

# Closing the mine: the news stunned the community

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## Closing the mine: the news stunned the community

*This story is part two of a series. [Read part one here.](#)*

HIMROD--The Morton Salt Seneca Lake Mine's fate had been sealed without much warning on that day in May of 1976, when Morton's executives arrived to deliver the news that the mine was to be shut down immediately. This news stunned not only the immediate community of Himrod, but the entire county as well. A skeleton crew of office personnel, mine workers, and equipment operators was put into place to accomplish the work that was necessary to close the mine.

The actual mining operation came to a halt, and any contracts left open for salt were

either filled with the salt that was already on the surface or filled by other mines under Morton's direction. This eliminated all the salt that had completed its production run. Every day the rock salt was loaded, either by rail car or truck, and sent on its way to the various vendors. Soon, all that remained dotting the Himrod landscape were the headframes, buildings and huge piles of waste salt. The skeleton crew of workers was decreased even further, and the actual closing-up process began.

As with many events that take place in our time, local stories or speculations can take on the cloak of fact, when in truth these stories often don't contain all the facts of what really did transpire. The passage of time has a unique way of twisting history. One of these instances exists around the closing process of the mine, and how the mine was made secure and exactly what happened to all the equipment, machines and buildings. A frequently repeated story is that all the machinery was left down in the mines because bringing it to the surface would make it fall apart due to the constant salt exposure. "Not so," a former employee, who was part of the close-up process, stated. In fact, the Caterpillers, Roof Bolters, Jumbos, front end loaders, bulldozers, personnel carriers and any other underground vehicles were disassembled, loaded into the personnel shaft and hoisted to the surface. On top, they were reassembled, and Morton either placed them

in other mine operations or sold them.

However, one personnel carrier did get left down in the mine for eternity because on the day it was to be hoisted to the surface the battery was dead, and a new one could not be secured in time. It remains down there to this day.

Once everything was out of the mine, the hoists, pulleys and motors located in the headframes (towers) were dismantled and removed. Like everything else, this equipment was re-allocated elsewhere.

Except for the strong heavy metal cables, they were cut and dropped into the shaft.

The employee who contributed to this column stated he imagines they must look like a huge pile of spaghetti on the floor of the mine. The openings of the towers were then concreted in, making it totally impossible for anyone or anything to get down into the mine.

Above ground, all the conveyers, loaders, skips, grinders, screens and other production equipment would also be reassigned to other mines or sold. Buildings were closed and boarded up, except for those needed for the five employees who would remain on Morton's payroll until all the waste salt piles were gone.

The waste salt piles were a huge problem for Morton Salt as they needed to be properly disposed of. This was a giant undertaking that would take eight years to finally accomplish. There were many stories about the waste piles that floated around. Many

people believed this salt was put back into the mine, trucked away and even dumped into Seneca Lake. None of these scenarios took place; however, a very technical disposal system was put into place. The first step was to drill wells, much like a water well, to the depth of where the salt deposit laid underground. Channels and brine ponds were dug around the waste piles to catch the brine that would be created by the dissolving waste salt. A motorized pump was placed on a small trolley-like apparatus that ran on tracks around the waste piles. Using the water pumped up from Severne Point, this little movable water pump with its nozzle sprayed water 24 hours a day on the piles. As the salt dissolved, the brine was collected in the channels and ponds and then finally pumped down into the wells. This technique put the brine directly back into the underground salt deposit where it originally came from.

The closing of the Seneca Lake Mine created an economic hardship for the area and an especially difficult time for all those local people who lost their jobs. So why, did this happen? There were several contributing factors all of which held some validity, however it was probably a combination of all these things that finally forced Morton Salt to close the mine.

To be fair, Morton Salt did try to sell the mine, but to no avail. After months of trying to sell the property and the mining operation without any success, they began to look at

the other "cons" of continuing to maintain production at the Seneca Lake mine. The first concern was the drop in the market for rock salt. Environmentalists had put pressure on the New York State Highway Department to stop using so much salt on the roads in the winter, and other alternatives were explored and put in place leaving an excess of rock salt sitting around the state. This left a huge supply, but no demand. No demand, no market.

Another big concern was the daily operating cost of running the mine in Himrod. It was very expensive to keep this mine going because of the continuing cost of repairs and maintenance. The chance of things that could and did go wrong just kept increasing. One of those costly endeavors was the daily grind of pumping water up from Seneca Lake. This uphill climb was hard on equipment and something was always breaking down or developing a leak. And then, there was the salt itself. The miners were finding more and more shale in the salt, and getting the shale out of the salt was an impossible task. The purity of the rock salt was decreasing, and there was no technology available at the time that would allow the shale to be separated from the salt. This was also a contributing factor to the great growth of the waste salt piles. Another mining problem was the constant battle to keep ground water from entering the mine and the shafts. The strong underground pressure made fissures in the

surface areas of the mine and ground water would flow through these fissures into the mine causing flooding problems. It took a lot of concrete to fill a fissure, and this battle was both a constant financial and safety concern. And finally, environmental problems began to plague the mine. A brine pond was breached leaving the soil and ground water contaminated. Neighbors filed law suits for damage to their wells and crops. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) stepped in and fines were imposed on Morton Salt for environmental damages. The amount of waste salt posed a very dangerous threat, and the disposal of these piles was closely monitored by the DEC. All these factors brought Morton Salt's Seneca Lake Mine to an untimely end.

When asked what the mine would look like today, the former employee stated he was sure by now the ground water had infiltrated both the shafts and most definitely the mine. Water flowing in the mine shafts would make them weak and unstable. The underground pressure that exists takes advantage of the weakening concrete and could cause sections of the shafts to crumble and collapse. As far as the mine itself is concerned, it is without a doubt the water seepage and sheer weight of the salt ceilings that have caused most of the rooms and pillars to completely collapse, leaving little trace of the great infrastructure that once existed underground. It seems to be a sad tribute to all the men and women who

worked the mine, some of whom paid the ultimate price.

While some believe there were several mine collapses with many miners losing their lives, the fact is that only two men died at the Seneca Lake Mine. The first death was that of a Cementation Corporation employee during the construction of one of the mine shafts. The other death was a Morton Salt miner who became a fatal victim of a salt ceiling collapse. Both he and the Roof Bolter he was sitting on were crushed under the weight of the salt as the ceiling fell during the bolting procedure. This is one of the greatest risks that any miner can face.

For now, it is unknown what the future of the mine will be. In April of 2009, Morton Salt was acquired by a larger salt company: K & S, a German corporation, for the price of \$1.6 billion. There was a lot of speculation at that time that the mine would be reopened, but it has now been over eight years with no signs of revival yet. For now, only the two concrete tower sentinels stand tall alone in a field representing what was once the most advanced and deepest salt mine in New York.

I would like to thank the Dundee Area Historical Society for their help with this subject. A lot of information was gleaned from the booklet, "Salt," a Morton Salt Company Production. I especially want to express my extreme gratitude to the former employee who took time out of his busy day to teach me about salt mining, and how the

mine was finally closed up.

Publisher's note: If you have photos or other stories about the Himrod salt mine, send them to [theobserver@citlink.net](mailto:theobserver@citlink.net).

There is no relation between Pamela Morton and Morton Salt.

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