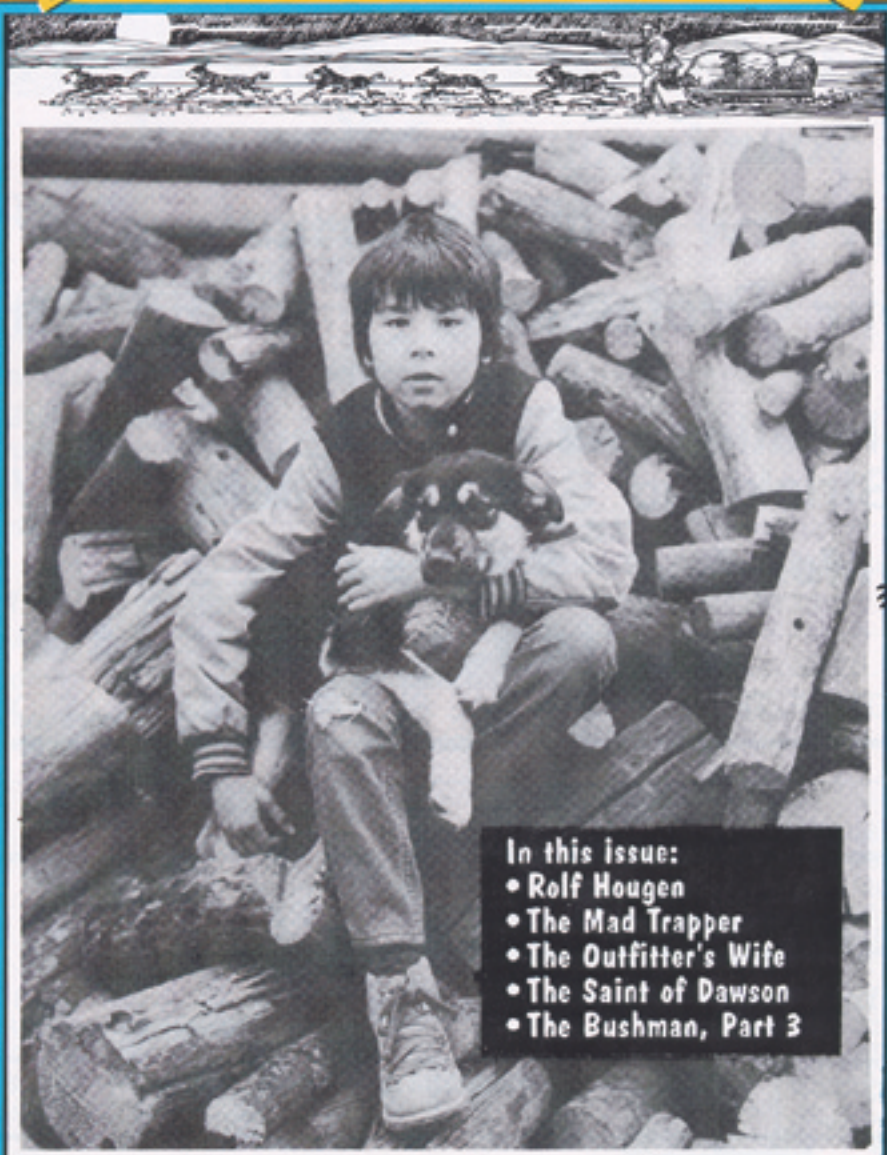


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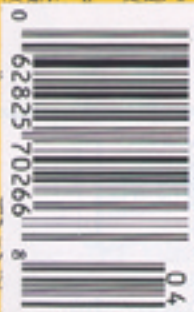
# THE YUKON READER

RECORDING THE SPIRIT AND THE TIMES  
OF THE FAR NORTHWEST



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**Yukoner:****ROLF HOUGEN**

By Sam Holloway

"Every individual... intends his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention... By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectively than when he really intends to promote it. I have never know much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good."

—Adam Smith,  
*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776



Rolf Hougen, September 1991

**T**here's hardly a Yukoner alive over the age of two who hasn't been in The Hougen Centre on Main Street in Whitehorse. Well, what about the man behind it all? A few weeks ago, I went to find out.

If we could know what Rolf Hougen knows about the last half-century of the Yukon's history, we could write a fair-sized book. While some folks were swept along by events, he grabbed history by the reins and made it pay. Not just in dollars, but by playing a big part in everything that's happened over the past 48 years.

Sounds like I'm talking about someone quite ancient. But Rolf is still in his prime and going as strong as ever. He's just finished a term as Chairman of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. If you notice a new postage stamp next year depicting the Alaska Highway 50th anniversary logo, well, Rolf had a lot to do with that too. When the White Pass Railway was about to be sold for pig iron a few years ago, Rolf Hougen said to us all, "It won't happen." And it didn't.

What impresses many Yukoners, besides his going down to Toronto where he "took on the big boys and won," is the fact that he reinvested in the Yukon. Over the years since the Gold Rush of 1898, hundreds of fortunes have left the Yukon, with the owners retiring somewhere on what they took with them. The worst example of that, perhaps, is the Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation. They took millions out of this country and left not so much as an outdoor skating rink for the little folk growing up here.

But the Hougens are still here — Rolf and Margaret, their six grown-up children and nine grandchildren.

Let's go back, to the summer of 1906. A Norwegian sailor is walking into the Yukon. He had been eight years at sea on a square rigger sailing ship that took him twice around the world. There was no Alaska Highway then, only the White Pass rail line that starts at Skagway on the Pacific coast.

Tramp, tramp, tramp. His feet sometimes stumbled on the ties which were too close together for his long legs. He kept his eyes down as he laboured along the railroad tracks. The roadbed led up, up through a great mountain pass. Hour after hour he walked, shifting his pack often to ease the pain of the straps cutting into his shoulders.

On each morning of his hike through the White Pass, a train came up behind Berent Hougen and he quickly stepped aside to let it pass him. In the evening the same train, on its way back to Skagway on the hundred-mile run from Whitehorse, rumbled past him as he slept among the rocks beside the tracks. By the third day the trail levelled out and he walked a little faster. Still the high granite walls towered upward on his left and right. The narrow tracks clung to the mountainside, bridging great chasms that took his breath away if he looked down as he crossed the narrow wooden trestles. One more day's walk and he started to go down. It was then he glimpsed the first sight of his



businesses and their line of merchandise grew more varied each year. In 1952, a fire gutted the inside and in a few hours took away everything they had built up over the past eight years. Undaunted, they used the insurance money to buy the bowling alley next door and to build bigger quarters than they had before.

In the meantime, starting in 1948, Rolf made trips to the East to buy products for the store. In those days it took four days to reach Vancouver--first the train from Whitehorse to Skagway, then the ferry down the coast, and finally he boarded a plane to take him across the continent. At the age of 19, he sometimes had a hard time being taken seriously by the wholesalers he met there. On those many continental trips over the years, he took part in aviation history. First he rode the DC-3's, then DC-4's, turboprop Electra's, and finally was able to board the first jetliners. By this time he could fly from Whitehorse to the south and save the four-day coast trip.

History moved along with Rolf Hougen and company—or perhaps they planned it that way. The capital of the Yukon was moved from Dawson City to Whitehorse. Buildings went up to house government clerks and appointees—more customers, steady ones too, for the department store.

As the Yukon grew in population and amenities, so did the opportunities. In 1958, Rolf was part of the founding of the WHTV television station in Whitehorse. It broadcast one black and white channel for four hours a day; the programs were pre-recorded and six months old. By 1965, the programs could be trucked in and were only a week old. The station later expanded into a complete cablevision network with 28 channels. Over the next



1945: Rolf Hougen outside the 2nd & Wood location. The '98 Hotel site is in the background.



1949: The Main Street Store, bowling alley on its right. This photo was taken from the ball park across the street, now the site of the Federal Building.



1952: Hougen's acquired the bowling alley & Meikle's Radio-Electric Shop.



1944: Hougens' Store at 2nd & Wood Streets, where the Justice Building is now.



1946: A new location in the old White Pass Hotel. Rolf's brother, Odin, in the doorway.

dream—his goal since leaving Vancouver on a ship to Skagway, his goal since leaving his native Norway. He was looking down into the Land of Gold—the Yukon Territory.

It was still fifty-some miles to Whitehorse and the train would have stopped for him if he flagged it down. But he couldn't ride. Not if he wanted to save any money for food. So he walked the remaining miles to Whitehorse. There he stopped just long enough to build himself a raft, then on he went, alone, down the Yukon River to Dawson City.

The year 1906 was a bad time to arrive in the Klondike. The Gold Rush had been over for seven years and the days of easy money and rich gold claims were past. Dawson was full of abandoned buildings and more folks left on every riverboat. Hougén worked for different mining companies for six years, finally moving on to Cripple Creek, Alaska where he and a partner operated a hotel for several years. That country too was falling so he sold out and left for Norway. There he met and married his wife Margrethe and they emigrated to Canada.

But the dream of the Yukon stayed with him. In 1944, he returned, bringing Margrethe and the youngest of his seven children, a fourteen-year-old boy named Rolf.

The Yukon was booming once more. A brand new road connecting to the south had just been built. Thousands of American soldiers lived in big camps along this highway as they called it (actually just a trail through the wilderness; the Canadian government is still working on making it into a real highway) but the biggest camps were at Whitehorse. Berent Hougén had a good job with the Highways department. He had no intention of leaving again. He and his wife and son opened a small store which sold Rawleighs products and photography supplies to the soldiers. While Berent worked on the highway, his wife and son ran the store, with Rolf working after school and on weekends. Some money came in from the sale of Berent's property in Prince Rupert and that went into the new business. They moved to larger quarters on Main Street. By now the Americans had left, precipitating one of the Yukon's periodic busts. The population of Whitehorse suddenly dropped from 30,000 to somewhere around 6000. However, the coming of the Alaska Highway had put new life into the town and it was growing steadily.

Hougén's dream of a life in the Yukon was now a firm reality. But he had a clincher on it. He had a son who would work hard and pour his heart and soul into the business. In 1947, after completing school, Rolf Hougén took over the full-time management of the company.

In 1949, the Hougén business moved to its present location. By now they had bought out a few other



The sidewalk in front of Hougén's on Main Street, Whitehorse.

twenty years the Klondike Broadcasting Company (CKRW), the local Ford dealership, a Honda dealership, Hertz Rent-A-Car, the Arctic Investment Corporation — all these were either founded by Rolf or came under his guiding hand. He has employed hundreds of Yukoners. It is interesting to note that during this same period his most serious competitor, the Seattle-based Northern Commercial Company, shut down their various businesses and left the Yukon for good.

Perhaps his most difficult project but one that's given him much satisfaction, was his forming in 1978 of Cancom — Canadian Satellite Communications Ltd. Through this company, some 2200 remote communities in Canada now receive multi-channel radio and television services. But that didn't happen overnight. He had to convince skeptical investors and regulators that it would work, then convince the CRTC that his company could do the job better than three other national companies. His proposal to the regulators stated that his company would spend \$21.8 million dollars to set up and operate the system — and that it would not make a profit for the first four years.

No Yukoner that I know of has taken that kind of gamble. No wonder the locals look so proud when they say about Rolf Hougen: "He took on the big boys in the East — and won."

In 1990, Rolf's son Craig opened Hougens' first retail expansion beyond the Yukon border — COAST MOUNTAIN SPORTS in Vancouver. In the Hougen Centre, Karen Hougen started ERIK'S VIDEO; Craig and Kelly Hougen operate THE SPORTS LODGE; Brent Hougen the PHOTO CENTRE, and Greta and Maureen Hougen run SEASONS FASHIONS. The Yukon has been good to Rolf Hougen and his family. The reverse side is that no one has done more for the Yukon in return — neither politician nor government appointee nor mining magnate — all of whom have come and gone while Rolf hasn't stopped.

He was president and founder of the Young People's Association; president and founding member of the Whitehorse Board of Trade; founder and chairman of the Yukon Research and Development Institute; chairman and founding member of the Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous; founder and chairman of the Yukon Foundation; a member of the Yukon Order of Pioneers; of the Yukon Historical & Museum Society; of the Yukon Parents for French; of the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce; he was chosen Yukon Businessman of the Year in 1986; and was awarded Tourism's "Yukoner" in 1987. Nationally, he has been appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada; is the Honorary Consul for France; is a member of the Vancouver Consular Corps; a member of the National Council for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award in Canada; member of the Canadian Cable Television Pioneers Club; was vice president of the Conservative Party of Canada; is a company director of Finning Ltd., Vancouver; of Alberta Power; of Northwestel; of Cominco Limited; and until very recently was the Chairman of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. He has travelled to Thailand, China, Japan, Hong Kong, India, Russia, almost every country in Europe, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, Australia and New Guinea, and is probably the most travelled person in the country. He took his family to Grenoble, France for a year so they could learn French.

A remarkable career, a remarkable man. The Yukon's Rolf Hougen has done it all, and he did it in what the rest of the country thinks of as the last frontier, the frozen north, the land of the moose and the wolf — the Yukon.



Hougen's on Main Street, Whitehorse, 1991