

# Pyroclasts: Some Fond Memories of the GSC: It's Not What It Used To Be

Ward Neale

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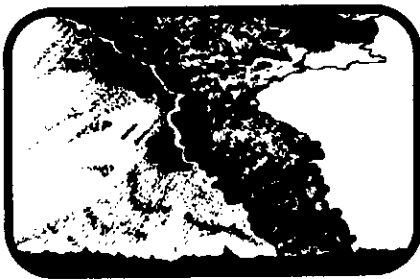
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# FEATURE



## PYROCLASTS

### Some Fond Memories of the GSC: It's Not What It Used To Be

Ward Neale  
5108 Carney Road NW  
Calgary, Alberta T2L 1G2

My late friend John Parker, a judge in Yellowknife and later Whitehorse in the 1950s and 1960s, was not very sympathetic to most elements of the Federal Civil Service that he encountered in the North. He maintained that "the RCMP and the GSC are the only Feds up here who give the taxpayers their money's worth." I am not very familiar with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's record but I fully endorse his assessment of the work of the Geological Survey of Canada, not only in the North but from sea to sea to sea.

Now I can be accused of courting my benefactors because I've had a "courtesy desk" in the GSC Calgary building ever since retiring from Memorial University 11 years ago. As my wife points out, this is twice as long as I've remained in any one place throughout my working career. In addition, my "grace and favor" status has improved dramatically in stages over time. I started with a desk and rusty filing cabi-

net in the first aid room. Now I have an elegant work space in a large divided room inhabited by distinguished "emeritus" scientists completing major projects during their "retirement." I'd like to think the improvement is wholly due to the Survey's high regard for my volunteer efforts in public awareness of science, but availability of space must be a factor. When I retired to Calgary in 1987 there were 164 full-time scientists and support staff in this beehive of activity; now 85 somewhat disillusioned people form the complement. And that, partly, is what this is about.

#### WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

Although the Calgary division has suffered more than some others, drastic cuts have occurred from coast to coast. The Survey consisted of more than 1000 people when I retired in 1987, and will have about 650 when you read this. In both large and small ways, this has been devastating to the fabric of Canadian geoscience.

Paleontology has been cut back drastically; in fact, macro-paleo has been virtually eliminated, which eventually will have a profound impact on applied geoscientists who ultimately rely on something they might remember as the "geological column." The Polar Continental Shelf Project has been whittled down from \$8 million to \$1 million per annum. Wasn't this once considered essential to our sovereignty over the polar regions, or has Free Trade taken care of this? Marine geoscience has been incredibly downsized, but if we eventually sign on with the United Nation's Convention on "Law of the Sea" we'll require millions to make up our deficit on investigation of distal shelves and continental slopes. Canada's only sophisticated inorganic geochemistry laboratory specializing in sedimentary rocks is a thing of the past. GSC's organic lab, which provides services and enters into joint projects with small and medium-sized hydrocarbon corporations, has been cut in

half. Incidentally, much of its recent, very successful work has been in East Africa, sponsored by CIDA through a Canadian private company while at home, we can't afford to carry on essential work on the reservoirs and source rocks of our own northwest. I could go on and on but you have heard it all before.

The sad truth is that the Geological Survey of Canada, which has had minor ups and downs as most of us recall, is now in the most deplorable state that it has endured since the "Dirty Thirties." Then, as now, as described by Morris Zaslow in his award-winning *Reading the Rocks*, its name and status were diminished in the government hierarchy, senior managers without geoscience experience were appointed, administration and public relations flourished at the expense of research, and many essential programs were eliminated without reason. There was a difference in the 1930s, however. Industry continually pressured the Federal Government to stop the bleeding and to restore the Survey to its legitimate, much-needed role. The Feds eventually complied, foolishly at first with their ridiculous, ill-conceived "million dollar years," which planted hundreds of inexperienced people on dozens of field parties. But things were finally righted. Not so this time; there are no authoritative voices screaming to save the GSC. I wonder why. Is it doomed? I hope not.

#### OUR STAKE IN THE SURVEY

I've thought about this since I heard an entertaining talk in February by Peter Errmann, GSC Calgary building manager. Peter, a venturesome outdoorsman, tried a solo canoe trip last summer north of Yellowknife into the barrens, tracing one of Sir John Franklin's routes. He ran into trouble and it seemed as if he was going to risk the expense of a search and rescue operation when he encountered a party of gold prospectors. They were kind to him

and eventually flew him out on their weekly service charter. He offered to pay his share but the camp manager said, "No way; you're an employee of the GSC and we owe it so much it's a pleasure to pay back a little." It made me think about how much so many of us owe to the Survey.

Sharing my new work space periodically is Laing Ferguson, on sabbatical from Mount Allison University, working on a fossil collection from the Arctic that he made 36 years ago, most of which has been stored here. Who else would give him the space, facilities and peer support necessary for this work? Before him, P.J. Lee from the University of Taiwan occupied his desk, completing a geomathematical treatise. And last year, much to my surprise, a Memorial student from long ago, In Seok Koh, turned up with several of his Korean students' theses and hoards of samples to learn the fundamentals of sedimentary geochemistry. There was nothing in it for the Survey or its scientists, who worked in the evenings to help him, but he was treated with kindness and courtesy and he went home satisfied and undoubtedly knowing more than when he arrived.

One of the several times that I departed the Survey to escape Civil Service rules and regulations, I left command of the largest section (Precambrian Shield) to join a very small, new, unknown geology department at Memorial University. Jim Harrison, senior ADM, and Yves Fortier, Director, were not pleased. Yet Jim remained a lifetime friend and supporter and, within the year, Yves had volunteered to act on the visiting committee to this department. He liked what we were doing and he and the Survey supported us for several years before NRC (later NSERC) finally realized we were on the right track. The world of Canadian geoscience is filled with people like me who have gained experience, a work ethic and friends while working for the Survey. Many are now consultants or scientists with small companies and they are sometimes found in the Survey's lunch rooms from Sidney, BC to Dartmouth, NS. One of them, Graham Davies, told me the other day that the Survey library service in Calgary is the lifeblood of his business and noon hour chats with Survey scientists often set him off in new directions.

Another ex-Survey geologist, Stu Blusson shared the H.H. "Spud" Heustis Medal of the British Columbia and Yukon Chamber of Mines with his colleague Chuck Fipke a few days before I wrote this. Both are credited with exploring, discovering

and now exploiting the diamonds of Canada's northwest. How did it happen? Both encountered GSC Calgary paleontologist (then Director) Walter Nassichuk on Ellesmere Island in 1981. Fipke invited Walter to give a few lectures to his Kelowna Prospector's Club. He told Walter of his dream of examining and compiling data on kimberlites in western Canada to determine which might have economic potential. Walter put him in touch with the Department of Supply and Services program to assist private sector scientists with bold new ideas. Chuck Fipke worked with renowned kimberlite specialists for five years before producing a 1200-page GSC open file report in 1990, followed by a more condensed Bulletin. In 1991, a decade of exploration by Chuck and Stu Blusson paid off with discovery of Canada's first commercial diamond property near Lac de Gras north of Yellowknife, NWT, expected to be in production in 1998. Both give credit to Walter Nassichuk and the Survey for playing a pivotal role in the discovery of commercial diamonds in Canada.

I mentioned my interest in public awareness of science. During my first few years of retirement, I worked nationally through the Royal Society of Canada in an attempt to involve groups of scientists in this endeavor. By far the most promising groups to spring from this effort centred on GSC Calgary, led by Godfrey Nowlan and Terry Poulton, and on GSC Atlantic, led by the late Mike Keen, Graham Williams and Louisa Horne. Little wonder! The Survey's tradition of public communication dates back to Sir William Logan and continues to the present, if we can judge by the splendid article by John Clague *et al.* in the last issue of this magazine. Until a couple of years ago, the GSC Rock and Mineral sets were fixtures in elementary and junior high schools across the country: incredible that they were one of the fatalities of the budget cuts! I am a member of the Calgary GSC group which is now known as the Calgary Science Network. It has won provincial and national awards and has been imitated successfully in many parts of the country. It is truly multi-disciplinary and for the past four or five years has been led by chemists. But, it still meets regularly in the GSC building. Other sites have been offered but the decision is always to stay with the GSC, "a warm, friendly place with the right traditions!"

I could go on and on. For example, the Canadian Geoscience Council owed

much of its early success to sympathetic GSC directors such as Digby McLaren, who provided encouragement and finance and opened the Survey up to advice and criticism from the geoscience community. It still relies heavily on Survey support although the financial aspect of this is now declining. The technical programs of societies such as our own GAC and others such as the Canadian Society of Petroleum Geologists always have relied heavily, often very heavily, on input from Survey scientists. I'll save this for another occasion. Meanwhile, if you have some personal stories about the Survey that you'd like to air and share, send them along to me.

#### **FINALLY**

Why is industry not clamoring for a stay of execution of our oldest scientific institution? Could it be that the Survey is not alone in its lack of geoscientists in high places? Over the last decade and more, prominent scientists (*e.g.*, Gerry Henderson, president of Chevron, and Arnie Nielsen, president of Mobil) have disappeared from the corporate executive scene to be replaced by lawyers and accountants. Just a thought!