



Yukon Prospectors' Association

- Meetings
- Metal Prices
- Home
- Hall of Fame
- Honour Roll
- Contact Us
- Prospector of the Year
- Yukon Geoscience Forum
- Properties for Option
- Larry's Corner

ALEC BERRY: CONWEST EXPLORATION'S SUPER SLEUTH by Jane Gaffin

Alec F. Berry, whose given name is often spelled Alex, presumably for Alexander from his Russian heritage, was 79 years old the evening he reminisced about his Yukon mining career in the Travelodge lounge in February, 1976.

He was best known for his employment with Conwest Exploration which had maintained an office on the north side of Main Street in Whitehorse in the 1960s. To enter the little cabin, a person had to duck to clear the door frame, then step down into the low-ceiling room.

One could often find Conwest's scout and public relations man pattering around map-covered tables. Berry was a debonair, dedicated mining man with a diluted English accent and a sharp, dry wit. He loved the romance of mining.

Long retired and living in his green Porter Creek house, across from Bachelors' Cover west of town, Berry retained a passion for discussing early mining days as though he were still living it.

But he said next to nothing about his three-year political stint when he served as the elected territorial councilman for the Mayo riding, 1952-1955.

Berry's long tenure as a director of the Prospectors and Developers Association (PDA), which dated back to his appointment in 1957, had ended. It was that year, 1976, that Al Kulan, the prospector extraordinaire of Faro fame, was replacing Berry as the Yukon's board member.

"I have to quit sometime," lamented Berry. It was the first time in 18 years he had not gone to Toronto for the annual PDA meeting and conference.

He was paid a retainer by Conwest after his retirement. As long as he was physically able to travel, Conwest paid his fare from Whitehorse to Toronto to attend meetings. If he wanted to venture farther, he paid the expenses for the rest of the journey.

Once, he decided to go to Florida to see his long-time friend and employer, Fred Connell, the founder of Conwest Exploration, whose business affairs had since been taken over by the youngsters.

Like all fresh-air fanatics from the North, Berry was confronted with hot air and a stuffy hotel room. "I'm used to living in the Yukon where you open a window to cool off. I went into an air conditioned hotel. It was hot in the room. It was in the 60-degree range. I opened the window, not realizing I was letting in an 83-degree temperature!"

Then he asked about a lounge and was directed across the street to an obvious gambling casino lit up in neon lights. "Nobody bothered me," he said.

"I sat on the barstool. The bar tender knew from my accent I was from Canada. The place was called--of all things--Miller's Bar. Here I was, over 3,000 miles from home, and I had to come this far to find Miller's Bar."

His reference was to Cal Miller's legendary bar in the Capital Hotel on Main Street, Whitehorse, where the early-day mining crowd gathered to tell mining yarns and cut deals.

In later years, Berry moved into the Macaulay retirement home in Riverdale residential section of Whitehorse. He and his aging bachelor buddies continued trying to recapture the culture of bygone days over a little libation and laughter at the Capital.

All were teases, gentle souls who wouldn't harm a living creature.

Berry was an octogenarian, heavy set, and no longer sure-footed. One night, upon exiting the hotel, he was rolled for his wallet and left crumpled on the sidewalk. The disgusting deed didn't spook him. He and his spirited friends kept up their routine of capping dinners with rounds in the bars until each, one by one, passed away of longevity.

Berry favoured fine Scotch whisky. It was unheard of for him to neglect it. As he reminisced in the Travelodge, the glasses of Scotch in front of him multiplied. Others at the table, entertained by his witty and nostalgic commentaries, sat sipping, listening, grins tugging their mouths, and ordering more rounds.

At one point, Wilf McKinnon, a retired, twinkly prospector worth a bundle and living in a Bachelors' Cove cabin across the road from Berry, asked, "Where's your drink, Alec?"

"Here--oh, there--where is it?" Berry wondered, perplexed, oblivious to his drinks vanishing as he talked. "Oh, there it is." Berry found the elusive drinks in front of McKinnon, who had taken them away to see if Berry would even notice. He didn't.

"I was going to drink them," laughed McKinnon.

Berry turned to me. "Take that as a compliment when Alec Berry forgets to drink good Scotch whiskey."

Berry, who cultivated a reputation as a drinker, though not a lush, simply liked his Scotch. As a mining scout, he was interested in prospecting and prospectors and was known for his foxy method of sleuthing out mining properties.

The best place to find prospectors was in the bar. In Dawson City, the men of the bush trailed in for their elixirs. Berry would have his face in his arms, folded across the bar, pretending he was listening to his new cigarette-pack-size transistor radio. He appeared engrossed in the radio or too tipsy to talk. Nobody bothered him.

Berry would then tune into their conversations. "I heard more from prospectors by eavesdropping than if I had been talking to them," he related.

Alec Berry, born September 3, 1896, at Nelson, British Columbia, was the oldest of three

boys in his family. His father had immigrated to Canada from Oxford, England, married a Russian lady, and grew fruit trees.

When the crop failed, Berry had to go underground in a Nelson moly mine at age 16 to support his family. A few years later, in 1914, Alec and friend Gunner Williams, a Scot, volunteered for First World War military service.

He returned from overseas and went back to the mine. But a bad leg sustained as a wartime souvenir ruled out working as an underground miner again. He turned to assaying.

Then underground mines were ordered to replace dry drilling with water methods to reduce dust and silicosis. Berry came to the Yukon as a wet-drill salesman for Ingorsoll Rand in the early 1920s.

Ore exhaustion began to plague the Treadwell Yukon workings. General manager Livingstone Wernecke negotiated a 10-year lease with the competitor to drain the last drop of millable Sadie-Friendship ore to feed a proposed 100-ton-a-day concentrator. Any profits from millable product over the first 2,559 tons, which Wernecke would mill for the Guggenheims, would be divided between the two companies.

Under adverse weather conditions, the mill was rammed into place in January, 1925. Alec Berry was hired as chief assayer and mill superintendent to help put the operation into smooth production and efficiency. Soon, valuable concentrates bubbled to the surface.

Treadwell Yukon closed in October 1941, following Wernecke's death in an airplane crash. The world, on the threshold of war, rendered metal prices worthless, except for tungsten. During those years of economic hardship, Berry stayed holed-up in his Keno Hill cabin.

In 1945, Conwest Exploration and Frobisher Exploration Company co-sponsored Keno Hill Mining Company to revive the old underground silver mines.

Karl Springer, a well-known mine developer, was contracted to review Treadwell Yukon's old Galena Hill cavarans. Springer hired Dr. William Smitheringale, who was guided about the old workings by Alec Berry, who had a thorough knowledge of the properties and vein geology.

Doc Smitheringale, born in 1901 at Slocan, B.C., stood less than six feet and weighed about 150 pounds. His diminutive size was offset by boundless energy. His main flaw was overwork. He was a top geologist, whose undergraduate studies were completed at the University of British Columbia and his doctorate earned at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Beneath heavy thatches of eyebrows and snowy white hair penetrating eyes expressed no time for foolishness. But behind the fire and excitability was a wry humour and charm. He and Berry struck a lasting friendship.

In 1945, Smithergale optioned a Mt. Nansen property 30 miles west of Carmacks from prospectors Brown and McDade for Karl Springer's Yukon Northwest Exploration Company. Berry came along as assayer.

Two years later, Smitheringale left Springer's company in favour of a geological advisory position with Fred Connell's Conwest Exploration, a co-sponsor of Keno Hill Mining. Berry

accompanied Smitheringale to his job and they became inseparable travelling mates.

According to a tale told by geological engineer Dr. Aaro Aho of Faro and Grum fame, Berry once took Doc Smitheringale on a social call in 1947 to meet a Mrs. Baine. The elderly widow lived alone on Duncan Creek where her late husband was buried.

She liked company. After coffee, she rolled up her skirt (nobody said how far) and commented something to the effect, "Oh, Doctor, heaven must have sent you to see me. Please examine this awful lump on my leg."

The shy geologist was having a devil of a time trying to convince her that his specialty was "rocks", not "medicine".

In January, 1948, Keno Hill Mining was refinanced into United Keno Hill Mines. That is when Doc Smitheringale, accompanied by his shadow, relocated to Conwest Exploration's new office in Whitehorse and made trips out into the Yukon looking to option good mineral prospects. At one point during his geological career, Doc had examined the Cassiar district in northern British Columbia.

In the summer of 1950, he heard about Vic Sittler's asbestos claims. Fred Connell, Conwest's founder, was intrigued. He dispatched Smitheringale and Berry to Lower Post, B.C., to negotiate an offer with Sittler.

The Cassiar Asbestos Corporation was by far the most ambitious development undertaken by Conwest Exploration. In 1960, Conwest sold its United Keno Hill Mines holdings to Ventures Ltd., and diverted sole attention to the fluffy fibres.

In late March, 1957, Smitheringale received a telegram in Vancouver from Berry regarding another asbestos prospect on Clinton Creek, a tributary of the Fortymile River northwest of Dawson City.

Berry had already made initial contact and made a verbal agreement with Dawson grocer Fred Caley and his son Bob Caley who had grubstaked prospectors Art Anderson and George Walters. Conwest now had a potential industrial-grade asbestos property eight air miles from the Alaska border.

Ten years later, in 1967, the deposit became Canada's most northerly open-pit operation, and the Yukon's first asbestos producer. It had a 10-year lifespan.