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JOHN PETER ROSS: 1995 TOP PROSPECTOR LIKES BEING HIS OWN BOSS

by Dianne Green

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A prospector's life can be very hard, but it has its rewards, says the Yukon Prospector of the Year.

The Yukon Prospectors' Association makes the award based on a prospector's success in uncovering new mineral discoveries. This year's recipient is John Peter Ross.

Ross is best-known for a gold discovery he and a partner made in 1987. That year, he and Rob dal Bianco began exploring a mountainous region 40 kilometres north of Haines Junction. The men went into the area based on information from maps and geochemical surveys which showed high values for gold and arsenic.

Not much was known about the mineral potential of the site they staked, high on a mountainside at Killermun Lake. The region was underexplored, a fact that sparked the partners' interest.

Rock samples the men brought from the field looked good and Silverquest Resources optioned the Killermun Lake property in 1988. In 1993, the same company took out a second option under its new name, Cash Resources.

"It doesn't happen often that a company will option the same property twice, so that shows its potential," says Ross.

Eight years after his first prospecting trip to Killermun Lake, Ross still has a financial interest in the property he and his former partner staked. A recent drilling program there turned up enough gold to encourage further exploration.

Now 47 years old, Ross works alone, exploring the area north of Haines Junction and other regions and parts of the Yukon and northern B.C.

He has obtained rights to seven or eight properties that appear to be rich in gold, lead, zinc, silver, placer gold and copper. The prospector of the year may be successful, but he is not rich yet.

"Prospecting is expensive. It would be nice if you could go behind your house and find gold but you have to travel. Helicopters cost \$700 per hour. Assays cost \$20 each and soil samples cost \$17. A prospector could test 50 to 400 rocks per season. If the tests are for

platinum or diamonds, they are more expensive.

"Your truck gets beat up. Your clothes wear out. The knees go on your pants. Tents go fast. One of mine went in two minutes when a bear went through it."

To help pay expenses, Ross taps into the Yukon Mining Incentives Program (YMIP). The program pays up to \$10,000 to eligible prospectors who can show good reasons for wanting to explore an area.

At the end of a season, the prospector must submit a report and maps describing the work done. YMIP is administered by the Yukon government department of Economic Development.

"It's possible that a mine has been found under the mining incentive program, but not enough work has been done to recognize it as a mine," he says. "The program has allowed prospectors to go places and do things that mining companies would not do."

Ross figures about 85 per cent of mines in Canada were originally staked or discovered by independent prospectors, who, he claims, assume a major part of the risk associated with finding a significant ore body.

"Big companies want sure things. Juniors don't mind taking some risk. But the prospector looks for the needle in the haystack. The chances of striking it rich are low, so the prospector lives on option payments and cooks his own food. I've eaten a lot of rice, beans and macaroni.

"The prospector's income is erratic, from zero up. You can't get bank loans. The work is seasonal. You're out in the bush during the best time of year for jobs. You come back in the fall and people are getting laid off. A guy working on a road crew gets UI at the end of the season, but a prospector gets nothing. Of course, it's difficult to be married."

Besides the financial risks, there are physical risks, says Ross, who has remained a bachelor. "If you break your leg you are by yourself. A prospector learns to be cautious. You're up to your waist in water with an 80-pound pack on your back. One slip and you drown."

What began as an adventure 20 years ago has been a serious vocation for the Winnipeg-born prospector for the last 10 years. To increase his knowledge of geology, he takes courses whenever they are available.

As a student, Ross' prospects for making money looked good. In an advanced prospecting course, he placed at the head of his class.

"I paid \$25 for the course and the prize was a \$37 rock hammer. So I made \$12 by taking the course. It's been a big hurdle to get this far," says Ross, who remembers a frustrating eight-day trip to Killermun Lake in August, 1991.

"The first day I camped at the 4,000-foot level and walked over a rock slide up to 7,000 feet. For the next seven days I stayed in my tent. It snowed four feet."

Other trips brought different challenges.

"One night there were seven bears around my tent so I couldn't sleep. I got in my truck and

drove 30 miles away to sleep.

"Another time, a small bear jumped on my tent a few times and tore it up. Luckily, it was an old tent."

Luckily, Ross was not in the tent.

Despite its many risks, the prospector's life has its rewards. The seasonal work lets him visit his mother in Michigan for two months each winter. If he has had a good year, he will travel to a warm country for the rest of the winter.

This year he is off to Indonesia. He figures it's cheaper to head south than to spend the winter in the Yukon.

In 1979, Ross underwent surgery for a herniated disc. Prospecting allows him to work at his own pace, so there is less risk of re-injuring his back.

There are other advantages to working alone, he concludes: "I like being my own boss. I like the mountains and don't mind being alone for up to 40 days at a time.

"There's a certain music in nature--the wind, rock avalanches, bears at 3 a.m., gurgling streams and wind in the grass. It is not silent. The stars seem to have a sound to them.

"There are no pressures out there."

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