

BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Mining, then and now

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Yukon is experiencing its biggest exploration boom in the past half century.

Just ask John Brock. He was there.

The veteran exploration geologist has been scouring the territory for shiny rocks for nearly five decades. He turns 70 this year.

He lives in Vancouver, where he runs Pacific Ridge Exploration, but he still comes up to the Yukon most summers, chasing the old dream of striking it big.

Brock started his career up here in the early 1960s, as a young geology graduate from the University of British Columbia, working with prospector Al Kulan and geologist Aaro Aho. Together, they found the deposit that would become the Faro mine.

That discovery set off a staking rush that seemed big at the time, but pales in comparison to what the Yukon is experiencing now.

Then, approximately 10,000 claims were staked around Faro. Now, roughly 35,000 claims have been staked around the White Gold district. And approximately 10,000 claims have been staked at the Rau property near Keno City.

The Casino rush hit in the late 1960s. The discovery of this massive, low-grade copper deposit, located 300 kilometres northwest of Whitehorse, helped turn Al Archer and Bob Cathro into living legends in Yukon's mining community.

Brock was part of it, too, staking ground nearby with an outfit called Atlas Explorations.

None of the discoveries that followed have turned into operating mines – at least not yet.

Slumping copper prices put Casino on ice for decades. Today, China's hunger for base metals has brought the project back to life.

The property is now owned by Western Copper Corporation, which has launched a big drill program to prove up claims that they're sitting on nearly two million tons of copper. If Casino ever becomes a mine, it would be monstrous in size, expected to create 650 jobs for three decades.

In the mid-1970s, prospectors rushed to stake claims near the Howard's Pass lead and zinc discovery. Today, Selwyn Resources, an exploration outfit that's being bankrolled by Chinese partners, is preparing a feasibility study. If its plans play out, a mine could open as early as 2014.

In the late 1970s, Brock explored the Tintina gold belt with Welcome Gold. To his dismay, Al Carlos made the Grew Creek discovery, "right in our back yard," near Ross River.

Grew Creek is now the site of a big drilling project by Golden Predator.

Brock also spent part of the 1970s poking around, what is now, ATAC Resources' Rau property, near Keno City, which is at



John Brock on Pacific Ridge's Mariposa deposit in the White Gold district, south of Dawson City.
Mike Renning/Pacific Ridge Explorations



the heart of one of the Yukon's big staking rushes. But he was looking for the wrong kind of metal.

"We were all looking for zinc and lead. There were very few of us who thought

there was potential for gold there."

Brock also tramped around the White Gold area, looking for "another Casino." He, like many others, lacked the insight that Shawn Ryan possessed.

Ryan realized that the area's dirt remained untouched by glaciers during the last Ice Age. He reasoned that a massive soil sampling program, properly done, may provide telltale clues of where gold lies buried.

He was right. After Ryan optioned White Gold to Underworld, early drill results were so good that mining giant Kinross swooped in and bought the property.

Now the whole world's watching.

Brock has seen his industry, and the Yukon, change a lot since he started.

New technology makes exploration far easier today than it once was. A few decades ago, you ran the risk of being socked in for the winter in a remote camp. Now, even miners at the territory's furthest edges are connected to the rest of the world by satellite phone, and they enjoy year-round helicopter support.

Yet Brock wonders if prospectors now see a weakness of spirit. He remembers when young prospectors understood working meant being at camp for long periods. Now, "they want to rotate out every four weeks for a little break.

"Nobody will listen to the old boy, but you've got to take advantage of the whole season," he said. "Younger ones just don't want to put up with full-time life in the bush."

Brock also remembers how, until the late 1970s, many First Nations found jobs in mining exploration. Not anymore.

He lumps it up to something that many First Nation chiefs would sadly acknowledge, but many businessmen wouldn't dare utter, for fear of causing an upset: welfare dependency.

"We'd have to chalk it up to greater amounts of government assistance," he said.

Creeping credentialism has forced out old-time prospectors in favour of diploma-issued geologists, although there are obvious exceptions, such as Shawn Ryan.

Brock's outfit still hires prospectors. But he knows many companies do not.

"There's nothing like having someone out there, in the field, banging on rocks," said Brock.

The Yukon's grown up. The territory has representative government, and province-like control over its natural resources.

Yukoners have grown-up, too. And as it's population has aged, expectations have changed.

Yesterday's young man sought a summer of adventure in the field. Now, more frequently than not, the young man expects a cushy government job and a house with a big yard.

It used to be considered an adventure to bunk on the floor with a dozen guys up in Dawson City. Now, Yukoners expect the same government services and quality of life as the rest of Canada.

Today, Brock's company has its fingers in properties near White Gold.

He tried to retire several years ago. But he can't resist the allure of the next rush.

"It's the thrill of the chase."

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