

Book

Sun Dogs and Yellowcake: Gunnar Mines – a Canadian Story

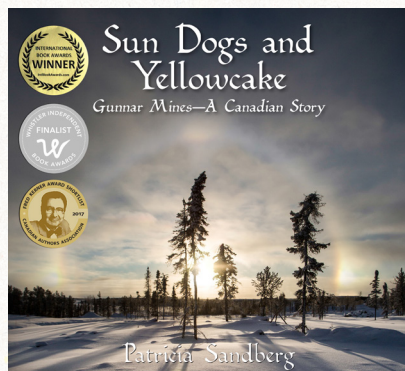
Born out of the 1940's quest for the atomic bomb and driven by the tension of the Cold War, Gunnar Mines and more than fifty other companies parachuted into the pristine Lake Athabasca region, home to small First Nations and Métis communities, a few fishing enterprises, and fur trappers. They were swept along in a uranium frenzy reminiscent of the Klondike gold rush, a heady, exciting era.

It is against this backdrop that prize-winning Canadian author Patricia Sandberg begins her memoir in *Sun Dogs and Yellowcake*. Sun dogs are the illusory “suns” that sometimes appear in the Arctic sky on either side of the physical sun (see book cover), while yellowcake is a sun-yellow powdery precipitate of partially refined uranium ore.



Patricia Sandberg

The author spent eight years of her childhood in Gunnar, a town of around 900 souls that sprang up around a uranium extraction and processing mine on the shores of Lake Athabasca in northern Saskatchewan. The mine was a highly profitable business from the mid-1950s until the early 1960s. The mine's radioactive output was



bought up exclusively by the United States in order to produce nuclear bombs.

Gunnar Mines was named after Gunnar Berg, a Swedish immigrant and prospector who discovered gold in the area in the early 1930s. Another Swedish immigrant, Patricia Sandberg's grandfather Fred Sandberg, subsequently joined the mining business and eventually settled in Gunnar. The author's recollections are a page-turner; her prose is elegant, and her narrative is accompanied by a wealth of photographs and maps. Moreover, she has gone to admirable lengths to find other former residents of Gunnar and to supplement her own recollections with theirs. She also relies on reminiscences told by her mother Barbara, and notes left behind by her father Jack. The stories are arranged in chronological order, such that the reader is able to follow the evolution of life in and around the mine.



Fred and Freda Sandberg, Patricia's Swedish grandparents

Most of the interviewees recall their years at Gunnar with nostalgia and affection. In the absence of urban distractions they formed a tight-knit community and depended entirely on one another, apart from occasional trips to places like Edmonton. Sandberg writes: Weekends were for house parties and some weekdays were too. But as the author points out, the isolation drove many of the men – including her own father – to alcoholism, and it is difficult to imagine how marriages and families could thrive in such an environment. Added to this, there were the inevitable work-related injuries and loss of life.

The 260-page book is not primarily about the role of Swedish immigrants in the Canadian mining sector, but Swedes appear here and there in different roles throughout the memoir.

Patricia Sandberg will contribute a future article in *Swedish Press* specifically about her grandparents, along with some interesting anecdotes about other Swedish and Norwegian immigrants who worked in the same area and time period. So stay tuned!

Sun Dogs and Yellowcake is available on Amazon and also via the author's website www.patricia-sandberg.com.

Reviewed by Peter Berlin



The beautiful scenery of Lake Athabasca.

Photos courtesy of Patricia Sandberg