



Arctic Development
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The Johnney Baker Story
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THE JOHNNY BAKER LEGACY

Yellowknife is the capital city of the Northwest Territories and it will no doubt remain so, for a few more years. Currently it has a population of approximately 16,000 people and it appears to be growing. It also sees slot of visitors and people passing through.

The North today is in the midst of a very exiting diamond rush and it, like most of the rest of the world is in the midst of a technological and cultural revolution. Cellular phones, computers, satellites, fax machines, television, videos, **GPSs, helicopters, jets**, ultra sound, hospitals, legislatures, jails, welfare, taxes, civil servants, **beaurocrats** and Politicians.

The world has changed slot in the past 60 years and 60 years ago, Yellowknife didn't even exist. There were no roads into the north, no airports and for much of the area, no accurate maps. To get from Yellowknife Bay to any major city would take you days, weeks or even months depending on the season, your resources and your determination. Darned few people bothered to make the trip and if they did they were just passing through. Other than a few families at Detah, the region was basically empty of humans and human habitation. The current city boundaries would have had a population of zero.

In 1933 two men working for a company called **B.E.A.R. EXPLORATION** after wintering at Great Bear Lake set out on a prospecting expedition. A plane dropped them off on the **Coppermine** River around Red Rock Lake. For 2 1/2 months they **travelled** by foot and by canoe. They **travelled** approximately 500 miles across the barrens and through the bush, down the **Yellowknife** River. **For 2 1/2 months** they saw no one, they talked to no one, they heard no planes and only rarely did they come across scant evidence

that humans even existed.

It was getting towards fall. The black flies were out. The two men were tired and had found little of any geological significance. The older man, **Herb Dixon** was in his 60's and he had slipped **on** a portage which caused a very **painfull** and potentially serious groin injury. The younger man Johnney Baker was in his 30's and he had accidentally Put an axe into his knee while clearing some bush.

They reached a lake about 30 miles north of **Yellowknife** Bay and decided to set up camp for awhile. Across the lake was a large outcrop ridge which they climbed to get a better view of the area and in the process they discovered a quartz vein which panned gold. Close to one ounce per ton of gold. Prospecting they found a number of other veins and mineralized zones, so they named it **QUYTA LAKE** and staked a number of mineral claims.

At freeze up a plane was suppose to fly north from Edmonton and then up the Yellowknife River **untill** they were spotted. As the days shortened and the temperatures dropped they prospected the area south from **Quyta** to Walsh and Upper Walsh. They found more indications of potential wealth so they staked the Homer and **Greyling** Claims and named the Lakes. Their plane finally arrived and they said goodbye to their **QUYTA** campsite, **their pet eagle and to the end of a years prospecting.**

In the spring of 1934 Johnney Baker returned with Major **Burwash** and four other men. They set up a base camp at **Quyta** Lake and while the Major and three men worked that area, Johnney Baker and Huey Muir prospected the area to the south.

On a cold, wet and windy **September** day Baker and Muir battled the weather to paddle down the east shore of Yellowknife Bay. They came ashore at the first large point and **set up camp. After drying out and** warming up they prospected inland from camp and on a large hill outcrop came across

a quartz vein which was "LOUSY WITH VISIBLE GOLD". It was the type of find or discovery most prospectors just dream about. A VEIN LOUSY WITH VG. They started staking.

A few days later they went to get Burwash and the rest of the crew. They worked the ground and staked more claims including the giant property on the north west side of the bay. At freeze up they flew south but the showing was so good Baker and three men returned in December to sample the vein in detail. During the short winter days of forty below, they shovelled the snow off of the rocks and cut ninety channel samples across the vein. They got some incredible assays. Two hundred and eighty two ounces of gold per ton was the highest.

This era was known as the great depression so news of a major gold discovery in a new area leaked out and spread far and wide. By spring a gold rush was on and most of the Yellowknife area was being staked up and people were pouring in.

Baker was back along with Burwash and a couple of dozen men. They set up camp and built some cabins. After break up boats and barges with mining equipment started to arrive. Baker went over to the giant property established another camp and began working the ground especially the Brock Vein.

Meanwhile a tent camp started up and Yellowknife itself came into being. In the spring of 1995 it will mark its sixtieth year of existence.

Johnney Baker became known as Yellowknife Johnney. He worked at developing the Giant Property untill 1937-38 when like a number of others he headed south to take part in WW II. Baker became a Wing Commander in the RCAF and after the war based out of Toronto he travelled the world working for The Argos Corporation.

Sixty years is a long time (in some ways) and the story of Yellowknife and its beginnings is passing with the men and women who lived it.

A few years ago I had reason to do a little research on the QUYTA, GREYLING, RICH, BYG and ACE CLAIMS. These were properties staked by Mr. Baker and others back in the mid thirties but which have sat idle since. Very little information existed and the book and reports from or about that era had various often conflicting accounts.

Ironically, 60 years after Baker and Dixon travel led down the Yellowknife River I found myself in Toronto. I started phoning the C. J. Bakers in the phone book and found myself talking with Yellowknife Johnney who is now 92. He is very fit and able mentally but house bound so I arranged to meet with him one afternoon. I soon discovered that Mr. Baker had a wealth of information to tell about those early days and he had a number of photos ect which I thought should be in the NWT archives.

For the past year I have arranged for this to be done and this material is being turned over to Martin Irwin (920-3125) of the CANADIAN NWT MINERAL INITIATIVES OFFICE of the GNWT. these include:

1. A copy of the original assay plan and report on the RICH CLAIMS.
2. Approximately 90 black and white photographs with notes taken by Mr. Baker 1933-37
3. A VHS copy of some 8mm film taken by Mr. Baker in 1935 at the RICH CLAIMS (BURWASH MINE), at the GIANT PROPERTY and the area around Yellowknife, before there was a Yellowknife.
4. A transcript of a three hour talk I had with Mr. Baker outlining his adventures and the early days of mining in the north.
5. Various misc. documents.

6. A CIM REPORT article written by **Mr. Baker** outlining his story.

A. Also collected and turned over to the Prince of Wales Museum to be copied four journals two by Baker and two by **Burwash** covering the period 1935-36. These books **are owned by D. Smith of Yellowknife and are on loan.**

B. Turned over to the Diand Archives various reports on properties in the Yellowknife area and elsewhere in the NWT.

WHATS NEXT

Now that this initial batch of material has been collected and returned to the north the question arises, what should be done with it and what else should be done to collect more.

September of 1994 will mark the 60th year of the discovery of the RICH VEIN.

The spring of 1995 (Caribou carnival?) **will** be the 60th anniversary of the YELLOWKNIFE STAKING RUSH.

The summer of 1995 (after break up) will mark the 60th year of the founding of **Yellowknife**, of gold mining in the **NWT and of Yellowknife being a place on the map.**

It would seem appropriate for the anniversary to produce a small book (booklet) outlining the discovery and founding of Yellowknife. It would also finally set the story straight.

Also, there are only a handful of **oldtimers** left who were around back then. A good project would be to interview and tape them for the archives before it is too late. These would include **Mr. Baker** 92 living in **Toronto**, Noel Barlow 76 who worked at the Rich Property in 1935 and now lives in Alberta, **Darcy** and Huey Arden who came down from Great Bear Lake when

the rush began and **now live in Yellowknife**, Jim Mason of Vancouver who came north in 1935-36 with the GST, **Michel Paper** and other elders from Detah who saw it all happen.

Eventually this material could be turned into a book or film on the discovery of gold in the NWT, the founding of **Yellowknife** etc.

With the right project hopefully the city, the government, the **chamber** of mines, the various mines and exploration companies in the north would help.

I have done what I can but a project of the size which needs doing is beyond my resources, capabilities and time, so hopefully someone who reads this will take over and get the ball rolling.

Once again I feel obliged to stress the time element. **If it is going** to be done properly, it must be done soon.

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