Memorial to Aaro Emil Aho  
1925–1977  

W. H. MATHEWS  
Department of Geological Sciences, University of British Columbia,  
Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1W5

Aaro Aho, outstanding geologist-prospector-promoter died suddenly on May 27, 1977, in a fall from a tractor at his home at Ladysmith, British Columbia. His untimely, tragic death was particularly difficult for his friends to accept because it came so simply and quickly to a man who had successfully worked among the hazards of the wilderness for many years.

Aaro was born of pioneer Finnish parents at the same town where he died fifty-two years later. Brought up on the family farm amid the forests and hills of Vancouver Island, he was an ardent outdoorsman. Thus, when he graduated from Ladysmith High School and entered the University of British Columbia, it was only natural for him to pursue a geological program. There he received the degrees of bachelor of arts and bachelor of applied science in geological engineering in 1949. He entered postgraduate work at the University of British Columbia the following year before going to the University of California at Berkeley where he received his Ph.D. in geology in 1954. He completed his academic career with one winter of teaching, 1953–1954, at Oregon State University.

His doctoral dissertation dealt with the petrology and ore deposition in a Mesozoic ultramafic intrusion in the southern Coast Mountains near Hope, 100 miles east of Vancouver, British Columbia. This work, later published in two papers (Aho, 1956 and 1957) guided much of the underground exploration at the Giant Mascot mine over the succeeding two decades, exploration which yielded more than $30 million worth of nickel and copper.

Aaro was first introduced to the Yukon in 1946 when he served as a laborer in the Klondike placer fields, and later, in 1949, as a student assistant for Dr. Hugh Bostock on a Geological Survey of Canada field party. He was to spend most of his later summers in this area and to leave it with an indelible stamp of his presence.

In 1953, on the recommendation of Dr. H. C. Gunning, then head of the geology department of the University of British Columbia, he was appointed exploration manager for a subsidiary of the White Pass and Yukon Railway Corporation, which was seeking to expand its business by encouraging mineral development in the area. Aaro continued with this corporation until 1957, when he set out as an independent consulting geological engineer. For the next seven years he spent much time in south-central Yukon Territory on behalf of syndicates and companies, most of which were his own creations. Guided by the thinking of his mentor, Dr. Ed Wisser of Berkeley, regarding ore deposition in a structural framework, he focused his attention on the Keno Hill district and the Pelly Mountains. In the former area he found several new, but as yet uneconomic, occurrences of silver and lead.
In 1964 he assembled a group of colleagues—geologist Gordon Davis, prospector Alan Kulan, and financier-promotor Ronald Markham—to continue the search for ore in the Anvil Range. Their company, Dynasty Explorations Limited, first financed from their own resources and from a limited public subscription (see Aho, 1972, p. 28), and later with support from Cyprus Mines of Los Angeles, found evidence in the late summer of 1965 of a major orebody. This later proved to contain 63 million tons of ore averaging 9.1% combined lead and zinc and 1.2 ounces of silver per ton. By 1969, Dynasty and Cyprus Mines through their joint subsidiary, Anvil Mining Company, with Aaro as vice-president, had brought this deposit into production as an open-pit operation. The Anvil mine has been the largest individual source of income for Yukon Territory since that time, grossing $750 million up to 1977.

On Aaro’s election in September 1969 as an alumni member to the Senate of the University of British Columbia, he immediately set out to improve the quality of instruction in geology at that institution. He identified a critical problem in the inadequate facilities then occupied by the geology department and moved quickly and forcefully to obtain new quarters. Invited by the university president to head a fund-raising committee for a new geology building, he and his associates raised $1.97 million in donations and pledges from industry, alumni, and friends. With an additional sum from the University Capital Funds, a building costing $3.3 million was opened for use in 1972.

In 1972 Aaro again felt the call of the wild and set off with a fellow prospector, Ted Skonseng, to re-examine the site of a geochemical anomaly noted three years before in a remote area some 100 miles east of Keno Hill. In this search the two of them located first an area of high-grade silver-bearing float and then the lode, the Plata deposit, under geologic circumstances resembling those of the Keno Hill camp. The Plata remains as a potential but undeveloped deposit.

Then, in 1973 and 1974, Aaro re-examined an old prospect twelve miles southeast of the Anvil mine and located a large, though deeply buried, lead-zinc deposit, the Grum. This too awaits exploitation.

Aaro’s explorations were concentrated in Yukon Territory, but he and his associates also paid attention to Chilean copper, where he made a significant discovery within the Sierra Gorda area, southwest of Chuquicamata, and operated another deposit, the Mina Quetena, for a short period. At the time of his death, he was head of a syndicate exploring south of Chuquicamata.

His success as a mine finder and as a fund raiser can be attributed to his tenacity, his ability to assemble and lead an effective team, and his ability to collect and absorb a vast array of detail whether this be of geophysical and geochemical anomalies or of sources of finance. He embodied the prospector’s yearning for adventure and discovery. He was forever promoting still another project with his traditional phrase, “a bold new venture.” His very life was bold and adventuresome in both concept and action. That he was lucky cannot be questioned, but Lady Luck rarely smiles on someone who is neither prepared nor perseverant.

Aaro was a Fellow of the Geological Society of America and of the Geological Association of Canada. He was a member of the Association of Professional Engineers of British Columbia and of the Yukon, of the British Columbia and Yukon Chamber of Mines, and the Prospector’s and Developer’s Association.

He is survived by his wife Silvia and by two children, Mark and Hillary, from a previous marriage. As memorials to his efforts, there are the Anvil Mine, the Geologi-
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cal Sciences Building at the University of British Columbia, and the undeveloped but potential mineral deposits in Yukon Territory and Chile. He leaves, too, a permanent inspiration to future prospectors and geologists.

His friends and colleagues, wishing to acknowledge Aaro's accomplishments, have established the Dr. Aaro E. Aho Foundation to support research and provide scholarships and other assistance to worthy and deserving students in geological sciences.

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