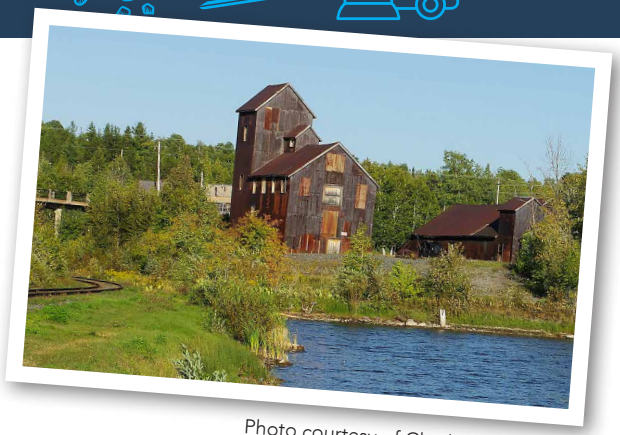


Photo courtesy of Charles Dumaresq

## Cobalt: The Silver Rush That Changed a Forest Town

Long ago, deep in the forests of northern Ontario, something shiny changed everything.

If you stand on **Nipissing Hill** in the town of **Cobalt, Ontario**, you can see old mine buildings, quiet streets and tall metal towers called **headframes**. Headframes are tall structures built over mine shafts that support a hoisting system, like a giant elevator, using cables, pulleys, cages, and skips to move miners and equipment underground and lift ore from **orebodies**—natural underground deposits where valuable metals or minerals are found—back to the surface.

Today, fewer than 1,000 people live there. But more than 100 years ago, Cobalt was one of the busiest places in Canada.

That's because of **silver.**

### What Is a Silver Rush?

A **silver rush** happens when people discover lots of silver in one place. When that happens, miners, workers, and businesses rush in, hoping to strike it rich.

Cobalt was one of the biggest silver rushes in North America—right up there with famous silver towns in South America and the United States.

### A Shiny Discovery in 1903

In the summer of **1903**, two railway workers named **James McKinley** and **Ernest Darragh** were helping build a train line through the forest. One day, they noticed **pink stains on a rock** near a small lake.

They broke off pieces of the rock and did an old prospector trick—they **bit the metal**. It was soft. That meant it might be **silver**!

They sent the rock to a lab in Montreal. The results were incredible: the rock was packed with silver.

## How Cobalt Got Its Name

A geologist named **Willett Green Miller** came to check out the discovery. He knew that silver in the area often appeared with another metal called cobalt, which was used to make blue paint.

Photo courtesy of CobaltHistoricalSociety.ca

He put up a sign at the train stop and called the place **Cobalt**. The name stuck.

## From Forest to Boomtown

McKinley and Darragh began digging for silver using simple tools like **shovels, picks, and wheelbarrows**. They found even more silver close to the surface.

Soon, word spread.

Miners and investors rushed in from all over the world. New mines opened, and Cobalt grew incredibly fast. By **1909**, the town had up to **12,000** people.

There were:

- Mines and mills
- Shops and banks
- A movie theatre
- Canada's first streetcar system
- A hockey team called the **Silver Kings**

Some people became very rich. Newspapers said Cobalt had **38 millionaires**!

## Not Everything Was Easy

Life in a boomtown was hard and sometimes dangerous.

- Mining accidents were common.
- Candles used underground could cause explosions.
- Over **100 miners** died in accidents.
- Poor sanitation led to a **typhoid outbreak**.
- Mine waste polluted nearby lakes with **arsenic**, which still affects the area today.

## The Rush Slows Down

By **1911**, Cobalt's mines were producing huge amounts of silver—about **30 million ounces in one year**. But the silver veins didn't go very deep.

As the silver ran out and prices fell, people began to leave. By the 1930s, only a few thousand people remained.

In total, Cobalt produced about **460 million ounces of silver**, which is worth about $50.2 billion CAD today! (As of February 2026).

## Big Ideas Came from Cobalt

Even after the rush, Cobalt stayed important.

- Engineers invented new mining technology there.
- The **Haileybury School of Mines** opened to train miners and engineers.
- Many workers from Cobalt went on to help build other famous mining towns.
- A company called **Agnico Mines** started nearby and later became **Agnico Eagle**, one of Canada's biggest mining companies.
- Fun fact: The name **Agnico** comes from the elements Silver (**Ag**), Nickel (**Ni**) and Cobalt (**Co**) from the periodic table of elements!

## How Mining Became Safer

The dangers in early silver mining taught important lessons. Over time, new rules and regulations made mining much safer:

- **Better lighting:** Electric light sources replaced candles, which greatly reduced the risk of fires and explosions within mines
- **Improved Ventilation:** Modern mines pump fresh air underground to help miners breathe safely and to cycle out harmful fumes
- **Protective Gear:** Hard-hats, steel-toed boots, safety glasses and ear protection are now mandatory to guard against injuries
- **Training Programs:** Schools like the Haileybury School of Mines (now part of Northern College) began teaching miners proper safety techniques and emergency procedures.
- **Stricter Regulations:** Mine inspections, safe working conditions and limits on work hours were put into place to protect workers
- **Environmental Protections:** New rules now require mining companies to carefully manage waste and clean up pollution to protect lakes, rivers and wildlife.

These changes mean that while mining is still hard work, it is far safer today than it was during the past.

## A Green Future

Cobalt's story isn't over.

Today, **silver** is important for **solar panels**, and **cobalt** is used in **electric vehicle batteries**.

A new refinery near Cobalt could help process cobalt for clean energy technologies. Scientists are also exploring the area again, searching for **critical minerals** needed for a greener future.

## From Silver Then to Sustainability Now

What started with two men noticing pink stains on a rock helped shape Canada's mining history—and may help shape its clean-energy future too.

The Cobalt story shows how **curiosity, science, and discovery** can change a place forever.