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AN AWARD-WINNING PROSPECTOR ART JOHN WAS A MENTOR TO MANY

by Jane Gaffin

Jane Gaffin is a Whitehorse-based freelance writer who specializes in mining.

Arthur John, a patient, clever Ross River Indian, was reputed to be fearless enough to attack a grizzly on sight.

He was born about 1911 in Livingstone, a Yukon goldrush town that sprang up 60 airmiles (96 km) northeast of Whitehorse in 1900.



Photo by Jane Gaffin

ART JOHN, summer of 1976

Latecomers to the 1898 goldrush had tried promoting the place as a competitor to the Whitehorse copperbelt and the Klondike goldfields.

Livingstone turned into a ghost town when an influenza epidemic claimed lives and caused a mass exodus in the early 1920s. John, orphaned at about 10 years old, was sent to the village of Ross River to live with his grandmother.

He knew that country like the palm of his hand. He spent many decades trapping and hunting around Ross River and was one of the original Canol Road surveyors for the U.S. Army during the war years of the 1940s.

He started prospecting in 1949 and was an integral part of the prospecting group when the penniless Al Kulan discovered the Vangorda Creek lead-zinc deposit in the summer of 1953.

Kulan had taken Peter Thompson, a Montreal outdoor enthusiast, to Ross River on another prospecting junket. The Indian crew consisted of Jack Ladue, brothers Robert and Joe Etzel, and Art John, whose boat was launched to travel down the Pelly River.

At the mouth of Vangorda Creek, 30 miles downstream from Ross River, Kulan found the Vangorda Creek lead-zinc deposit which was the forerunner to his participation in finding the enormous Faro lead-zinc-silver mine that put the Yukon on the map in 1969.

Kulan had taught mineral identification to anybody who would listen. John, who spoke fairly good English, passed on knowledge to his brethren, despite an occasional communication breakdown.

The Indians understood "bed" and "rock", therefore assumed "bedrock" had to be a hard place to sleep. Once the translation obstacle was hurdled, the innate bushmen proved to be naturals in their new occupations.

Indians proved to be exceptionally fine prospecting hands. They were associated with major mineral discoveries like the Faro and were hired by many of the syndicates and junior exploration companies coming in from outside the territory.

One was Conwest Exploration, a co-sponsor with Frobisher Exploration Company in the 1940s in Keno Hill Mining's Elsa silver workings. Later, Conwest sold out and turned attention to asbestos in the Cassiar country of northern British Columbia and then in the Fortymile country near Dawson City, Yukon.

John explained: "Worked two summers in Telegraph (B.C.) country and two summers down in Dawson area. Conwest gave up and wanted me to go out, but I didn't want to take my family and go out. Kulan started up Star Syndicate, so two years I work with Kulan."

It was a rather unorthodox fashion the way John came to be working with Star Syndicate, an enterprise founded by Kulan in 1972.

Prospector Pete Risby, a mulatto of Negro-German-Scot heritage, was working independently on a first-refusal basis for Star Syndicate. He and Ross River Indian Esau Dick headed for the Logan Mountains.

A Great Northern Airways Beaver was accessible to them. It was piloted in summers by Erik Nielsen, who started his long political career as the Yukon's member of Parliament in 1959.

"I had heard good things about Art John," said Risby, giggling. "I had never met him; only knew who he was when he worked for Conwest. He was working near a lake for Star Syndicate. So I nipped over to prospector-*nap* him. Before anybody had a clue what was happening--or missed Art--he was working for me."

Risby, who moved to Ross River in 1966, had enjoyed 10 years as a successful prospector. He had interspersed his avocation with his job as a heavy-equipment operator.

When Risby and John joined forces, they searched for minerals, staked ground and optioned properties to various exploration syndicates and major mining companies.

By 1972, they felt secure. Arrow Inter America had optioned their Mackenzie Mountain lead-zinc properties. But the bubble burst. A mid-season change in corporate policy curtailed all of Arrow's exploration operations in the north.

"There we sat in the field with a full crew, camp, fuel...and a cut program," fumed Risby. "It was abruptly brought home to me that you're not secure working for yourself or for somebody else."

The prospectors had bad visions of having to drop the Godlin Lake properties, across the Yukon border in the Northwest Territories. As independents, they simply could not afford to keep up assessment requirements on the block of claims that had reverted to them from Arrow.

Fortuitously, Canex-Placer's 1972 Howard's Pass lead-zinc discovery sparked a staking rush. The general speculating public became keenly interested in Selwyn Basin and Mackenzie Mountain activities.

With attention focused on a new geologic province, Risby's and John's claims took on a special significance. Welcome North Mines Ltd., formed around those properties in the spring of 1973, was masterminded by Pete Risby and Al Kulan.

They phoned John Brock, who was wiggling his toes in Hawaiian sand. The young Vancouver-based geologist/geophysicist accepted the invitation to come on board.

Welcome North was structured to make deals similar to prospector agreements; carry out its own grassroots exploration; do saturation prospecting; follow-up regional programs; acquire property; and encourage major mining companies to participate in joint ventures. The company managed to maintain a good capital position without any involvement in a producing mine.

Junior exploration companies like Welcome North set examples by hiring praiseworthy locals as Art John and Robert Etzel.

When Risby taught six-month, government-sponsored basic prospecting courses in the community, he, as Kulan had earlier, turned to his friend John to serve as an assistant instructor and interpreter of geological jargon.

"The Indians have a natural bush savvy," Risby noted. "They know how to survive in the woods, don't get lost, and learn quickly to identify minerals. After all, the Indians have been traipsing this country all their lives."

By the mid-1970s, it was increasingly difficult for hardrock prospectors to continue freelancing. But Welcome North helped breathe life into the fading profession by optioning properties. Some of those were Godlin Lake mineral showings found by John.

It was only fitting that John Brock had nominated Robert Etzel, 69, and his mentor Arthur John, 89, as recipients of the Spud Huestis Award. Established in 1977 by the B.C.-Yukon Chamber of Mines, the award recognizes excellence in mineral prospecting and mineral exploration.

The award was named for the remarkable Herman "Spud" Huestis who was born in

Fredericton, New Brunswick, in 1907. The Yukon can lay a little claim to him. His syndicate conducted the first underground work on the historic Brown-McDade gold property on Mt. Nansen, near Carmacks, Yukon, in 1947.

But among his premier credentials, he is most heralded as the father of porphyry-copper development and production in Canada. Huestis formed and was first president of the famous Bethlehem Copper Corporation mine which started producing low-grade, high-tonnage ore for a low cost in south central B.C. in the 1960s.

His attitude was "we have to win ever so often", and he did. He was the first recipient of his namesake award two years before his death in 1979.

The Ross River prospectors, both members of the Kaska Dena first nation, received their Spud Huestis Awards during the 2001 Cordilleran Round-up, a major mining conference staged every year in Vancouver in late January.

The awards were presented to the Yukon prospectors by Robert Nault, then federal minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

They were selected for the award on the basis of their lifetime dedication to their craft and for their contributions to grassroots prospecting in the Yukon.

Both gentlemen were further commended for encouraging Ross River first nations people to seek employment in mineral prospecting which led to many successful careers in the past.

"Over his 40-year career, Art John has been credited with the discovery of many mineral deposits, including tungsten, hard rock gold near Dawson City and numerous deposits in northern British Columbia," said Brock.

"All who met and worked with Art considered him a real gentleman, storyteller, bushman and prospector, with a natural instinct for finding minerals."

Etzel, likewise, made numerous important mineral discoveries, most notably the Plata silver property in the Upper Hess River country which led to the production of a high-grade silver and lead mine.

"Robert Etzel's prospecting expertise and quiet diligent manner are well-recognized and respected by the mining industry and the residents of Ross River," Brock added.

Art John's advanced age didn't curtail his avid interest in minerals nor in his venturing the short distance from his home to see how the young fellow, Allen Carlos, was progressing on his Grew Creek gold property.

Carlos and John had been prospecting partners when employed by sundry exploration companies back in the 1960s. They got along famously and had maintained a close friendship over the years.

John would offer sage wisdom on where Mother Nature might be hiding the loot. It was nice knowing men like John, so resourceful and in tune with nature, who had led a long, fruitful life trapping in winters and prospecting in summers.

The Ross River elder was still prospecting and cutting property deals when he was over 90

years old. Carlos sometimes helped with the paperwork.

John was gentle, easy-going, twinkly, a light comment about everything, although he had suffered many tragedies in his own family.

Art John was inducted into the Yukon Prospectors' Hall of Fame in 1989. His name is engraved in the base of the bronze prospector statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

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