

KEND CITY HOTEL

LIFE AT THE END OF THE SILVER TRAIL

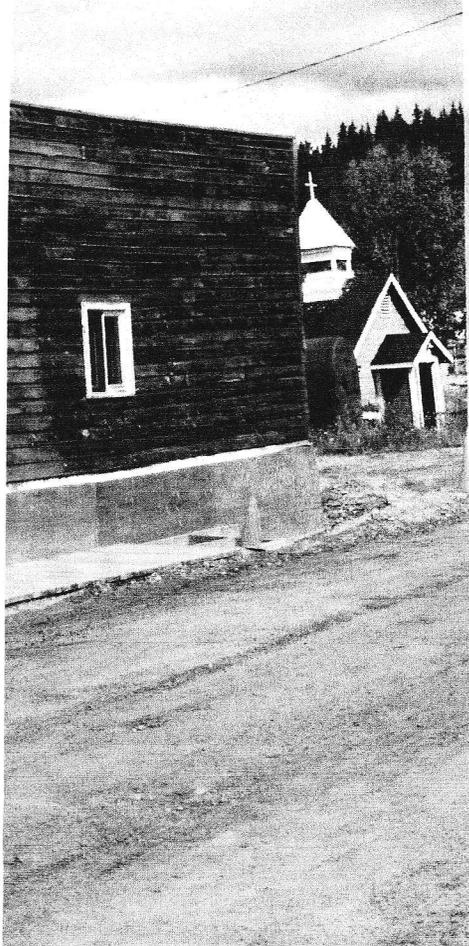
Reflections on Calling Elsa and Keno City "Home"

Story and photos by Catherine Lai

Keno City is an end-of-the-road settlement where roughly two-dozen residents get things done at their own relaxed pace. Once a lively place bustling with mining activity, Keno is largely a ghost town today that subsists on a small, tourism-dependent economy.

In its heyday, during the '60s, '70s, and '80s, the area had a vibrant community of miners and their families who primarily lived and worked in Elsa, an adjacent town owned by United Keno Hill Mines. Keno City had a bar, gas station, theatre, and its own taxi service, which would deliver a case of beer for a fee. The prosperity of the mine meant workers earned a lot of money while paying very little rent. But once the mine shut down, in 1989, the workers moved elsewhere. Those who didn't want to leave the area retreated to Keno City and tried to make a living.

Some of those people are still there today, having grown too attached to the region to depart. These are the stories of some of Keno City's current residents, reflecting on their long-standing connection to the place they call home.





MIKE MANCINI

At his iconic Keno City Snack Bar, Mike Mancini serves up signature homemade pizzas using his mother's recipe. The restaurant is teeming—inside and out—with memorabilia from Mancini's personal collection. His latest acquisition: an old United Keno Hill truck.

It's easy to tell Mancini pines for the "good old days," before the mine closed, when Elsa was a thriving community.

Mancini was born in Italy. His father was working in Belgium's coal mines when he heard about opportunities in Canada, later moving his family to the Yukon in the late '50s.

His father worked on the tramline, while his mother found herself living in a tarpaper shack on the side of a mountain. Eventually, the family moved to a house in Calumet, a townsite that was later amalgamated with Elsa. Rent was cheap and everything was taken care of by United Keno Hill.

"If anything, the most that we ended up paying was 75 bucks [for rent]," Mancini says. "You only had to call if you needed anything fixed, sheds built. We were looked after pretty good. Everybody sort of lived in this bubble that life was rosy."

The community was devastated when the mine shut down.

"That first layoff opened everybody's eyes," Mancini remembers. "A lot of people who had not put any money aside, living paycheque to paycheque, got a shot of reality."

Many retreated to Keno, and Mancini says it was tough to leave Elsa behind.

"My ties with Elsa were pretty much gone once the mine shut down. We weren't encouraged to go to town anymore," he explains. "The infrastructure was slowly being dismantled, so we came to Keno and tried to regroup. Up until then I considered Elsa my hometown—I could go there anytime I wanted. It was hard, but when the town shut down, the reality was that it didn't belong to us."

Though Mancini did yearn to seek his fortune elsewhere, he was drawn back to the area after his parents passed.

"It's comfortable," he says. "It just feels like home. I was always the one telling my friends that there was more to life in the big city. And now I'm the only one who is still here."

KEITH AND SONIA HEPNER

As trappers, Keith and Sonia Hepner divide their time between living in the bush and Keno City. Both came from very different places, but felt at home once arriving in the Yukon. Keith hails from a farm in southern B.C., near Kelowna.

"It got more and more populated, and as I grew up I didn't like it, so I just started moving north," he says. "When I got here it was just like coming home for me."

A city girl from Vancouver, Sonia visited Whitehorse on a cross-Canada road trip.

"I wouldn't be caught dead looking like this ever," Sonia says with a laugh, gesturing to her outdoor attire. "I used to go to the corner store with makeup on; otherwise, I wouldn't go."

A friend introduced the pair, and after Sonia spent a winter on Keith's trapline she was hooked on bush life.

"After awhile you become attuned to the environment around you and you feel like you're a part of it," Keith says. "It's really a beautiful feeling."

The couple started off on a trapline on the Rackla River, north of Keno. After the birth of their son, Rafe, they moved closer to civilization, settling on a trapline at nearby McQuesten Lake. While it is their main residence, they also bought a house in Keno City in order for their son to attend high school in Mayo.

Sonia and Keith are extremely versatile residents who've occupied a variety of jobs, from teaching art, fire assaying, to conducting historical research. And after the Elsa mine shut down, the couple maintained the site for a year and a half as contractors.

Their current home in Keno also showcases their resourcefulness—everything is crafted from reused material found in Elsa. And the couple is still connected to the former community via a Facebook group of former Elsa residents who keep in touch and organize reunions.

"It was the first community I've ever been around that I've been very comfortable in. Everybody was very open and honest and upfront," Keith says. "It was a great little place, eh?"

"THERE'S ONE THING THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE
HERE ALL HAVE IN COMMON: WE LOVE LIVING HERE."

LEO MARTEL

Leo Martel not only loves Keno City, he also has big dreams for it.

In 1980, he came to Elsa to work at the mine until it shut down.

"There was me, my brother, and a few others who didn't want to leave, and so we tried to make a go at it here, but reality set in," he says. "There wasn't enough money to sustain everybody."

While Martel moved to Whitehorse, in 1992, he always knew he would retire in Keno.

"I want to die here," he says with an unmistakable air of certainty.

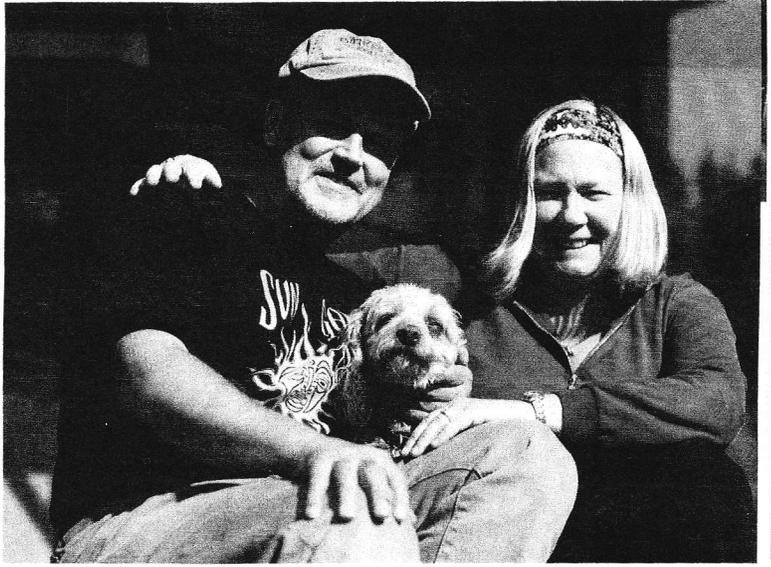
When businessperson Geordie Dobson put the historic Keno City Hotel up for sale more than six years ago, Martel plotted with his brother to buy it to revitalize Keno City's economy.

"The only thing that's going to revive the place is the elephant here," Martel says, gesturing to the hotel. "Once it's the main attraction in town again, it's going to help everybody."

A headstrong man by all accounts, Martel has ambitious plans for the hotel and even grander visions for Keno City as a prime retirement spot, educational tourist retreat, and dream destination for outdoor enthusiasts. And although he knows it's a long shot, he's also hoping a gas station and store will open so the community can have a post office again.

He doesn't know specifically why he wants to live in Keno; he says it's just a feeling.

"This is an extreme place. Extreme places attract people who are different. We're all different in our own way," Martel says. "But there's one thing the people who live here all have in common: we love living here."



DIRK RENTMEISTER AND TRACY DE LA BARRE

Dirk Rentmeister grew up in Calumet and Elsa, and also worked at the mine. The community was like a big family, and he remembers all the kids growing up together.

"There was about 22 of us that hung out and did everything together, except dating. We never really dated each other. We were all too much like brothers and sisters."

When the mine shut down, Rentmeister actually found himself grateful for the chance to search for a new life, and a few years later he met his wife, Tracy de la Barre.

The couple raised their three children in Whitehorse and Marsh Lake, but the Keno City area remains important to their family.

"There's something about end-of-the-road places. It's an automatic affair of the heart—you either get it or you don't," de la Barre says. "This is where our kids learned to shoot rabbits and grouse, pack a moose, and catch a pike. This is where they learned to ride an ATV, a quad, and paddle in a boat or canoe."

The couple built the Silvermoon Bunkhouse in Keno City a few years ago, as well as a family home on the hill.

"There's a bit of mining heritage memorabilia in the house to acknowledge what it has done for our family," Rentmeister explains. "It was a financial gain; it was a learning experience."

Mining has been in the family for three generations. Rentmeister's father also worked at the mine in Elsa, and his daughter, Aliasha, had a summer mining job in the area with Alexco Resource Corp.

"The [Elsa] mine was rated as the highest producing silver mine in the Yukon for about 30 to 40 years," Rentmeister says. "I worked underground for about nine years here as a miner. I think it's pretty important and amazing in some ways to have been a part of that." Y

