

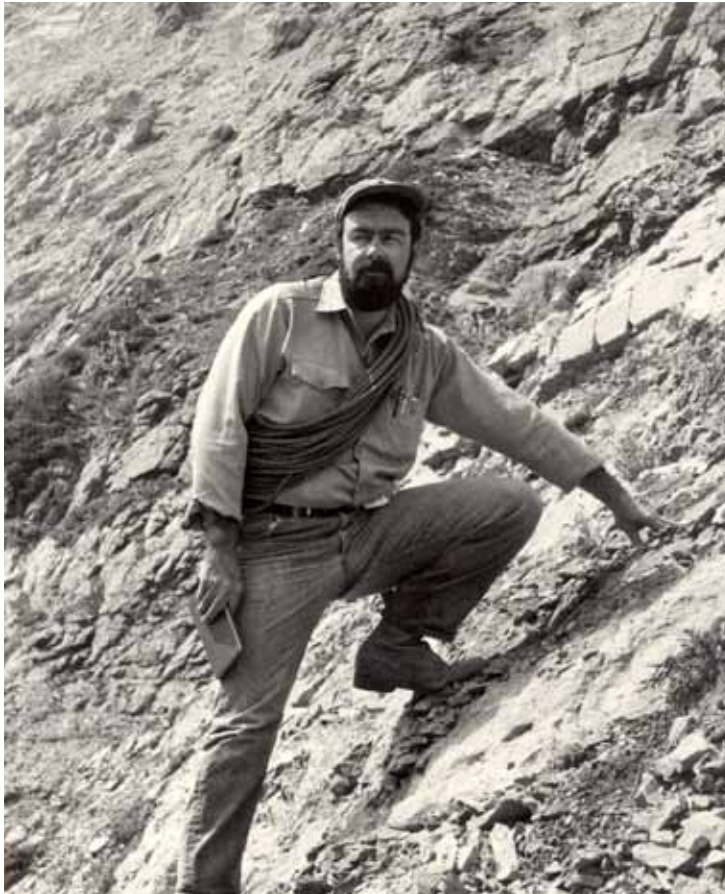
Doug MacFarlane - A Geologist AWA Loved

- By Vivian Pharis and Norma Ruecker

In the 1960s McIntyre Porcupine Mines Ltd. had coal leases in the vicinity of Grande Cache and had made it clear to the provincial government that it wanted to develop the area's bounty of metallurgical coal. The company's CEO, while on an Australian business trip in 1975, drew a bath so hot he scalded both feet. They became gangrenous and he died. His tragic death may be one reason why the superb goat and caribou habitat on Caw Ridge was not destroyed thirty-five years ago. As readers of Wild Lands Advocate appreciate Caw Ridge is an area AWA has fought to protect since the 1970s and Alberta's formulation then of *A Coal Development Policy for Alberta*.

The intrigue of personalities playing against each other over the fate of Caw (Copton) Ridge is only one of the fascinating stories in the lore told by Doug MacFarlane, one of AWA's favourite geologists. He recently reminisced with us through an entertaining evening, regaling us with stories of close encounters and extraordinary feats from his life as a geologist who, literally, did his work "on the edge." He is proud to have never carried a weapon or felt unsafe during his adventures in Alberta's shrinking wilderness. Many would consider Doug retired; Doug is not among them. Geology does not change and, as an expert in coal deposits in Alberta, his expertise is still sought for one reason or another.

Doug was born into the rocks, mines, and mountains of the Crowsnest Pass but his life took many twists and turns before



Geologist Doug MacFarlane in the North Kootenay Pass, 1970.

he realized his destiny lay in his origins, in geology. Best described as a maverick his geology career was carried out with the tenacity of a bull rider. He stayed with every job until it bucked him off or he rode it out. And, he had a lot of mean jobs.

Doug departed school early and joined the navy. He loved the travel but not the authority so after three years he found himself back in "The Pass" looking for work. He applied to one of the local mines and a few hours later he was hired and sent 2.5 miles underground. There he stayed until the mine closed five years later.

Again without work Doug used union benefits to take a Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) course that got him a government job as a radio operator. Doug, back to dealing with

orders and bureaucracy, soon decided more education might be the ticket to gaining more independence. At twenty-six he finished high school by correspondence and followed a counselor's advice to become a pharmacist. Doug knew this was a bad career choice in the first ten minutes of his first class but he persevered to earn his degree; he returned to rock tunnels soon after graduation.

These tunnels were through the Bennett Dam on the Peace River where Doug supervised a band of independent spirits from all over the world – part of the 6,000 man work force employed to build that massive structure. The dam was completed in 1967 and Doug again looked to education for advancement; this time he followed the lure of rocks to the University of Alberta's Geology department.

Two years later, degree in hand, Doug embarked on a whirlwind of jobs that took him to the farthest oil and gas drilling outposts in the high Arctic, Yukon's Mackenzie Mountains, northern B. C., the southeast corner of B. C., Montana, many parts of Alberta and to uranium prospecting sites on the Saskatchewan-Northwest Territories border. During this whirlwind he was part of a team that mapped all of the Paleozoic rocks in the huge Fernie Basin – a dream job for Doug in a dreamland. Another dream job found his team surveying foothills lands between the U. S. border and Grande Prairie and mapping Upper Cretaceous coals. It was a time to see great wildlife and wander through great country not to mention the great beer, burgers and hospitality small town Alberta served Doug.

But Doug decided, after years of

working as a geologist in extreme places under extreme weather conditions and enduring extreme travel (via float planes and helicopters), that this was a too treacherous path – he needed a quieter life not to mention more time at home with his wife Irene.

Seeing a one-line advertisement in the Calgary Herald that was looking for a coal geologist Doug showed up for the interview at a Calgary hotel. He liked his two interviewers on sight: one wore a three-piece suit while the other wore suspenders over undershirt, big boots and a bowler hat. These two were from Indianapolis, representatives of Meadowlark Farms, a respected coal operator. The company had just purchased exploration leases in various parts of Alberta's Front Range. They needed a local geologist to handle their drill testing programs. Doug signed on.

Doug's first job was in the Panther River area in 1972. Little did Doug know that, at that time, Meadowlark Farms was already in AWA's sights. AWA was in the midst of writing its presentation to the all-important 1973 Eastern Slopes hearings where it argued that nine areas along those Slopes merited full protection from development. The areas included the Panther Corners and the Ram-Whiterabbit Creeks. AWA also was incensed that lands had recently been withdrawn from Willmore Wilderness Park in the vicinity of Grande Cache and had begun the fight to restore protection for Caw Ridge. All of these areas were open to coal leasing and were acquired by Meadowlark Farms.

Ironically, Doug belonged to a sister conservation group to AWA also opposed to industrial development of the Eastern Slopes. But, what could Doug do? The Alberta government had issued the leases and he wanted to practise good geology. But the beauty and elevation of Jap Mountain in Panther Corners where the drilling was to occur made Doug realize this was "the totally wrong spot" to ever mine. But roads and drill pads soon gouged and disfigured the face of the mountain. Tests showed the coal lay in deep seams that would require expensive underground mining. Also, it was thermal coal not the more coveted metallurgical coal. The Panther Corners project was uneconomic to develop. With an observation that might lead us now to ask questions and think critically about

reclamation requirements Doug recalled that the reclamation bond required of Meadowlark "was a mere \$5,000 – hardly enough to sow a mile of track." Fortunately for the landscape there, Heritage Trust Fund money was available for Eastern Slopes reclamation work in the early 1970s; the area was reclaimed at taxpayer expense.

Doug's next project was in the area delimited by the South Ram and Whiterabbit Creeks. Doug showed us photos of one drill site in a "totally unmineable" area on the top of an 8,000 foot precipitous ridge in the headwaters of Whiterabbit Creek. But testing decisions were made in Indianapolis, far from the reality of the landscape. On a more positive note, this South Ram job was carried out using complete helicopter support; there was no ground-work or disturbance whatsoever. Not an inch of road or trail was constructed. It could have been used as an example of an innovative alternative to intrusive exploration but, unfortunately, it was prohibitively expensive (for companies, not the landscape). Drilling was conducted in late fall and winter due to the need to avoid migrating elk. This drilling took place in almost impossible weather conditions. One drill shack was blown off the ridge face, forcing the crew to spend a night sheltered in a snow cornice. No mineable coal was found here either.

Doug's third project was on Caw Ridge near Grande Cache. This assignment was through a joint venture with the leaseholder, McIntyre Porcupine Mines. This was the coal company that preceded Smoky River Coal Ltd.; Smoky River preceded Grande Cache Coal, the present leaseholder.

Meadowlark was to conduct a systematic drilling program to test for coal seams across the brow of Caw Ridge (or, Copton Ridge, as it was called then). This project was not a winter program by choice. It was initiated in July 1974. All open holes were to be logged by the fall and core drilling was to commence the following spring. Doug told us that McIntyre found a loophole in the joint venture agreement that forced Meadowlark to carry on through the winter or forfeit the agreement. Temperatures dipped at times below -50 degrees Fahrenheit and the winds

were fierce. But, to invoke the words of Churchill, Doug's team carried on in a winter remembered with anguish. Seven rigs drilled 150 test holes in a grid that showed enough surface mineable coal to last 20 years. A rail line was envisioned up the Sheep River to a townsite and new cleaning plant on Beaverdam Creek below Caw Ridge.

Doug suggested that Meadowlark Farms had a good environmental track record in the U.S. and undertook an extensive set of environmental studies on Caw Ridge. The Alberta Coal Policy was now in place and companies were nervous that all alpine areas would be put off limits. McIntyre Porcupine and Meadowlark Farms secured hasty meetings with local MLA Bob Dowling and Environment Minister David Russell to lobby for Caw's exemption from the protective Category 1 of the policy. Caw, sadly, ended up as a Category 4 area – open to mining.

All was not lost, however, as feuding between Meadowlark and McIntyre officials took place and they sued each other for large sums. The suits dragged on for several years; Doug never knew the outcome. The CEO of McIntyre Porcupine met his fate in Australia and took a major player out of contention. Today Grande Cache Coal claims Caw's riches but, to date, there is still no mine on the ridge. It is though, through exploration programs, getting dangerously close.

After Caw, Doug continued checking prospects for Meadowlark Farms in B. C. and Alaska, always upholding his record of "never making a mine." In fact, he is quite proud that he very often, as a consultant, recommended that marginal mines be closed and old mines not be re-opened. He may hold no record for proven discoveries, but, as he explains, he just "cannot stand to see bad geology." With this view Doug is an activist in his own right and continues to petition against destroying natural land for unprofitable ventures.

For all of that AWA members should be very pleased Doug MacFarlane was the geologist on so many Eastern Slopes coal projects. 🍷