

## JOE SUITS: PROSPECTOR OF THE YEAR 1992

by Glenn Harris

(The Prospector of the Year article originally appeared in *The Northern Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue #104, first quarter, 1993; it is followed with additional insight into Joe Suits.)

Joe Suits is a long time Yukon prospector and I must say a good one.

He takes his time noticing everything and missing nothing when he is in the bush. Having said that, I can give him credit for being a better prospector than I am.

I will quote some of the write up about his lifestyle from the *Ore Shoot*, the Yukon Prospectors' Association's newsletter. I think the piece is well-written and explains why he was chosen Prospector of the Year for 1992.

"Joe is a long time Yukon prospector, well known for his persistence and thrift. In over 25 years of prospecting, he has uncovered dozens of new occurrences and fattened the pockets of more than a few Vancouver promoters," said the *Ore Shoot*.

"His well-known penchant for heading into the bush for a month with a box of groceries, a .22 rifle and a blanket, shames many of us accustomed to more luxurious camps. We are hoping he will make the awards banquet and collect his reward, but it would be entirely in character for him to pass on it and avoid the limelight."

To my knowledge, he didn't do it, though someone told me that they had seen him in town the day of the banquet that is put on by the Geoscience folks every fall, after the summer work season is over.

I guess Joe held true to form.

One prospector expressed the following to me about Joe in camp:

"You get up to do something in camp and sure enough Joe has done it ahead of you," confided the unidentified prospector.

"He was very good at fixing things and could come up with a way to get by, even if something was forgotten or broken. He was able to improvise something to make do in almost any occasion. He would figure out a way to do just about everything even though everyone felt it was just about impossible, like crossing a river in high water or flood season."

He had a nonchalant way of expressing things. For example, he said once, "There is nothing to prospecting; just look in the gopher holes and follow the sheep trails."

Maybe I am telling some of his trade secrets, but I am sure no one can do as well as he can anyway or will find as much as he will in any event--even if you double check!

We were the first ones to take a Cat and truck to the north side of Boswell River, a tributary to the Teslin River in the Big Salmon Range. That was a kind of feat in itself. We had to build a continuation of the Amoco (American Oil Company) road to the Boswell River and then had to find a descent place to cross it. This was in the early 1970s.

We remodelled an old cabin and put on a new roof that had fallen in but the logs were still sound. We made a descent place to stay as we had brought in all the plywood with D-4 Cat and a 4x4 truck on the winter trail.

This sounds easy but don't let it fool you. It's not easy, I can assure you. We built about seven miles of road on the north side of the river on ground we had staked for a company that we had intended the public to go on.

It never happened, much to our disillusionment. Boswell River was Joe's home stamping ground, so I felt real proud of anything we could find out there. Joe's mother gave me some old pictures that I promised not to lose or give away.

There were some of Blackie and Brownie, a couple of bear cubs they raised. I think that is where Little Bear Creek got its name.

Joe notices everything when he is out, even the weather balloons and the radios strapped to them that the weather bureau sends out in the sky.

C.B.C. (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) came in once to make a short movie of grass roots prospecting and of me and Joe Suits. They were doing it in advanced stage on top of the mountain at Amoco.

Being a movie actor was not Joe's piece of cake, but he amused himself in any event. I thought he was overdoing himself, being good host, making tea for all the film crew who came in two helicopters.

He particularly made sure that the movie producer, a stoutly-built lady, got lots of tea. It wasn't until after they left to finish pictures on top of Red Mountain that Joe mentioned she had three cups of tea, never went to our brand new plywood outhouse. Then I caught on. We had dug up a 50-year-old toilet seat and repainted it. It was not quite dry.

Joe also got along with the animals in the bush. It was great to sit and watch him feed a pet gopher at the old Boswell Mines camp. When he came to the door, Joe would see how many soda crackers he could feed him before he would go and unload, to make ready for another load. The gopher would take the crackers in both paws, devouring them in seconds. His jowls got ridiculously big as he tried to get too many in before making another trip.

Joe would even look under your feet, as you stopped for a breather, and remark on how many insects were crawling around on the ground. Take five minutes sometime and I'll bet you will be surprised how many are crawling around things like the old trees and

debris way up mountainsides like Dezadeash Pass west of Haines Junction, telling you that it must have been flooded in years past and how did they get there. Something that has always interested me is old writings on the old cave walls north of the Haines Highway.

I hope I haven't talked too much and given away any secrets. But I am glad and proud to have Joe Suits as a friend and past partner and will continue to respect him very much in the future.§

As per Glen Harris' article, the Yukon Prospectors' Association named Joe Suits Prospector of the Year in 1992. When his name was engraved in the base of the bronze prospector statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue, he was inadvertently credited with the honour for 1993.

The oversight worked out fine. Since Joe Suits was the only prospector named during the years 1992 and 1993, his prominence simply extended an extra year.

When Joe's name, included in the second set of engravings, appeared on the commemorative plaque at the base of the bronze statue in 2006, subtly teased that he was that nine-foot-tall prospector.

#### About the Author

Glen Harris, inducted into the Yukon Prospectors' Association's Hall of Fame in 1989, came to the Yukon in 1949 as a surveyor, crusher operator and a camp foreman on the Alaska Highway construction.

He owned a garage at Haines Junction, started a sawmill and served as a principal officer in several mining companies, including Shakwak and Tally Ho. While staking and prospecting in 1984, he barely survived a devastating avalanche near Atlin, British Columbia.

In 1985, he suffered a stroke. Despite a second stroke that left him partially paralyzed and without speech in 1988, he became a columnist for The Northern Journal. Glen Harris died on August 28, 1997; he was 67. (See his full Hall of Fame story on the YPA website.)

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#### **Joe Suits: A Heavenly Rock Hunt**

*(Joe Suits, predeceased by his partner, Florence, died suddenly on October 23, 2006. The following article has relied mainly on a family-written biography that was prepared for funeral services held in the Christ Church Anglican Cathedral, Whitehorse, Yukon, October 30, 2006.)*

Joe Louis Suits was born with his eyes open. Coupled with an inquisitive mind and a fascination for the unusual, he was gifted with the essential attributes to be a good rock hound.

In January of 2000, he participated in the most profound mission of his prospecting career. While garnering bountiful rewards, they were not of an earthly ilk. Yet it was an extraordinary experience for which he tossed aside his rock hammer in favour of self-fabricated tweezers and went searching for celestial rocks.

He was far from a space case who was out of touch with reality. No, a real meteorite, speeding recklessly through the universe, hurled itself into the earth's atmosphere on January 18, 2000. Instead of being charred to nothingness, the meteorite showered its precious payload fortuitously upon the Yukon.

Internationally, scientists were aflutter over this very rare and special treasure. Over 90 percent of the meteorites heading for earth don't survive passage through the atmosphere.

Finding where the space particles came to rest would prove as daunting as looking for a certain speck of quartz on an expansive sandy beach had it not been for a bit of divine intervention.

Time was of the essence. The pinhead-size particles had to be found before the snow and ice melted, otherwise billions of years of secrets would be lost forever to the physiography.

The giant fireball had exploded on a Tuesday morning about 8:30. It was the hour when Yukoners were headed to work or school, thus accounting for why a large number of the population was lucky enough to witness the stunning phenomenon.

Simultaneously, Alaskan residents reported hearing a thunder-like sound and felt a slight earth tremor.

At the relevant time, however, it was impossible for the observers to say over which mountaintop exactly the bright light had flashed.

As the object had streaked across the ebony backdrop, it was producing sonic booms, green flashes, a foul odor of sulfur, and was said to have banged with as much energy as several kilotons of TNT (tri nitro toluene).

The thought of 4.5-billion-year-old pristine pieces of space material scattered somewhere in the Yukon that could provide a glimpse into the original composition of the formation of the solar system before the planets formed was an overwhelming thought that captured Joe's imagination.

By chance, another man beat him to the scene. On January 5, a week after the fact, Jim Brooks was driving across the snow-covered ice of Taku Arm to Tagish Lake toward his nearby home when he accidentally spotted black specks in his headlights.

The recoveries of crumbly, black, porous rock specimens resembled charcoal briquettes left over from last night's barbecue and were the prime pickings.

He stored the plastic bags of contents in a freezer. It was critical to preserve the pristine condition of the complex organic compounds in the original outer-space state before the specimens were transferred to a laboratory for study.

Carbonaceous chondrite--as this stony meteorite that contained small mineral granules turned out to be--is a key to understanding the earliest stage of cells from which life sprouted.

As soon as Joe Suits learned of a vicinity where he could focus his eye on the unusual, he and his two prospector brothers, Sandy and Robert, plus nephews, Kelly and Ron, packed up and set off.

It is incredible that after the largest fragments had already been recovered that Joe was still able to spot teeny flakes of black which had to be picked out of the snow with tweezers because of their delicacy and to avoid contamination.

Proudly, Joe took his hard-won prizes to the Yukon Geology Survey office to confer with government geoscientists. They fostered nothing more and that seems to be where the story ended.

Jim Brooks received a small payment from a U.S. scientific institute for bagging his black beauties. But nothing financially lucrative is known to have resulted from the Suits brothers' pursuits.

Who cares? No amount of money could have paid for this once-in-a-lifetime thrill. The Suits men had participated in an event so rare, so precious, so surreal that it could never be duplicated.

As proven by the outer-space story, Joe's keen eyes didn't miss much when out tramping the bush. From his wanderings, he collected priceless souvenirs and tastefully displayed these artifacts around his tidy cabin. His motto was quoted as, "A place for everything and everything in its place".

Joe Suits was born to an Indian mother and a white father on April 5, 1942. He had two brothers and three sisters.

His debut to the world came on a crisp Easter Sunday inside a small log cabin at Marsh Lake, some 30 miles south of Whitehorse. The Suits home was small but was in an exciting location. It was only a stone's throw from the World War II commotion of an Alaska Highway being newly-minted by the American Army.

It was indeed an exciting time for a young lad to be raised at Marsh Lake and in the little frontier town of Whitehorse that expanded exponentially with the American military's presence.

While attending grade school in the farming and ranching territory of Fort St. John, British Columbia, young Joe lived with the Holway family. Obviously influenced by the surrounding country, one letter home indicated he was dreaming about becoming a rancher.

Joe did not continue along that career path. But he did go into an associate occupation. While living and working at the Indian settlement of Champagne on the Alaska Highway west of Whitehorse, he wrangled horses and guided for the hunting parties of Champagne-based outfitter Alex Van Bibber and the Chambers.

Another wilderness interest was the sharing of a trapline in the early 1970s with partner Johnny Gatey.

For sure, Joe was a homebody. Although he did spend time at Horsefly, British Columbia, in the Cariboo ranching country, and once visited the city of Calgary, Alberta, who could blame him for not liking to travel outside the Yukon.

He and the Yukon were a good fit. He was a free spirited, laconic, with a boyish charm, winning smile and a quiet teasing disposition. He was of an independent bent, innovative, an improviser and a self-taught prospector that loaned itself to his loner nature. Whenever he wanted to get away from humanity, the bush offered him solace.

One anecdote from the book of family lore exemplifies Joe's bushmanship. It is decreed that Joe could set up camp, build a fire and have tea water boiling before the others could find their "axes".

He was about 22 years old when he participated in the discovery of fabulous lead-zinc-silver showings in the Anvil Range that led to the formation of Dynasty Explorations. The syndicate was the driving thrust behind the discovery and development of the gigantic Faro mineral deposit that Anvil Mining Corporation brought to production in 1969.

Prospector Al Kulan (Hall of Fame), one of four Dynasty principals, hired Joe for the exploratory rotary drill program during the early 1960s. Whenever the camp was out of meat, Joe would set off with his rifle and prospector's hammer. While waiting to spot a caribou or moose for the cook shack table, he occupied his time wandering the hills hammering rocks.

On more than one occasion, Dynasty Explorations was skinny for cash and had to pay employees with 10-cent stock. Anybody who recognized the signs and could visualize the forthcoming birth of a giant let their "pay cheques" mature. Some employees were believers while others had to be jolted to remember the stock payout. Soon, the shares were worth \$23 high. Joe and a few others as wise as he were laughing as they spring-boarded to the bank.

Joe was not naive by a long stretch, but he was soft for a hard-luck story. He was reputed to be too honest and charitable for his own good, sometimes not wary of those ready to take advantage of his generosity.

But what better legacy could be bestowed on a man than having friends remember him for his genuine kindness, unselfishly assisting anybody in need without expecting anything in return.

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See related articles: *Glen Harris: A Prospector Who Simply Won't Quit; The Yukon's Favourite Prospector; Mine Finder Dr. Aaro Aho Believed Deeply in the Yukon; Al Kulan Welcomed into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame.*