



# Yukon Prospectors' Association

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It's a Good Life for a Free Spirit

A ROCKY ROAD IS THE RIGHT ONE  
FOR PROSPECTOR PETE RISBY

by Jane Gaffin



Photo by Jane Gaffin

Pete Risby, 1976

Risby was added to the Hall of Fame in 1996.

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ROSS RIVER, Yukon - Pete Risby (Hall of Fame), 46-year-old chief prospector and a director of Welcome North Mines, has overcome a lot of obstacles to get where he is today. Through it all he has retained a refreshing, sparkling wit that dimples his bronze cheeks in impish humor; his dark eyes flash with good-natured devilment and independence.

A dedicated prospector for 20 years, his knowledge of the rocks was gained mostly through practical experience in the field. He also had a good geological upbringing from a few geologists for whom he had respect, such as the late Dr. Aaro Aho (Hall of Fame), as well as John Brock, Welcome North's president.

"Some geologists were not only not so good they were just plain bad!" Pete emphasized. Often geologists angered and frustrated him into quitting syndicates, giving up a regular pay cheque to strike out as an independent.

Pete's self confidence, determination and definite ideas were inherited from a Negro father and Scottish-German mother. When life got tough, sometimes it just made him try that much harder. He is not a quitter.

Never enrolled in a public school, Pete has little formal education and didn't learn to write. He has taught himself to read. He was gifted with a superb memory and the ability to talk and express himself well. For three years he taught 6-month basic prospecting courses to native people in several Yukon communities. Some students are active prospectors involved with major mineral finds over the past 10 years.

Pete has confidence in the Indians as natural prospectors. "They know how to survive in the woods, don't get lost, learn quickly to identify minerals and if they don't come back to camp in the evening there's no need to worry about them. They don't require steak and lobster on the table for meals."

Pete has been successful in suggesting to some large companies that they follow Welcome North's trend of hiring native mineral identifiers as a result of an informative, entertaining presentation he gave at a Geoscience Forum in Whitehorse. No geologist was safe from Pete's teasing as he expounded on the worth of prospectors in Yukon mineral exploration. Independent prospectors are responsible for the majority of currently operating mines and for 75 per cent of the territory's mineral inventory.

In 1973, Pete had a setback. Jumping from a Bell-47 helicopter as it crashed into a hillside a split second before the main rotor decapitated the seat where he had been a passenger, he suffered a compound shoulder break and a partially-severed ear.

A nurse pronounced him dead prematurely in Ross River where the rescue plane brought the victims for medical attention before medivacing them on to Whitehorse. He struggled through after a 3-week hospital incarceration and now lives with a stiff shoulder.

"But there's a lot more good rock breaking ahead," he said. "I like going out, doing what I want. I don't listen to anybody although there are lots of people to give me advice. There have been times when I contemplated quitting, just throwing away my hammer. But I don't know what I'd do."

In 1956, Pete was first exposed to rocks. Through the Alberta-Northwest Chamber of Mines in Edmonton he latched onto a job with Cassiar Asbestos Corp. in northern British Columbia near the Yukon border.

He roomed with a young Ontario geology student who wanted to look at rocks on weekends. He had no transportation. Pete agreed that on alternate weekends he would make his truck available for backroad travel; on the other weekends, the rockhound had to pay for parties in Watson Lake or Whitehorse.

By the time the geology student returned East, rocks fascinated Pete. He spent all his spare time alone breaking rocks for the four years he operated heavy equipment at the asbestos mine.

He had learned machinery skills in Korea while serving in the Canadian Army, having joined the military in 1950 with the express purpose of acquiring an education by seeing the world and learning a trade to support himself.

In his opinion, he didn't know anything: he spoke Cree fluently and was an interpreter as well as special RCMP constable touring northern Canada to assist in an Indian census-taking which pertained to treaty payoffs. He knew trapping, hunting and cattle raising.

His parents had brought him to the Alberta Athabasca ranch country. Pete was four when they pulled up stakes from Kansas where he was born in May, 1931.

Until he was 14, he hadn't seen a vehicle he couldn't drive before joining the military. In the early 1960s, he was a Cat operator on the Canol Road.

He recognized asbestos, having worked in it for so long as Cassiar. But he knew nothing about staking or filing claims. In Whitehorse, he talked with government mining people who provided him with the necessary information. He staked and sold the claims to an Eastern asbestos company. He made \$3,000.

Pete thought: "Gee, that was good, easy money. Better than \$1.90 an hour driving a Cat." From then on each summer he took a month's sabbatical to prospect. Soon he was a full-timer.

In those early prospecting days he worked for the Nahanni Syndicate, Norquest Syndicate, Mt. Billings Ventures and Mackenzie Syndicate, but he felt hemmed in, as if he were a backpacking assistant and raft builder rather than a prospector. He struck out on his own.

Able to identify a sufficient number of sulphides he qualified as a recipient of a \$900 government prospecting assistance grant. He discovered mineralization in the Fortin Lake area, about 60 miles east of Ross River. It was staked as the Pay and optioned to Atlas Explorations, a subsidiary of Dynasty Explorations which had discovered the fabulous Faro deposit.

In July, 1966, Pete moved to Ross River, joined Atlas Explorations and prospected a year in the Yukon, Alaska and Chile. From boredom he quit.

"I wasn't intrigued with the regional geochemical survey type thing," he said. "It didn't make sense to me to do a lot of geochem where there were plenty of rocks to break."

In his opinion silt and soil sampling are unreliable unless accompanied by sufficient geological data and rock breaking. "I hadn't seen a rock for two months," he said.

He chose the independent route, arranging a first-refusal agreement with the Star Syndicate. Taking along Ross River Indian prospector, Art John (Hall of Fame), he trekked into the Logan Mountains. The Lee group sparked the eventual staking of 3,000 claims to form Spartan Explorations. For that company Pete prospected for a year until geologists troubled him again.

By 1972, Pete and Art had optioned claims in the Northwest Territories to a large exploration company, but corporate policy curtailed that company's Canadian exploration work. The properties reverted to the prospectors who didn't have the financial means for the annual assessment work on these Godlin Lake claims.

A short time later the general speculating public became keenly interested in the Selwyn Basin-Mackenzie fold belt activities, especially when Canex Placer's lead-zinc discovery at Howard's Pass sparked a staking rush.

In the spring of 1973 Pete's and Art's properties laid the foundation for the formation of Welcome North Mines by Al Kulan (Hall of Fame), John Brock, Irene Wilson and Pete.

Since that time Pete hasn't once looked back over his creaky shoulder or strayed from his solid prospecting philosophies.

"If a prospector is going to find something he has to go out and work as hard as he can make himself work," Pete said. "He has to look. No matter how many times the ground had been covered or how advanced technology becomes...it takes a prospector to physically bend over and whack the rocks.

"The idea of being on my own, doing what I like, doing things my own way...that's what I like about being a prospector."

The well-known, much admired and very successful Pete Risby was inducted into the Prospectors' Hall of Fame during a 300-guest Geoscience Forum banquet at the Gold Rush Inn in 1996.

The Hall of Fame honours prospectors who have contributed tremendously to Yukon mining. "Among his many contributions, Pete was instrumental in opening the Indian River placer camp, indicating that the larger, low-grade placer deposits south of Dawson City could be mined economically," noted Yukon Prospectors' Association's president Mike Power. "Pete's put a lot of people to work."

In his acceptance remarks the inductee credited the late Al Kulan for the secret to his success. "I was very fortunate to meet Mr. Kulan," Pete praised, referring to his long-time friend and business associate who discovered the Vangorda and Faro lead-zinc-silver deposits.

"Mr. Kulan told me at one point that 'You don't have to be smart to succeed in the mining business. You only have to be smart enough to surround yourself with smart people.' I've done that. And I very much appreciate this honour being bestowed on me by my peers," Pete said, sincerely.

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