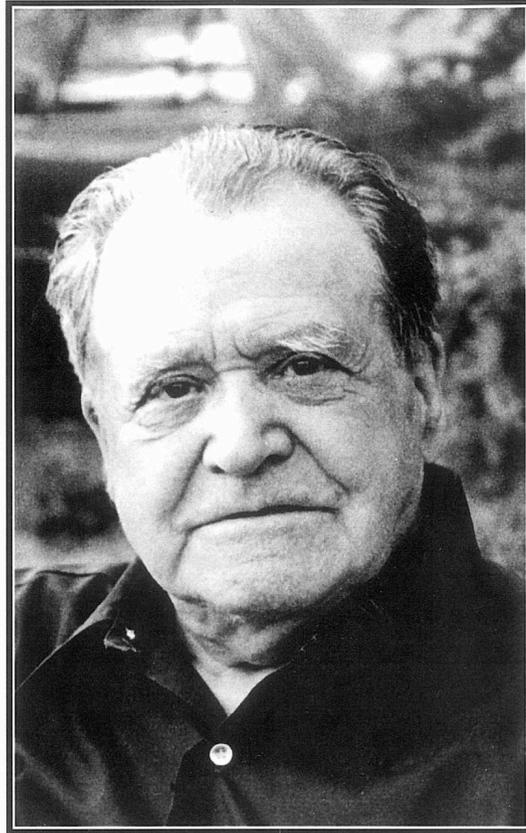


## FRED CALEY: THE GROCER WHO SIDELINED AS A GRUBSTAKER

by Jane Gaffin



*Fred G. Caley*



Toronto-based Conwest Exploration was the major shareholder in the Cassiar Asbestos Corporation that had been operating the famed Cassiar mine in northern British Columbia since 1953. It would be Conwest's star accomplishment as Canada's--maybe North America's--finest, richest and strongest asbestos mine with its nearly 40-year lifespan of producing long, silky, spinning fibres.

In an effort to satisfy a longing for more asbestos, Conwest Exploration looked toward the northwest Yukon. In August, 1955, senior geologist Dr. William Smitheringale was

attracted to the Caley asbestos deposit on Cassiar Creek, a tributary of the Yukon River, some 30 miles northwest of Dawson City.

Occasionally, the prospector and claim owner Fred Caley (Honour Roll) has been erroneously credited with finding the great Cassiar asbestos deposit in northern British Columbia (B.C.). The confusion comes from Caley's asbestos showing being located on the namesake creek which happens to be in the Dawson City area of the Yukon and had no other connection to the long-time Cassiar asbestos producer in the Cassiar Range of northern B.C.

After stripping and open-cutting proved the Caley asbestos showing too shallow to mine, those involved with the project went back to what they had been doing before.

Fred Caley was a long-time Dawsonite who mixed his butter-and-egg business with mining interests. He was optimistic and pleasant, coating his words with chuckles. Since coming North in 1922 he had gypsied over every speck of the Yukon looking for minerals.

"I got too old to prospect, so I grubstake others," said Caley in 1974. The storekeeper displayed a classic asbestos sample in his Dawson City general store that prospectors began to associate with minerals in the field. His personal support of the prospectors was actually responsible for stoking the local economy.

In late March, 1957, Dr. Smitheringale received a telegram in Vancouver from his scout Alex Berry (Honour Roll) in Whitehorse regarding another asbestos prospect, this time on Clinton Creek, a tributary of the Fortymile River northwest of Dawson City.

Berry initially contacted and made a verbal agreement with Fred Caley and his son Bob who had grubstaked prospectors Art Anderson (Hall of Fame) and George Walters. The Caleys were the gamblers who provided food, supplies and money in exchange for a percentage of any profits that might be realized from the enterprise, whether it was gold taken from a creek or an option agreement made with a mining company.

Then Dr. Smitheringale showed up to examine the prospect on behalf of Conwest Exploration which had latched onto 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--all because Fred Caley had the foresight to grubstake a couple of trapping partners. The mine, located roughly 50 miles below Dawson, was a boon to the community for the 10 years Clinton Creek Asbestos operated.

"I'm no prospector," said Indian trapper Art Anderson, who found the Clinton Creek asbestos deposit. "I didn't know geology. I didn't have to. The asbestos was obvious, spread out all over the ground." He emphasized the immensity with hand gestures. "When tunneled, there was more than hoped for."

Anderson was quiet, pleasant, unhurried and the youngest of six children. His Indian mother, Mary Charles Phillips Anderson, had died giving him life at Fortymile in 1912. By the time Art was born, the village, located on the confluence of the Yukon and Fortymile rivers, had dwindled from 300 to a dozen residents. Rumors of gold strikes at Dawson City and Alaska's Circle City had silenced the village.

Father and son stayed behind in their log cabin which had to be replaced when fire destroyed the original one.

Art's father Pete was a Dane who had come for gold, boating down the Pelly River in July, 1898. Too late to grab Klondike gold ground, he had turned to commercial fishing, prospected on the side and settled permanently in the Fortymile area.

In 1933, the Anderson pair left Fortymile to farm in the fertile Clinton Valley soil that provided a big batch of vegetables. On Porcupine Hill, Pete Anderson found rusty goldpans, picks and decayed posts left behind by the miners of 1898, as well as a pile of fluffy fibres.

"Asbestos didn't mean much then," Art Anderson said in a 1974 interview. "It had no value, market or significance."

After 20 years passed, asbestos became a sought-after commodity. But when Art returned to Porcupine Hill in 1957, he couldn't find the asbestos. He turned to another father and son team, Fred and Bob Caley, for financial assistance.

Art Anderson, joined by his trapper friend, George Walters, picked away until they relocated the white fibres, bursting forth as if the earth had been overstuffed.

Word quickly seeped to Alex Berry, Conwest's foxy sleuth. He negotiated terms for the Clinton property with the four prospectors--Anderson, Walters, Fred and Bob Caley--until Dr. Smitheringale arrived from Vancouver to check out the asbestos deposit.

Clinton Creek Asbestos Mine, owned by Cassiar Asbestos Corporation, made its production decision in 1965. Two years later the mill was officially opened. On the company's payroll was No. 1 employee Art Anderson who took his first full-time job for wages and was lauded by company officials as a legend within his own time.

All this industry was a spinoff from the faith of the visionary Fred Caley who is probably better known for his long tenure as a Dawson grocer and hardware merchant than as a prospector and grubstaker.

Frederick George Caley, born in Wilham, Essex, England on September 4, 1904, had set off on his life's adventures at about age 18. He arrived in Dawson, Yukon on the last run of the Overland Mail Stage in 1922, still in unsuccessful pursuit of a long-lost uncle whom he never found.

A report in *The Dawson Daily News* in November, 1922 viewed the recent recruit to Dawson as an exceptionally bright and energetic young man who possessed the capacity to make good in the country.

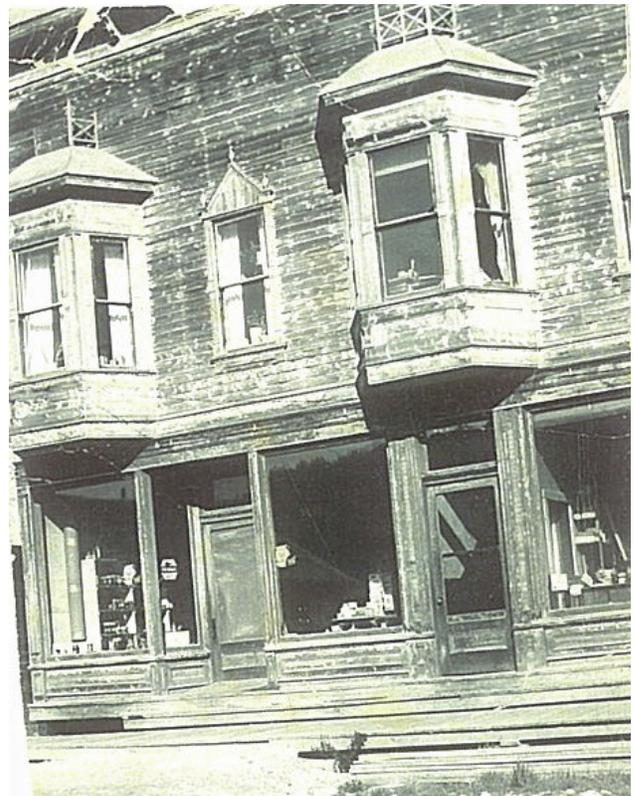
Except for logging a while in the Whitehorse area and odd-jobbing in Dawson as a dishwasher and setting bowling pins before delivering water with his own two horses, basically Caley's career centered on groceries. He was employed first with John Spence until the independent grocer retired and sold to the Northern Commercial Company in May, 1938. Caley stayed on with the new owner for a several-year stint before striking out on his own.

For six years, he operated his own grocery business on the south end of town from the old Palace Bakery building he had bought from Charles and Marie Lefebvre Burkhard about 1941. The bake shop was more popularly referred to over the years as Burkhard's Bakery. After nearly 30 years of baking bread and pies, the couple wanted to retire although the nearly 70-year-old Charles Burkhard stayed active with his mining and real estate interests.

On October 14, 1947, Caley upgraded. He purchased the Whitehouse Hotel building on Third Avenue, near Queen Street, where he expanded the grocery business into an eclectic array of general merchandise that included hardware and clothing.

Caley's Store, an example of Edwardian commercial architecture, was built at the turn of the 20th century and originally served as a combined furniture/upholstery shop, restaurant and boarding house, according to Parks Canada.

Within ten years, the building was converted to a rooming house to service the community's increasing demand for transient housing.



**Caley's General Store, Third Avenue, Dawson, is noteworthy for its false front, large shop windows and the cantilevered box bay windows on the second floor. (Photo courtesy of Caley family).**

Caley, also known for his keen interest in mining, added spice to the retail trade by often providing grubstakes whenever optimistic and enthusiastic prospectors approached him. Sometimes he won; sometimes he lost. However, it is likely that without his faith and willingness to support and gamble on the regional prospectors, the Clinton Creek Asbestos Mine and townsite may never have come to fruition. The mine was certainly a boon to Dawson.

During his 56 years in the grocery business, until his retirement in 1978, Caley was remembered for his capacity to forget grudges just as he had generously forgiven many debts. He often gave virtually unlimited credit to those out-of-heel and down-on-their luck.

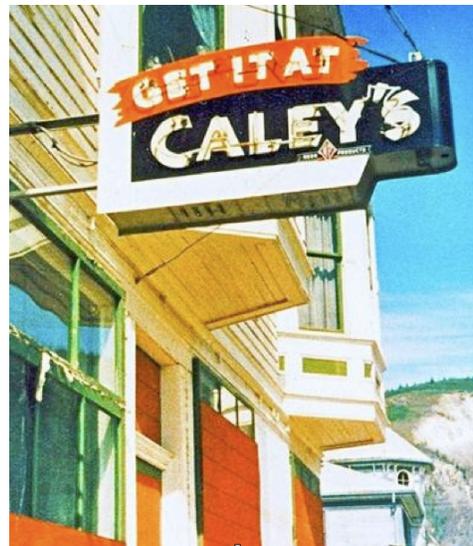
He might tell his customer to collect the groceries needed and place the goods on the counter where Caley packed the items into boxes. The storekeeper never embarrassed his broke and hungry customers who were not generally seeking handouts so much as they needed a little credit to tide them over till payday.

While packing the boxes, Caley offered the liberal terms, "When you get paid, and you feel you have enough money in the bank, then come and pay me." Most people who enjoyed extended credit from Caley's Store honoured the gentlemen's agreement.

Entering the dimness and walking across creaky-board floors was like stepping into history. Caley seldom, if ever, discarded anything, for he saw every item to be of historic value. Besides the exquisite example of asbestos displayed on the counter, customers could find a manna of merchandise ranging from copper nails to fur hats to top-quality ratchet sets to fresh eggs to delicious cans of Hot Toddy imported directly from England to Nabob Spice tins to pharmaceuticals and cough syrup.

Yukon writer and researcher Dick North related that he was once tracking the cough medicine that the Mad Trapper of Rat River would have used back in 1926. North solicited Fred Caley's help. Not only did the shopkeeper know the brand, he pulled a bottle of it off his store shelf, much to the author's delight.

Ah, yes, and the legendary neon sign, installed in 1950, demonstrated that Caley also accepted modern methods of doing business. The sign, serving as the first and only neon marquee in town for a long while, billed the business with the message, "Get It At Caley's".



**Installed in 1950 as the first and only neon sign in Dawson for a while was the one bearing the message "Get It At Caley's" (Photo courtesy of Caley family).**

Everybody old enough to remember Caley's Store and the warmly-glowing sign agreed that you really could find virtually anything there.

Meanwhile, over many decades, Caley was surreptitiously planning the salvation of old Dawson. He was quietly squirreling ownership of real estate and paying property taxes on old buildings he recognized as historically-significant structures--or what remained of them--plus preserving their contents, all of which would have been bulldozed or gone to rot and ruin if not for his vision.

He had the foresight to be thinking about and investing in the town's future during what appeared to be a time of dismal circumstances.

The wartime Alaska Highway project that connected the Yukon with the Outside world bypassed Dawson in 1942-43. Then, in 1953, Dawson took another blow when the Yukon's capital was moved to Whitehorse.

The residents pulled together in dazzling Dawson spirit and prepared to shift gears. Regardless that some people still believed Dawson would die, others saw the new Alaska Highway transportation artery and the Canol Road and other spurs as the opportunities to open northern British Columbia and the Yukon Territory to greater mining opportunities.

The roots of the Yukon Chamber of Mines were planted first in Dawson City on September 3, 1943, under auspices of the Vancouver-based British Columbia (B.C.) Chamber of Mines. Dawsonites rallied for a rousing meeting and Dawson was soon receiving front-page coverage in mainstream newspapers in Vancouver.

All was not bleak as Caley soldiered through the downturns of his beloved Dawson and was later noted for protecting such decaying buildings that had once housed the Dawson Daily News, Ellingsen Photography Studio/Minto Hotel, the Red Feather Saloon and Billy Biggs' Blacksmith Shop, at the corner of Third Avenue and Princess Street, to name a few.



**Dawson Daily News office on Third Avenue between King and Queen streets.**

**Left: a 1925 Claude Tidd Photo, Yukon Archives # 8356. Right: building bought and restored by Parks Canada.**





**Left: The permafrost-ravaged Ellingsen Store Complex, Third Avenue, between Princess and Harper streets, was built in 1901 and bought in 1912 by Erling Olav Ellingsen for his photography studio and the Minto Hotel. (Klondike Sun Photo by Thomas Seibel, 2008)**



**Left: Photo of Red Feather Saloon, corner of Third Avenue and Princess, by Sam Holloway, 1978. Right: Red Feather bought and reconstructed by Parks Canada.**



Many of the buildings Caley saved were later purchased from him and restored by Parks Canada.

Meanwhile, he was carefully preserving the invaluable artifactual treasures, including ledgers, business documents and newspapers. All issues of the Dawson Daily/Weekly News, dating from 1898 to 1954, were remarkably saved and reproduced on microfilm by the Public Archives of Canada. Before he finished, he had donated over 400 artifacts and paper archives to the Dawson City Museum.

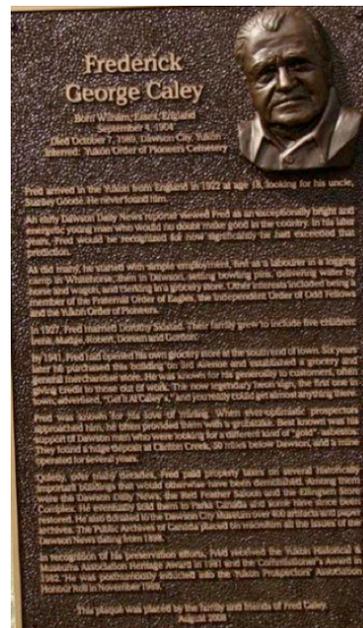
In recognition of his preservation efforts, Caley received the Yukon Historical & Museums Association Heritage Award in 1981 and the Commissioner's Award in 1982.

Fred Caley died at age 85 in Dawson City on October 7, 1989 and was interred in the Yukon Order of Pioneers Cemetery. He also was a member of the Fraternal Order of Eagles and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

Fred Caley and Dorothy Skistad were married in 1927 and had five children: Irene, Madge, Robert, Doreen and Gordon.

On August 2, 2008, family and friends celebrated Fred Caley's life with the unveiling of a bronze commemorative plaque that is mounted on the front of the Third Avenue building where he once operated his retail business.

The structure was designated a site of historical significance and has been renovated and annexed to accommodate extra rooms for the Midnight Sun Hotel.



Fred Caley was posthumously inducted into the Yukon Prospectors' Association's Honour Roll in November, 1989 in recognition of his unwavering faith in helping prospectors fulfill their dreams. His name is engraved in the base of the bronze prospector statue that watches over Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

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See related articles: *Alec Berry: Conwest Exploration s Super Sleuth*; *Art Anderson: Asbestos Mine Discoverer Was No. 1*; and *Bob Kirk: The Prospector Who Cheerfully Blew His Million*.

(Information for this article has relied on **Cashing In: A History of Yukon Hardrock Mining 1898-1977** by Jane Gaffin, 1982; Judy Kelly who provided her grandfather's biography and a copy of the program for the unveiling ceremony in Dawson, August 2, 2008; Fred Caley photo taken by Doreen Caley Jeffery, June 10, 1982, following Commissioner's Award ceremony, Dawson; *"Get it at Caley s" Had a Broader Meaning for Dawson* by Dan Davidson, *The Klondike Sun*, Wednesday, August 13th, 2008; *Fred Caley Plaque Unveiling in Dawson City on August 2nd (2008)* by Kathy Jones-Gates, *Moccasin Telegraph* Special Edition, posted online August 8, 2008 by MocTel publisher Sherron Jones; *Charles Burkhard, Dawson Pioneer* by Jane Gaffin, Yukon Chamber of Mines Supplement, Yukon News, 1993.)

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