

Remembering Bob Hopper

By David Bond/Wallace Street Journal

Saturday, Sept. 13, would have been Robert Dwayne Hopper's 75th birthday.

For those new here, or with short-term memories, Robert Hopper was owner and managing partner of the legendary Bunker Hill Mine in Kellogg, Idaho, from 1990 until his death in January 2011. He was an Elk, a Mason, a self-educated genius, and my dearest friend.

We met by happenstance in 1999 when a former colleague from the Coeur d'Alene Press who was working on the Milo Creek flood control project told me of this guy who had bought Bunker Hill, was making colloidal silver, and had just put the lie to the whole EPA Superfund fiasco in the Coeur d'Alene River Basin.

As to colloidal silver, try it sometime on a burn, or inhale a few drops to end your sinusitis: Silver is nature's oldest known bacteriacide.

No, despite the propaganda from Big Pharma, it won't turn you purple unless you chug a gallon of it every day. In jigger-sized daily doses it fights all kinds of disease, and over time even seems to give viruses a run for their lives. Big Pharma hates colloidal silver because you can't patent an element and charge a royalty for it.

Bob Hopper knew this, and many, many other things. His giant intellect inhaled knowledge and could not resist curiosity.

When the EPA-instigated “mining-caused lead pollution” debate in the Silver Valley was raging and every mining company was being sued to bankruptcy, it led him to postulate: If this is a lead-mining district, it's because there is lead here and has been for quite awhile. Where might one find a place where the normal, pre-mining “background levels” of lead might be found?

Simple answer: The Sacred Heart Mission at Cataldo, Idaho, chinked with mud from the Coeur d'Alene River and built between 1850 and 1853 – 35 years before lead-mining began here. He obtained permission to sample mud-chinking still in place from the Mission's original construction, split the samples from these tiny injections and sent them to two independent laboratories.

The results astounded even Bob Hopper, who was not easily astounded. The lead levels in the Mission's original mud were as high or higher than the levels the EPA was attacking and suing mining companies for.

Here's where the story gets funny.

The mining companies were afraid Hopper's results were wrong, and the EPA feared they were right, so nobody ever went back to check the samples and this amazing story was buried, unpublished except in the Spokane Inlander. The Coeur d'Alene Indian Tribe, which had neglected the Sacred Heart Mission for nearly a century, put up a mild fuss about Hopper's “desecration” of this dilapidated “sacred” Mission. Ironically it was a mining executive, Henry L. Day, who put up the money for its later restoration.

There are too many other stories to tell about Hopper. They would fill volumes of books. The man could quote Dostoyevsky, Pirsig, Rand, Lucretius, Nietzsche, Christ and Plato with equal ease but didn't show it off. Not bad for a kid who grew up in Flint, Michigan, on the wrong side of the tracks and was sent to military school to finish high school because of his impatience with lame schoolteachers.

Philosophically Robert was a pacifist, but EPA declared war on him and even had devised a plan to seize the Bunker Hill Mine from him by armed force. He had no response but to sue the bastards in the 9th Circuit and the U.S. Court of Claims, and expose them for the liars they were, and he won.

Our brief lunch meeting that first day in mid-summer 1999 lasted throughout the afternoon and into the evening. Here was the reform-school miner, educating the college boy.

Miners aren't supposed to be like that. When the World Trade Towers went down on Sept. 11 and I felt like nuking the whole Mideast, he cautioned, "It's all about usury. Look it up."

You should see his library. One of his sons would admit you, if you asked.

Bob Hopper was generous to a fault but never broadcast it. Despite his growly bluster, he was shy and gentle. He hated socializing and he didn't drink. He lived a compartmentalized and very private life: family, friends, business and the Bunker Hill.

And most of his adult life he lived in debilitating pain from an accident in his early years, but never spoke of it, even to his friends. His wife told me of this, his searing pain, only after his death.

We all knew just a little slice of him.

His desk was a heap of chaos. He could not help reading and learning. The letters he wrote to his sons pack the punch St. Paul's Epistles. He took a motor into the mine every day to check on things, to make sure the Bunker Hill would survive him. He gave things to Kellogg that even Kellogg doesn't know about. And he may have saved, by sheer force of will, our mining industry, by backing a rogue agency off

The one thing he never buried in that chaos was a quote from Richard Mayberry's Two Laws: "Do all you have agreed to do. Do not encroach on other persons or their property."

A few of us, including Bill Calhoun, Lovon Fausett, and Laurel, his devoted secretary, used to drag Bob out one evening a year to Albi's in Wallace to celebrate his Sept. 13 birthday. Honestly, I think he preferred his Thursday lunches of Spam at the Broken Wheel but he put up with us.

It would not be right to numerate Robert Hopper's gifts to me. He gave in secrecy, as Christ preached, and would reach down and shove a giant hook up my ass if I recited them.

But here they are:

That speaking truth to power is OK, in fact mandatory.

That your mind is a growing thing, if you feed it properly.

That you can be a miner, a thinker, a writer, a fighter and a pacifist, all at once.

That if you're depressed, work harder.

Lastly, excerpted from a letter he wrote to his sons, not bad, coming from a simple miner:

“If we attract the things we most fear, does it not stand to reason that we would also attract the things we most loved? So what is it that you most love with all your heart, all your Soul?

“Whatever this most loved of all things to you, it is the source of your strength, your dignity, your integrity. And if there is nothing that you love with all of your heart, your Soul, then that is exactly what you are – Nothing.”