

Matti Hakala

- Matti Hakala was born on December 20th, 1903 (five days before Christmas and a few days after the Wright brothers' first flight) on his parents' small farm in the parish of Ylistaro, in the Southern Ostrobothnia region of Western Finland (which merged with the city of Seinäjoki in 2009).
- His parents were Hermanin and Wilhemina.
- He was the youngest of six sons and four daughters. To his heartbreak, he outlived all of his siblings.
- Matti's early life was guided by a yearning for adventure. His parents' farm was unsuccessful, so in his early 20s he joined the First Field Artillery Regiment Finnish reserve army in Helsinki from 1924-1925 as a corporal cook. This was followed by four years spent working in Helsinki.
- By 1929 Matti paid \$1.50 for a passport and sailed for Canada. He arrived in Canada on May 25th.
- He soon found work in Sudbury at the International Nickel's Froid shaft (then the world's largest mine shaft) for five years.
- He learned English at Sudbury Technical School in 1930-1931 and had a perfect attendance record. Report cards attested to his dedication to conquer the language barrier. A report by the school's principal certified that Matti had attended 90 hours out of a possible 90. "An excellent record. This student is making a very faithful attempt to learn English," he noted.
- Subsequently, Matti prospected in Val-d'Or, Quebec.
- With another gold boom brewing in Red Lake, Matti decided it was the place to go.
- The trip from Swastika, Ontario to Sioux Lookout, he remembered, only cost five dollars.
- In early 1934 he travelled from Hudson to Red Lake on a scow with Wilfred W. Wright, Sr. – the trip took three days.
- Two days later, he found a job as a prospector for Colin Archibald Campbell mining interests in Martin Bay (Campbell was one of the founders of Campbell Red Lake Mines).
- Matti recalled that his pay was \$2.50 per day, money he was happy to earn during those depression years when most places "outside" were ravaged by unemployment and all that entails.
- Matti's greatest friend in Red Lake was Juho (John) Humlin with whom he had been neighbours in Finland. Together they prospected the North Paulore claims for Colin Campbell.
- Only one month after Matti's arrival in Red Lake, they came upon a shallow but promising vein which contained small gold nuggets. Paulore Gold Mines was formed and Matti did much work in both the North and South Paulore properties, especially in the sinking of the shaft to 250 feet and drifting of tunnels on three levels.
- When the Second World War was declared in September 1939, Paulore closed and Matti took over operation of Mikolas (Mike) Billy's "Zenith Cafe" in Red Lake for a year. Billy had come to Canada from Czechoslovakia three years before Matti. Ultimately, the friendly but non-bill paying customers and some untrustworthy employees forced Matti to give up the venture after a year.
- Matti returned to mine shaft sinking work from 1940 to 1941 at Madsen Red Lake Gold Mines, Limited, for eight dollars per day. He carried on the same type of employment at Cochenour-Willans, Hasaga and McMarmac Gold Mines.
- Matti also moonlighted as watchman/janitor for Crawley & McCracken at Bruce Lake.
- During this period of mostly lumber and mine work, Matti was also famous for operating a water taxi in the district with his inboard motor boat.
- By the mid-1940s he quit mining and began working in the lumber industry, supplying and hauling logs with his boat to Kenneth McDougall's sawmill, John Gustafson's Red Lake Lumber Company, and supplying mine timber to the McKenzie-Red Lake and Madsen Red Lake Gold Mines.
- Matti briefly returned to mining in 1952 when he sank the 85 foot high shaft for McFinley Red Lake Mine and, with his boat, hauled timber seven miles from McKenzie Island to the mine site in East Bay.
- He then cut mine timber for Cochenour-Willans Gold Mine to be used in the shafts at the Ancco and Wilmar gold properties.
- In 1963 he retired from bush work but readily came out of retirement a few times. In 1968-1969 he worked for Griffith Iron Ore Mine, from 1971-72 he was a watchman at Madsen Red Lake Gold Mines, and from about the late 1970s and very early 1980s Matti was a guard at the Red Lake Ontario Provincial Police detachment jail.

- For many years, Hakala owned several of Red Lake's original homes on the hill across Howey Street from where Green Airways is today. At one time he lived in the original log cabin which later became the residence of Winnifred and Gordon Shearn, natives of England, and one built by Johan (Joe) Granstrom and several other Norwegians.
- After final retirement, Matti was one of the original tenants of the Follansbee Apartments on Gold Shore Road.
- At almost 81, he moved to Thunder Bay, Ontario to live amongst its large, thriving Finnish community. He left Red Lake in October 1984 exactly 50 years to the day of his arrival!
- He greatly enjoyed a return visit in 1988.
- In Thunder Bay, Matti socialized in Finnish clubs and cafes in the heart of their community of 20,000 Finnish people.
- His final days were marred by low vision and limited mobility, but Matti was fiercely proud of his sharp mind – and his memories of Red Lake.
- Matti's strength and perseverance, along with his friendly, personable nature, made him many friends over the years.
- An imposing figure, Matti was the quintessential "gentle giant". His huge hands bore witness to the hard work they had seen and the fact that he could tear a stack of telephone books in half.
- However, he was also the first one to sob openly, unabashedly, at the funeral of a friend. One such time was the 1981 funeral of fellow prospector Johann (Hans) Pokolm. During the service, loud weeping was heard coming from the back of the old St. John's Roman Catholic Church. Mourners looked back to the source of the sounds. Those who did not know the tender side of Matti learned something that day.
- He never lost his dense staccato Finnish accent and was known for his remarkable recall. He could remember dates of events such as the spring ice break-up in Howey Bay on May 5th, 1946, the day he had returned from a trip to Niagara Falls. Previous to that he had never missed a freeze-up or break-up.
- Matti was content with his mining career and told friends that he was driven only by adventure and not by monetary gain.
- While some prospectors and miners of his vintage became alcoholics and led troubled lives, Matti lived a sober and respectable existence. "If I had made big money like the Campbells, I would likely be dead like they are, but I'm still alive and well and have no regrets. My pension is adequate and I am enjoying life very much. They have gone to their reward long ago and I'm still going," Matti recalled in 1990.
- He made many trips back to Finland to visit his old home and kin. Matti's 1990 visit to Finland was a highlight. He and a nephew drove to Finnish Lapland, where they rented a cabin for one week and watched the midnight sun and salmon runs. He returned to Finland for one last visit in August 1994 at nearly 91.
- Matti, who never married or had children, treasured his nephews and nieces and was the quintessential doting uncle.
- His very being epitomized the strength and universal pioneering spirit of prospectors, miners and lumbermen of the Red Lake area's history.
- He died at age 92 at Dawson Court nursing home in Thunder Bay, Ontario, on March 14th, 1996.
- Matti was the second last of Red Lake's Finnish pioneers. Tyne Mele, who died in 2002, was the last.
- Under the watchful eye of his favourite nephew and other family, Matti's ashes were interred in the soil of his birthplace in Finland.