BOB KIRK: THE PROSPECTOR WHO CHEERFULLY BLEW HIS MILLION

by Jane Gaffin

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(Information for this article relied on Cashing In: A History of Yukon Hardrock Mining by Jane Gaffin, 1982; personal interviews with (1) Vic and Thelma Sittler, Edmonton, Alberta, May 9, 1977, (2) Dr. William Smitheringale, Comox, British Columbia, March 17, 1978, (3) Harold "Van" VanBuskirk, Whitehorse, Yukon, March 11, 1978; Canadian High News, Mining Supplement, 1969; Cassiar: A Jewel in the Wilderness by Suzanne LeBlanc, Caitlin Press, 2003; Wild and Free by Frank Cooke as told to Jack Boudreau, Caitlin Press, 2004; Dease Lake area, Cassiar district, British Columbia, Geological Survey of Canada report by F.A. Kerr, 1935; Prelude to Bonanza by Allen Wright, Studio North, 1976; Report on an Exploration in the Yukon District, N.W.T. and Adjacent Northern Portion of British Columbia 1887 by George M. Dawson, Geological and Natural Survey of Canada, reprinted 1987; The Travels of George M. Dawson with the Yukon Expedition 1887 by W.J. Ross, based on Dawson's diaries, Historic Trails West, 1996; Yukon Places and Names by R.C. "Bob" Coutts, 2nd edition, PR Services, 2003; British Columbia Place Names by G.P.V. and Helen Akrigg, Sono Nis Press, 1986; Alaska & Yukon History Along the Highway by Ted Stone, Red Deer College Press, 1997; Alaska and the Canadian Northwest: Our New Frontier by Harold Griffin, Norton & Company, 1944; and Metals and Men: The Story of Canadian Mining by Donat Marc LeBourdais, McClelland & Stewart, 1957.)

Bob Kirk (Hall of Fame) was a likeable chap from Manitoba who settled around Lower Post in the mid-1940s and took up fur trapping for a livelihood. He wore fringed buckskins and a black wide-brim hat. His handsome, dark-complexion face was covered with a thick, bushy beard, and he spoke with a gruff, raspy voice that could be very argumentative.

Like good whisky, wacky yarns about Bob Kirk better with age. The mere mention of his name conjures up images of the famous "corn flake story", which, like breakfast cereals and urban legends, comes in many varieties.

Bob wasn't formally educated beyond grade three but what he knew, he knew well, especially about the bush. In a Seattle bar with a gold rush motif, the seasoned sourdough was locked in some nonsensical banter with an inexperienced Cheechako about how to snowshoe. To make his point, Bob ordered vast quantities of corn flakes to cover the entire floor. Then he took down a pair of snowshoes and proceeded to demonstrate the art of northern foot transportation to the delight of his half-swacked audience. Nobody ever said but it is assumed he paid to clean up the mess.

Frank Cooke considered Bob Kirk to be a good friend. The British Columbia big-game outfitter told his biographer that he knew Bob when he was broke and when Bob was rich and when Bob was poor again. One thing Cooke said that has been corroborated by others was Bob didn't like hard work, just as others have echoed Cooke's opinion that Kirk was "a helluva nice guy".

Windfalls come easily and his went just as easily. "Money is for spending," Kirk contended. "I spent mine. Anything wrong with that? When it's gone, you just go out and get some more."

Kirk had a cabin and a trapline in northern British Columbia (B.C.) near the Yukon border where the Dease River flows into the Liard River. People who knew him said he didn't do much trapping nor much prospecting, either. In fact, they said he never did much of anything in his whole life, which was a direct contrast to his hard-working older brother and prospecting partner, Ron, who was big, handsome and affable like his younger brother.

Ron Kirk knew the worth of a dollar and spent his money carefully, although maybe not always wisely; money burnt a hole in Bob's pocket and he couldn't get rid of it fast enough.

Before the heavy-set, 275-pound prospector struck it rich with three partners in 1950, money was an unknown quantity to Bob Kirk. The boisterous extrovert, who seldom had more than $400 to his name, suddenly found his buckskin pockets bulging with $15,000 in $50 bills.

Bob lived hard and fast. He cheerfully spent his money and shared his toys. He gambled in Las Vegas; vacationed in Mexico; bought fancy Hudson roadsters and air-cushioned-ride Packards; purchased a fleet of panel trucks from Northwest Highway Construction that the Lower Post Indians pranged; built a nice house at Lower Post; married an Indian lady; and consumed whisky wherever and whenever he damned well pleased.

"Money is for spending," he reiterated. "I spent my share. Anything wrong with that?" questioned the prospector who was rumoured to have blown a million in 10 years; others peg the amount at $3 million. Whichever, he had fun ridding himself of the wad in a fairly short time while one of his partners simply lost his fortune investing in bad business ventures.

"When it's spent you just go out and get more. We haven't even scratched the surface of this north country yet," added Kirk who, around 1964, was staking mineral claims in the newest Yukon exploration hot spot near Faro.

Regardless of what people said about Bob Kirk, nobody ever accused him of rushing. His lackadaisical, laid-back personality perplexed his ambitious trailmates. On prospecting trips he would roll out at 5 a.m. for coffee, a pipe, breakfast. When his companions were ready to break camp, Bob wanted more coffee and to smoke another bowl. After lunch, they could only manage three hours of travel before darkness set in.

Bob had been hiking the British Columbia hills for several years and was aware of asbestos fibres popping out of the earth high up on McDame Mountain in the Cassiar Range. He had gone in there about 1946 or 1947, roughly the time when the Americans had turned over Alaska Highway construction to the Canadians. Civilian truckers were hauling piling for a bridge not far from his stomping grounds. When the crew of 10 was in his neighbourhood,

they used Kirk's cabin as a mess hall. Plenty of good grub was cooked, baked and roasted there. The leftovers were one of the perks for sharing his Lower Post cabin. Whenever he was home from the bush, Kirk could tuck into some mighty fine victuals.

The existence of asbestos had been known back to early-day prospectors and Indians who told of birds building nests that could withstand forest fires and they noted the yellowish fibres clinging to coats of the indigenous mountain sheep that bedded down in the weathered outcrop.

But Kirk was not particularly ambitious and didn't consider doing anything about the asbestos after visiting the remote site with others. Making money wasn't a goal, and his imagination wouldn't have twigged to future possibilities any more than it did anybody else's thoughts of the day. Asbestos had no commercial value. Even if it had, asbestos requires roads, heavy equipment and mills to mine and process. It wasn't like gold that could be scooped out of the creek and carried out in a hat.

Although asbestos was known to have tensile strength similar to mild steel and twice the strength of wrought iron, technology had not yet created a big demand for the mineral. Johns-Manville of Quebec was satisfying the limited markets, mostly for insulation of submarine cables. Therefore, the white plume on McDame Mountain was ignored as a commercially non-viable commodity, and prospectors continued to concentrate on searching for the easily portable placer gold.

The common denominator of rocks and prospecting in the 1940s did bring Bob Kirk together with Vic Sittler through his older brother, Ron Kirk, a Caterpillar owner-operator on Alaska Highway construction at Fort Nelson, B.C., where Sittler was a mechanic with the U.S. Corps of Engineers. The fourth member of the prospecting quartet was Hiram Nelson, a welder, who was in from an overseas tour and based at an air force trunk-road camp eight miles from the newly-minted highway.

Dawson Creek, B.C., Mile 0 on the Alaska Highway, was the receiving depot where 3,000 people were in constant rotation. Every 10 days workers and soldiers were dispatched to various points along the construction route. There were three crews: one coming; one going; and one on the job for 16 hours a day without any time off.

As wartime pressures eased, the Canadian Army gradually took over and completed construction and workers were put on 40-to-48 hour weeks. With weekends off, many highway workers had free time to prospect. The area around Watson Lake, Yukon, bustled with serious placer activity.

Ron Kirk, Hiram Nelson and Vic Sittler borrowed an army vehicle and headed for the hills on weekends. "We were amateur prospectors," Sittler said, "but very serious."

They studied government geological reports and maps; read books about prospecting and exploration expeditions in the area; delineated good target areas; and checked out 1870 placer sites. They sold Sayyea Creek claims on the headwaters of the Liard River and looked at a half dozen other places, then turned to accounts described in an 1887 report written by Dr. George Dawson (Honour Roll), the Geological Survey of Canada's first man into the northern British Columbia and adjacent Yukon District. He had named one of the ranges "Cassiar" which took on a connotation meaning the whole district.

Like many Indian words of the day, the original Casheahr was mispronounced and spelled phonetically until the white miners coined the new word Cassiar.

Dr. Dawson wrote that the district Cassiar was derived from Kaska, a name applied collectively to two tribes or bands occupying the country eastward of the Tahl-tan. He noted that a Mr. J.W. McKay believed Cassiar to be a corrupt spelling of Kaska and suspected that it might be connected with "kaska-met", a word used by the Stuart Lake Indians to designate dried beaver meat.

Some anthropologists thought that "kaska" meant "old moccasins", a scornful term that Tahltan Indians applied to the neighbouring Kaska Indians who assembled in summers to fish and trade on Kaska Creek, a tributary of the Dease River.

When Henry McDame, a blackman of West Indies origin, discovered gold there in 1874, the prospector's name was attached to the creek as well as to the mountain at the creek's headwaters.

It had been in 1870 that prospectors who wintered in Sitka, Alaska, started moving inland along the Stikine Indian trail into Telegraph Creek, Dease Lake and pushing on to Cassiar. A permanent gold camp, Centerville, sprang up in Cassiar Valley, where 5,000 men, mainly of Chinese origin, prospected for gold on McDame and Dease creeks. Above McDame Creek's headwaters loomed a mountain, banded distinctively by green and plumed in white. The Indians called this magnificent sight Woolly Hill because the wool of the inhabitant sheep was heavily coated with the yellowish fibres.

The Hudson's Bay Company's trading post, built at the junction of where the Dease River enters the Liard River, was named Lower Post in reference to an earlier "Upper Post" that was built farther up the Dease River near McDame Creek.

The first log trading post was built at Lower Post by Rufus Sylvester in the 1870s and over the years the small community was naturally identified often as Sylvester Post or even as Liard Post. The name Lower Post stuck and was a popular stopping place for trappers and miners heading north on the Liard River.

Dease, Thiebert and McDame creeks produced the greater portion of the $2 million worth of gold credited to the Cassiar district in 1874 and 1875. Optimistic, yet unfounded, reports continued to circulate outside the north country. Fresh prospector recruits flooded Cassiar creeks in 1876. Thiebert, Dease and McDame continued to yield moderate amounts for many years but there was not enough profitable ground to sustain all who sought it. The Cassiar gold rush activity waned. As prospectors looked farther afield to more promising Alaska and Yukon prospects, Cassiar was left to a sparse population of Indians, trappers and gold miners.

The next significant event was not until 1942. The Alaska Highway was under construction and the original route went directly through the small settlement of Lower Post where the army operated a sawmill. The logs were used for bridge building and as a corduroy road base to lay over permafrost. As
the disturbed frozen earth thawed, the logs were sucked out of sight into the quagmire and another layer of logs had to be placed on top. The sawmill was very busy.

One early traveller over the new road was Harold Griffin, author of Our New Frontier.

"Lower Post on the Liard River was changed little, although supplies which used to be brought in through Wrangell, Alaska, to Telegraph Creek, B.C., and up the Dease River now are brought over the highway. The camp and airport are at nearby Watson Lake (Yukon) and no new buildings have been erected beside the Hudson's Bay Company's whitewashed log store and the few Indian cabins there."

But the store had a new type customer, he explained. Behind the Indian cabins two army trucks were parked. When he entered the store to talk to factor Jack Stewart, he saw half a dozen soldiers looking for gifts to send home.

"It is a typical northern trading post, selling everything from cigarettes to straw hats," he continued. "On one shelf are the gay print cotton dresses favored by the women among the fifty-odd Indians around the post. On another are piles of untanned moccasins. Hanging from the rafters are ermine pelts, priced from fifty to sixty-five dollars, and red fox pelts, at twenty-five to forty-five dollars each."

Griffin observed the soldiers fingering the furs speculatively. One said that when the first soldiers entered the country some of the Indians were so fascinated by the tractors that they offered furs just to ride up and down the road on the bulldozers. But when the machinery became a commonplace sight the soldiers had to buy their furs.

The Scotland-born factor, employed with the H.B. Company for 20 years, gave a tour of the sound old post with its warped jack-pine shingles and hewn fire-kiln logs. Even the iron door hinges were made by the HBC men who built the post. Still papering the walls were fragments of the Scientific American, dated May 22, 1880, and the Canadian Illustrated News of May, 1881. The remnants of old sulphur matches were from a supply brought in during the gold-rush days. The storekeeper gave them to the soldiers for souvenirs.

The Lower Post was no longer isolated, wrote Griffin, even though it was only in touch with the outside world through the Hudson's Bay Company's private commercial transmitter which the storekeeper operated.

The highway running through the cluster of buildings was only the beginning of many forthcoming changes, Griffin predicted. "(N)one will feel the effect of these changes more than the Indians. Soon the life they know will no longer be possible and they will be ill-equipped for any other."

This was the quaint northern settlement where Bob Kirk had chosen to call home. And it was the Alaska Highway, rendered navigable for the general public by 1946, that supplanted the early trade route and opened a new mining potential for Kirk and his partners. Soon, the U.S. government began stockpiling asbestos for emergencies.

From the new highway the asbestos outcrop was roughly 120 miles from Watson Lake into weeds, buckbrush and near the top of steep, rugged McDame Mountain (Woolly Hill). In August, 1949, the four men drove the terrible Moccasin Mines road to Snow Creek in Vic Sittler's truck, walked the last 20 miles, and camped on a small lake above the Yukon border. A Geological Survey of Canada party in search of stray pack horses passed by. The conversation turned to geology.

"There's a good looking asbestos deposit in there," offered a University of British Columbia student, who was employed as a summer field assistant with the survey party. "Why don't

you fellows go stake it?"

As a government surveyor, he was obligated by ethics not to stake the ground himself, nor was he supposed to discuss confidential information with anybody until survey reports were released to the public. Obviously, he was inexperienced in such matters.

"I know where it is," Bob Kirk offered. "I've been there. It looks good." He thoughtlessly added something to the effect: If anything comes of it we'll keep you in mind. Hiram Nelson too made an off-handed remark about not forgetting the young assistant.

The conversation spurred Vic Sittler and Ron Kirk to backpack in with two dogs, pitch tents and spend four days on the mountainside checking out the asbestos. They climbed up to the deposit and decided staking would be insane. Even spending the money for a nominal recording fee was impractical since the ground was too inaccessible to keep up the annual assessment work.

"Asbestos isn't like gold, to be carried out in your hat or packsack," Sittler advised. "Asbestos needs mine roads and equipment."

In March, Ron Kirk charged into a cabin where Sittler lived a half mile from the army camp. He waved a copy of the Toronto-based Northern Miner under Vic's nose. "The United States is stockpiling asbestos!"

"Maybe we have something after all," Sittler mused. They invited Hiram Nelson in for a conference. The three decided there was no reason for Ron Kirk or Hiram Nelson to quit their respective civilian jobs with the army and air force to go stake the McDame deposit. Sittler was working odd jobs on James Bell's new Fort Nelson Hotel to earn prospecting dollars. He and Bob Kirk had freedom. They would go.

When the snow melted in June, Kirk limped into Lower Post from his traplines. He looked lean and haggard. It had been a tough winter.

"We have something up there," Sittler announced. "Let's go stake it. It looks valuable."

"I need a rest," replied the trapper who wanted to sell his beaver pelts. Instead of a rest, he went on a Watson Lake Hotel spree that left him worse for wear. "I can't go," he said. "I have two cracked ribs."

"Bob, I'm not waiting another hour for you," Sittler said. "I can't sleep anymore. This thing…in my mind…we're onto something big. It's a sixth sense. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I know it. I can feel it."

"Take my dogs, whatever equipment you need," Kirk invited.

Sittler set out with two dogs, a small tent, rifle and provisions. He hitched a ride 75 miles with a fellow out to stake gold claims and walked the rest of the way. He climbed the 6,400-foot McDame Mountain with two packdogs on June 12, 1950. From the creek 3,000 feet straight up the mountainside he marked off two claims covering prominent surface indications traceable for 1,000 feet and sacked 20 pounds of asbestos samples.

On his way home, he stopped to rest at McDame Creek with placer prospectors Jerry Davis, Phil Hankins and Stan Bridcut. Another McDame prospector, Johnny Bartle, who was

heading the 90 miles to Watson Lake, became a fifth trail mate. They camped beside an old mining road which led to McDame Lake.

Grinding into camp was a jeep carrying B.T. O'Grady, a 73-year-old mining engineer who had been pensioned off long ago. The B.C. mines department, facing a shortage of consulting geologists, took O'Grady out of retirement to do field work in newly-opened mining country off the Alaska Highway, primarily to report on gold.

"Did you find anything?" O'Grady asked over tea.

"Asbestos, all over the mountainside." Sittler pulled out some samples. "But I'm not sure how good it is or if there is enough for commercial value."

"Meet me in Lower Post in two weeks," O'Grady urged. "I'll get in touch with my office. Someone should make a report on your asbestos find."

Later that night Sittler decided to go back and stake more claims. Bartle tagged along and tied on to the five claims of Sittler whose total of seven now encompassed the entire outcrop. Then Sittler headed for Lower Post to telephone Ron Kirk. "You'd better get up here and stake some claims. I can only take one more."

"I can't get away," responded Kirk who sent $50; Hiram Nelson didn't show; Bob Kirk's good intentions went astray.

Although Sittler was the recorded holder of the Rugged Nos. 1 to 7, situated in the Stikine Mining District, the four participating prospectors always held equal ownership in the property.

O'Grady, who had sent a telegram to his superiors, was instructed to do the asbestos report since he was already there. Sittler hired an Indian's pack horses and guided O'Grady up the mountainside.

"That's the best thing I've seen in 35 years," said O'Grady whose subsequent support helped Sittler obtain a $1,000 B.C. government tote road assistance. He spent several hundred dollars on grub, hired white and Indian lads for a couple of dollars an hour, cut a trail for a total of $700 and returned the surplus grant dollars to the provincial government in Victoria, B.C.

The Northern Miner released the asbestos discovery story in the summer of 1950. A tent camp popped up on McDame, a home base for a small mining rush. Prospectors tied on. Conwest Exploration, drilling elsewhere in the province for asbestos, had a staker put in a couple dozen Cassiar Valley claims.

Sittler was soon deluged with letters, telegrams and people. He promised first negotiating rights to Johns-Manville, one of several companies interested in a property option. When he returned to Lower Post after a 10-day excursion up the mountain with the Johns-Manville representative, two Conwest Exploration representatives were waiting.

Dr. William Smitheringale, the Conwest negotiator, was a top geologist whose main flaw was overwork. The other man was Conwest's scout and public relations man, Alec Berry (Honour Roll). From Conwest Exploration's log cabin on Whitehorse's Main Street, the two men fanned out looking for good mineral prospects. At one time during his geological

career in the Yukon, Doc Smitheringale had examined the Cassiar district.

In the summer of 1950 he heard about Vic Sittler's asbestos claims from Joe Thompson, a prospector who lived in the area and knew most of the McDame asbestos stakers. On the advice of Conwest owner Fred Connell, Doc Smitheringale and Alec Berry went to Lower Post to negotiate an offer with Sittler that included a promise to go into production right away.

This was no ordinary stubby-grade fibre commonly mixed with cement, plasterboard and used in brake linings, clutches and gaskets.

The Woolly Hill deposit was the crème de la crème. It was chrysotile, a Greek word meaning "golden fibre". It is a white and greenish mineral of the serpentine group but weathers out yellowish.

Chrysotile fibres are finer than silk and form several inches long, constituting the most valuable variety of asbestos. The mineral's properties resist fire, heat, corrosion and friction. The long fibres can be spun like wool or cotton and woven into material to manufacture fire-resistant garments for test pilots, fire fighting crews and suppressers of oil-well fires.

Suzanne LeBlanc wove some tantalizing historical tidbits about asbestos into her book Cassiar: A Jewel in the Wilderness. "Historical records show that the unique properties of asbestos have been known for more than two thousand years. The Egyptians wove asbestos into cloth which they used to wrap the bodies of their pharaohs to preserve their mummified remains over time," she wrote.

Author Donat Marc LeBourdais elaborated on the ancient history of asbestos in his 1957 book Metals and Men: The Story of Canadian Mining. Asbestos, a mineral fibre, surpasses in variety of uses anything manufactured from the other two classes of animal or vegetable origin.

Asbestos is unique insofar as having great strength, great flexibility, is impervious to water, resists chemical action, is practically immune to decay and, most remarkable of all, it cannot be destroyed by fire.

"The ancients were probably as well acquainted with it as the average person is today," declared LeBourdais. "It is mentioned by the Roman writer Piny as a 'rare and costly cloth', the cremation garment of kings. The Greek geographer Strabo wrote about lamp wicks the fire could never consume."

During later time, the strange material caused awe and wonder. After Charlemagne, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (800-814 A.D.) fed agents sent from hostile tribes, he liked to impress them with a party trick. At the end of the banquet he whisked the tablecloth from under their elbows and tossed it into the fire for cleaning. He magically retrieved the undamaged covering and spread it back over the table to the loud ahs of admiration from the emissaries.

Marco Polo, the great Venetian traveller of the 13th century, had seen in Tartary the fabric the Tartars wove from fibre found in nearby rocks. But LeBourdais assumed that most of the asbestos known to the Greeks, Romans and other Europeans probably came from the Italian Alps, as it was Italy where asbestos was first fabricated into thread, paper and cloth on a considerable scale between 1860 and 1875.

Large scale industrial use of asbestos had been established earlier in the 19th century when asbestos was found to be the ideal insulating material in factories where steam engines and other machinery generated a great deal of heat.

Asbestos was first discovered in Canada near St. Joseph, Quebec, in 1860. But the asbestos mining industry didn't get off the mark until sometime about 1874-76. Basically, Quebec held a monopoly as the only place in Canada mining asbestos until 1949 when a deposit was opened in northern Ontario, and then the quartet of Cassiar stakers started peddling their high-grade wares for the best deal in 1950.

In the bidding game, Vic Sittler had listened to Norm Hendry, the Johns-Manville rep, make an unacceptable first offer of $50,000 and nothing else--not even stock in a new company.

Next, Doc Smitheringale asked for Sittler's expectations. The prospector told him: $125,000 cash and 16 percent of the share capital plus a few other compensations. Sittler was promised what he asked for, signed an initial arrangement with Conwest Exploration and signed the final agreement with Fred Connell in Toronto in October, 1950.

Fred Connell, president of Conwest, was a prospector turned successful businessman. He had notched his career as a principal in companies such as Waite Amulet, Central Patricia, Kerr Addison, United Keno Hill Mines and Conwest Exploration. The Cassiar Asbestos Corporation would be his star accomplishment as Canada's--maybe North America's--finest, richest and strongest asbestos mine with its nearly 40-year lifespan.

"Conwest robbed us," Sittler fumed. "The company made an end run around what I understood to be a deal. We were honest, everyday guys taking the company's word at face value."

As usually happens in high-stake mining agreements, companies consistently try shafting the unwary prospector at every opportunity. Conwest reduced the terms. By June, 1951, Conwest had modified the terms of the agreement to $90,000 and 300,000 shares in Cassiar Asbestos, the new corporation formed a month earlier.

"Conwest received 600,000 shares in the corporation for its worthless (Cassiar) Valley claims," explained Sittler whose first two claims staked were the heart of the extremely high-grade deposit of exceptionally long, fine spinning fibres. The deposit was so rich in quality that random grab samples sometimes were accused of being selected ones.

As a matter of expediency, Sittler accepted a percentage reduction to 12 percent of $4 million. But some years later when the $4 million was cut to $2.5 million and Cassiar's capital was increased, the prospectors launched a lawsuit that wound through the Yukon, British Columbia and Northwest Territories courts for 10 years. The company principals accused the prospectors of "greed", when, in fact, they were simply trying to protect their position.

"In this case 'up' could be interpreted as 'not staying down'," said Sittler about the original agreement going off the rails. "I'd like to make another deal with Conwest to show what they taught me. If I had learned what Connell knew at the time I sold the asbestos property there wouldn't have been any legal technicality trouble."

Then, in 1960, Chuck Stowell, the geology assistant who had casually talked with Bob Kirk and Hiram Nelson about the asbestos 11 years before on the mountainside, sued for a one-

fifth partnership. The University of British Columbia student contravened government policy when employed with the government Geological Survey. His unethical behaviour about prematurely releasing confidential information worked against him in court. What he did was not a criminal act but contravened a long-standing policy observed by government even to this day. The suit was dismissed in British Columbia Supreme Court, as was the man's later appeal.

But in keeping with a casual gentleman's agreement made by Kirk and Nelson, it speaks volumes about the integrity of all four prospectors, who, under no legal obligation, awarded Stowell almost $4,000 in cash and about 10,000 shares of Cassiar stock. For some unknown reason, he irresponsibly dumped the shares on the Vancouver Stock Exchange at a dollar below the $4 market value. Had he held on a while, the shares which went to over $25 could have netted him a tidy quarter of a million dollars. Obviously, Bob Kirk's philosophy about 'money is for spending' rubbed off on Stowell.

Friends deny that too much of the good life killed Bob Kirk. Although he was a relatively young man, probably in his mid-50s, they said he died of "old age" waiting for all the asbestos cases to wind their way through the judicial labyrinth. A final negative decision against the prospectors was rendered in 1972 by a Yukon territorial court judge around the same time of Kirk's death.

Bob Kirk was inducted into the Yukon Prospectors' Association's Hall of Fame in 1988. His name is inscribed on a brass plate attached to the Hall of Fame artpiece on display in the foyer of the Yukon government administration building. His name also 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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See related articles Alec Berry: Conwest Exploration's Super Sleuth; Dr. George Mercer Dawson: The Little Giant; and Keno: The Venerable Old Gentleman Mine (a 23-article history in pdf).

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