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GEOLOGIST HAS KNACK FOR FINDING EMERALDS AND STUFF by Jane Gaffin

Jane Gaffin is a Whitehorse-based freelance writer who specializes in mining. "This piece was originally published in the Yukon News, December 3, 1999"

"My forte is prospecting," said geological engineer Bill Wengzynowski, who works with the Archer, Cathro & Associates' team in Vancouver.

Yet the 34-year-old, sixth-generation Yukoner never misses a summer looking for minerals on his home turf.

He radiated enthusiasm when talking about his profession. "There's nothing more exciting than finding something in the field," he declared.

Regardless of how skilled he has become at reading the Earth's subtle nuances, the secret to his success is banging a lot of rocks.

"But you have to know when to slow down and start banging them," advised the young prospector, who's already notched his well-worn hammer with several impressive finds.

He discovered native silver in the Keno Hill area and the volcanogenic massive sulphide (VMS) Ice deposit southeast of Ross River.

His greatest feat was finding the nests of tiny gem-quality emeralds near Finlayson Lake last year (1998).

The emerald occurrence is not a fluke, but finding the Yukon's first emerald deposit was. It's the proverbial needle in a haystack. He "found the needle".

This is a classic illustration of why a prospector cannot go into the field with tunnel vision, he said.

"I was looking for one thing but found something else."

Wengzynowski, who is blessed with better-than-perfect vision, has an eye for the unusual. To him, prospecting is a game.

"It's a big puzzle. And I'm trying to find the missing pieces."

Often, he is contracted out by his Vancouver-based employer to an affiliate company.

In 1998, he was working under the banner of Expatriate Resources.

A claim-tagging crew had brought back soil samples which had returned curious anomalous values in the Finlayson Lake area, roughly 100 kilometres (60 miles) southeast of Ross River.

Wengzynowski and a couple of fellows were following up on those regional VMS targets in September.

VMS is an abbreviation for volcanogenic massive sulphide, which denotes a poly-metallic deposit containing a combination of lead, zinc, copper, gold and silver.

"We went to the area of the copper anomaly expecting to see copper oxide, which is green.

"We prospected the slopes and found copper, which was no surprise."

However, he was burdened with a backpack full of rocks and a monstrous-sized hammer.

He was favouring an injured left foot. He compensated by shifting his weight to the other foot. Then the knee swelled painfully.

His slow pace may account for why his attention was drawn to a piece of green-speckled quartz poking through the dusting of snow.

"It looked a little bit too green," he mused.

Ready to break open the vein with that 18-inch weapon, he stopped in mid-swing. "It didn't look quite right."

Closer examination confirmed his suspicions. Emeralds and aquamarine are gem varieties of beryl, a hexagonal mineral.

He had seen aquamarine in a field setting once when prospecting on his days off.

"This one had a typical hexagonal cross-section which distinguishes a beryl from another type crystal. And, of course, the colour."

After a couple of minutes of hunting, he found a perfect cross-section. "That's when we started to get excited."

The other unusual occurrence was for Wengzynowski to be sent back on the same project twice.

"I'm the one who starts the fire. Somebody else takes care of the fire while I go start another one."

On this particular occasion, it was critical to prove that gem-quality emeralds existed in the small, three-kilometre-square area.

Gemstone value is judged on the distinct characteristics of colour, clarity and quality. Otherwise, they are just pretty specimens.

So, he went out armed with a powerful magnifying glass and tweezers to mine these delicate beauties.

Expatriate Resources met most of its objectives in 1999, he reported at the annual

Geoscience Forum held in Whitehorse in November, 1999.

The objectives for the millennium will be to get a better grip on the economics of the deposit.

"I stumbled across the emeralds while looking for VMS potential, which is still there," he noted.

It's just taken second seat to the exotic emeralds, which will be bequeathed to other scientists while Wengzynowski starts another fire.

In his wildest dreams, he could never have predicted how life would unfold when he first applied for a job with Archer & Cathro in 1983.

The F.H. Collins Secondary graduate liked the bush life but had no geological experience.

In those days, exploration jobs were at a premium. He was content to find a job in town and save toward an education at the University of British Columbia.

One day, a school chum told him about a geological consulting firm that had an immediate opening.

Wengzynowski hurried down to Archer Cathro's office on Third Avenue, which was then located where the Java Connection is now.

After an interview, Bob Cathro gave him the we'll-get-back-to-you spiel. The applicant never expected to hear from Cathro again.

An hour later, he was packing bags. That evening he set off on a month's adventure with trailmates to northern B.C.'s Cassiar country.

This was Wengzynowski's introductory course to prospecting.

While looking for staking posts to tag with little metal plates issued by the Mining Recorder's Office, his assignment was to keep his eyes open for asbestos.

Instead, he came back with a big chunk of copper-rich rock. A throwback to his youth, he had merely picked up the malachite for its exquisite shade of green.

Wengzynowski quickly learned to keep his eyes open and to bring back pretty rocks.

"It keeps the geologists really happy," added the bemused prospector, who has been fascinated by rocks since he was old enough to say the word.

In his youth, he'd go on river outings with his parents and younger brother. "Instead of fishing, I walked the beach and brought back stones."

He got hooked on rocks by heritage. His roots date back to pioneer trader/pro prospector Jack McQuesten, who came into the Mayo area in the late 1800s.

His maternal granddad, Bill Harris of Carmacks, used to prospect.

So did his dad, Frank, who had a little placer operation in the Livingstone camp north of

Whitehorse.

At age six, little Bill saw a six-ounce nugget mined from the creek. "I went to the sluice box almost intuitively, looking for shiny rocks."

Ten years later, a 16-year-old Bill built a sluice box and set up his own little pick-and-shovel operation near Atlin.

Again, he learned quickly. What you put into a project is not necessarily what you get out of it, he said.

His meager take for two months of hard labour did pay for a passenger truck, though.

Then he turned to hardrock. And his geological mentors at Archer Cathro were impressed with his innate abilities to read the rocks and geology so accurately.

Al Archer encouraged Wengzynowski to obtain his university degree, which he finished in 1993. Yet he doesn't think of himself as a geologist.

"My forte is finding new stuff," he noted. "Whatever is hot, I'll be working on it.

"But I'll always be keeping an eye on the emeralds. That is going to be hard to top."

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The Yukon Prospectors' Association named Bill Wengzynowski the Prospector of the Year in 2000.

At the time of this 2005 posting, British Columbia-based, public-traded True North Gems had taken over exploration of the emerald deposit in the Finlayson Lake area.

Also, the fresh high school graduate whose humble beginnings started as a salaried Archer Cathro prospector, now reigns as president of the Vancouver-based company.

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