

## MINE FINDER DR. AARO AHO BELIEVED DEEPLY IN THE YUKON

by Jane Gaffin

(This piece originally appeared in the *Yukoner Magazine*, #29, March, 2005. References: Dr. Aaro Aho's obituary by Anne Tempelman-Kluit, *Yukon News*, June 3, 1977; Jane Gaffin's book, **Cashing In.**)

First and foremost, Aaro Aho was a geologist--a minefinder--who believed deeply in the Yukon. He was sure as much ore could exist at a thousand feet below surface as near surface in the Anvil Range and that the ore potential was limited only by exploration depth and extraction economics.

An extraordinary man endowed with a good mind that he used imaginatively, he had a knack for seeing invisible things others could not.

Aho was a careful scientist, making his own luck. Ambition and optimism were his strong points. He thrilled when breaking new ground and exploring the unknown. He endlessly raked over muskeg and mountains, searching for what he wanted.

"I was hunting elephants, either a high-grade profitable deposit or a low-grade of large enough tonnage to be profitable," said Aho, a whiz in petrology.

Originally, he had planned a career in research. But he thought research was less exciting than hunting for elephantine mineral deposits in the Yukon's clean laboratory, a detour that changed the territory's economic health by opening up the country. Later, he spoke ruefully of his mixed feelings about the results.

Since the Yukon's mining history was based on high-grade gold and silver production, he first looked at the Klondike area of 1898 gold-rush fame; next, he moved into the Keno Hill area where high-grade silver veins were masked in heavy overburden.

There was no magic formula to lead to a major discovery except Aho's characteristic of doubling his work load and injecting extra muscle and brains into his performance. He untiringly promoted his ideas.

Tall and khaki-clad, he had a dark brush cut, tolerance and a benign disposition. He was a sentimentalist, environmentalist, technician, a prolific writer, educated gambler and a mentor to many.

To him, enthusiasm ranked as high as experience and he always attracted the cream of the crop for crews. Summer students who attended Aho's School of Hard Rocks learned about mineral prospecting, human nature and how to get along with Yukoners. Many went on to very successful careers in the mining business.

Aho's unwavering faith in the Yukon was rewarded in 1965. He and a small exploration contingent had moved into the Anvil Range area and discovered the mine that spiraled the Yukon into overnight world prominence.

The 70-million-ton, lead-zinc-silver Faro deposit came into production in 1969 and was destined as Canada's largest lead producer. It contributed 50 per cent of the Yukon's economic well-being while directly employing 400 people.

Since only one prospect in 50,000 makes a mine, it is definitely a feat to find one major mine. Yet Aho gave a repeat performance in 1973 when he found the Grum zinc-lead-silver deposit, prefaced by the 1970 discovery of the Sierra Gorda copper-molybdenum deposit in northern Chile.

Aho's bent for the outdoors harkened back to his boyhood when he spent many happy years exploring Vancouver Island alone. He was born on a farm near Ladysmith, British Columbia, on June 20, 1925. Although his parent's small farm was a mile from the closest neighbors and playmates, his childhood

was normal and happy other than suffering spinal meningitis in his fifth year. Half his equilibrium mechanism was destroyed and he had to re-learn to walk. He was left permanently deaf in one ear, a disability to which he was very sensitive.

He was of Finnish descent and inherited the best qualities from each parent. His father, Emil Aho, was the builder, and his mother, Alma, had a good business head. She had moved from Finland via Colorado to British Columbia at age 17. Born liberated, she was among the first women in the province to vote and get a driver's license.

To honor his parents, Aho placed a slab of white quartzite from the Keno Hill area on the top of Aho Mountain, located 100 miles north of the village of Ross River. The commemorative plaque is inscribed "in dedication and for inspiration".

The beginning of his 30-year love affair with the Yukon commenced in 1946. He and a friend, Ian Campbell, sailed north on the Princess Louise in May to Skagway, Alaska. They rode the White Pass train over the 110 miles of narrow-gauge track into Whitehorse where they overnighted in the White Pass Hotel on First Avenue before heading down river for Dawson City.

"It was squeegee, with holes under the doors," Aho recalled. "The doors had no locks. It was the same in Dawson. Nobody locked anything. They gave liberal credit. They knew you couldn't get out of the country."

In Dawson, it was easy to land laboring jobs for 87 cents an hour stripping overburden for Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation or longshoring for the sternwheelers. At one point, Aho assisted Mike Winage, who died a few months before Aho in early 1977. Black Mike, as he was called, was already as old as the pyramids at the relevant time and was a "good businessman" with gimmicks to make a house-levelling job last.

The pair jacked up and leveled Clear Creek Placer Mines' offices, then visited the Pearl Harbor Hotel where they splashed back a round of double overproof rums and returned to unlevel the foundation. The crooked job had to be redone.

It was fun until the stark reality of mounting bills interrupted pleasure. Aho worked, saved and settled his debts, boarded the sternwheeler *Whitehorse* and left Dawson City while he could. His friend Campbell didn't get out for three years.

After hitchhiking the Alaska Highway from Whitehorse, Aho reached Vancouver with \$131 to continue his education. He entered university unsure of a specific field. But geology's combination of science and the outdoors was a natural magnet.

The next summer he worked for the Geological Survey of Canada. The 1947 field season was his favorite, spent with mountaineering expert, Dr. John Wheeler. The following summer, spent with Dr. Hugh Bostock (Honour Roll), the grandfather of Yukon geology, was the most influential.

"It was Dr. Bostock's empathy for the Yukon, its people, the little animals and the environment which inspired me," Aho said. "He was the most eloquent of persons."

Aho went on to earn a double degree in applied sciences and arts from the University of British Columbia in 1949 and a doctorate degree from the University of California at Berkeley, before teaching a year at Oregon State University.

By 1953, Aho was back North in an exciting job as exploration manager for British Yukon Exploration, a newly-formed arm of the White Pass and Yukon Corporation. He was to find mineral deposits in the proximity of the railroad to support the operation.

Three years hence, an expanded budget unleashed him to roam the territory at will. He found a few small deposits and inconsequential showings. By 1957, White Pass curtailed the mineral-hunting program. The company opted to be a cheerleader rather than participate directly in mineral development.

Aho was thrown into the arena as a free agent when most geological consultants were older and more experienced. He soon found out why. "For two years, I didn't qualify for an income tax bracket," he reminisced. "Some clients were reputable. Others were strictly promoters. If I wrote an adverse report, many times I didn't get paid. In other cases, I was paid in stock or commodity instead of consulting fees. That's why I decided, instead of looking and losing on others' projects, I'd start my own."

His experience and persistence eventually paid off with the magnificent Faro discovery. Initially, the mine was operated by Anvil Mining Corporation, a partnership between Cyprus Mines of Los Angeles and Dynasty Explorations, a syndicate formed by Aho.

But the companies he created tended to run him rather than him running himself. "That's not the best way for an individualist," he added.

In March of 1973, he resigned as Dynasty's president and went back into the geological arena where he preferred to work on mine-finding projects. The first thing he did was start another company. AEX '73 was formed to prospect for mineralization in various parts of the Yukon.

He still viewed the Anvil Range as "elephant country". Recycling old ideas and untangling an ownership mess, he concluded an option on Kerr Addison's Vangorda, Swim and Grum properties.

Aho and his second wife, Silvia, a social worker from Chile, moved into the condemned Faro Hotel in August and used the restaurant to spread out maps to compare and color. He gathered and assembled information, correlated and sifted through every bit of research material. Closing his eyes, he mentally pictured the data.

"It's the creative process, based on intuition, above-normal incentives, some bullheadedness and a lot of data," he explained in a 1976 interview from his Vancouver office. "I may not know exactly why I want to drill in a certain place, but I'm drawn to it. My idea may--or may not--work. That's trial and error, like research. When the circuits are lit, I'll borrow from the bank to keep a program going because there is no question in my mind."

The first drill hole intersected low-grade mineralization. The next two holes were duds and Aho vowed to put up the money himself if he had to. "There's an advantage if you are in a position to keep drilling and get conclusive results one way or the other before having to stop."

The fourth hole of high-grade zinc-lead-silver sections was the pay off. Aho had found another large deposit.

"Searching is a helluva risk, and people are negative about what they can't see. If there's overburden and no sign of mineralization, an unexplored area is often assumed to have nothing." The Grum was a prime example. The Faro mine road was built overtop the Grum ore body. Traffic had to be diverted because of two drill rigs beside the road, he added.

To possess the power to be able to do things, you need money, said Aho. "I wanted to make my own mistakes rather than someone else making them for me. My objective was not to get rich. My objective was to create something. Find mineral resources. Build something for the North.

"I wanted to contribute something to the progress, whatever the destiny of mankind might be. I'm a part of it. I'm here for a purpose. I'm here to create things, to make my contribution somehow.

"Then I look at the way resources are squandered. Everything has to be obsolete in a few years so you can market more. This has to be turned into a more realistic approach. The energy crunch may do it."

The Grum deposit was rolled into his company Canadian Natural Resources which had the potential to put the Yukon over the financial hump. "But it depends on whether the federal government keeps milking us with taxes. There's hardly any incentives left to be able to do the sort of things that have been done in the past."

At every opportunity, he warned the politicians and bureaucrats the increasing cost of exploration is risky and returns restricted and that Canada doesn't have a monopoly on resources. Exploration companies could go offshore. And the first place that would go down the drain would be the Yukon.

Aho often was a speaker at a Northern Resources Conference, which he founded in 1963 to be held in Whitehorse every three years.

While he advocated effective mining and environmental laws, unreasonable government restrictions were the strongest deterrent to the high-risk exploration business. He expressed dismay with the enormity of unnecessary government control and regulation introduced after the Faro's development. One reason excellent projects could be brought to fruition was due to the ability to operate with a minimum of red tape.

When Anvil Mining Corporation was reorganized into Cyprus Anvil Mining Corporation about 1973, Aho relinquished the vice-president's position in favor of a director's position and as company consultant.

About 1975, he relinquished the presidency of Canadian Natural Resources also for a directorship. He was shedding administrative burdens to spend more time in the bush and on a farm he planned to buy soon.

Just about anything other than looking for mines, which was both a career and a hobby, was considered a dreadful waste of time by Aho....except agriculture. His keenness for farming was a carry over from boyhood. It prompted him to acquire land in partnership with a beef cattle expert in March, 1976.

The land was on the opposite side of the mountain from where he grew up near Ladysmith that Aaro Aho, the man who more than any other had brought modern exploration techniques to the Yukon, spent the last 14 months of his life. He was killed on May 27, 1977, when the tractor he was driving rolled on him. He would have been 52 years old come June.

A 1978 Northern Resources Conference was dedicated to the eminent geological engineer who had died the year before. Excess revenues from 362 registrants' fees went toward a \$500 grant. It was named the Aaro E. Aho Northern Resources Scholarship and was awarded annually to a Yukon college or technical school student who was majoring in resource-related studies.

Despite the tragic deaths of Aho and some of his associates, these men remain immortal within the Yukon mining fraternity. Their geologic theories, ideas and boundless energies helped discover millions of tons of open-pit ore that sparked a base-metal rush and hurled the Yukon into world prominence.

But it is unfair to identify any one person as a hero when so many people contributed in varying and meaningful degrees. In the Anvil district, Paul Sterriah, an old Indian, initially brought the Vangorda area to the attention of prospector Al Kulan who found the outcrop (*Yukoner Magazine* #14). He and lodge-owner Bert Law staked the original Wynne and Elle May discovery claims.

Geologist Ted Chisholm interested the Prospectors Airways exploration company in optioning the showing, which eventually led Chisholm, Kulan and Aho to other mineral deposits.

Promoters raised capital; developers proved an ore body; the government provided the services.

So, who does get the credit?

In Aho's opinion, "The driller on shift."

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