

# No Question About It

## John Hart is a (Coal) Family Man

By Kate Tanquary

**T**he best life stories are never about only one person. They are stories about meetings and about the building of relationships.

The industry has seen areas of remarkable growth, from coal becoming a backbone of energy independence to the discovery and optimization of deposits in the Powder River Basin. But none of this growth is quite as remarkable as the people that fostered it. This is the story of one of those individuals, but like all the best stories, it goes far beyond just that.

John Hart grew up in the Denver area with his two older sisters. He was awarded a football scholarship to attend the Colorado School of Mines (Go Orediggers!), where he graduated with a B.S. in Engineering in 1974.

Six months before graduation, an OPEC oil embargo had prompted the United States to realize how fragile its energy supply was, and the subsequent move to cultivate more U.S. resources created a highly favorable job climate for new graduates like John. "That created the U.S.'s initial emphasis on how vital it was to develop domestic energy production and move toward energy independence," he remembers. "After receiving my engineering degree on a Saturday morning in May, I began work the following Monday for Consolidation Coal Company."

Although prices of oil more than doubled and people waited hours in lines to fill up their cars, the embargo also succeeded in spurring a large-scale creation of new jobs. Businesses made huge efforts to develop methods of low cost domestic energy production and, as John recalls, "electric utilities were scrambling

to tie up long term fuel contracts to match the operating lives of their newly planned electric generating plants."

### A Northern Expedition

John's new employer, Consolidation Coal Company was, at that time, owned by Conoco, and like many of the major oil companies of the day it held large coal reserves in the previously untapped Powder River Basin. However, John's career was destined to take off someplace much farther north, where he would get his first taste of operations experience.

"Consol's policy for new engineers was to get them into operations as soon as possible before working as a staff engineer in the office. That summer, I moved from Consol's Denver office to Hinton, Alberta and my operations experience began at the Cardinal River Mine."

John worked for four years as a pit foreman, the manager of several construction projects, and as the Mine Planning Engineer in an area just 15 miles from Canada's Jasper National Park. The lush scenery and abundant nature of the northern Canadian Rockies set the scene for what John describes as "some of the most memorable years of my career." When he wasn't on the job, John took full advantage of his surroundings; he enjoyed skiing, rock climbing and cycling along the Columbia Ice Fields Highway.

Except for the frigid winter cold, Alberta reminded John of his hometown in Colorado. After using up all of the extensions on his work visa, he was given the choice to either return to the U.S. or become a landed immigrant. He did both. After becoming a landed immigrant, further reflection on Alberta's winter weather which could get to -40°







(in both Celsius and Fahrenheit) was not a point in its favor. “On subsequent business trips to the west coast, I found the milder climate to be very attractive and I was considering a change,” John says.

### “Go West, Young Man”

“In 1978 I moved to Portland Oregon to join CH2M Hill Consulting Engineers.” While with the consulting firm, John worked on mine designs, production optimization studies, and even provided expert testimony on a case in Portland

Power and Light Co, was headquartered in Portland. John seized the opportunity to get back into the coal business and stay in the Pacific Northwest, which he had come to love.

“NERCO had just opened its Spring Creek Mine in Montana at the north end of the PRB and was in stages of planning the Antelope Mine, the southernmost mine in the PRB. After a couple of years at NERCO working in the engineering/development department, I was offered a position in coal sales.” And John was



Left: Winter Park Colorado Ski Resort

Above: Canada’s Columbia Icefields Parkway

district court. The case involved a dispute over silver mining claims in central Washington, and to John it seemed that “it involved the same issues as the Wild West during the late 1800s gold rush days... That was kind of a fun sideline to being a consulting engineer.”

After a few years with CH2M Hill, the company began planning to move its mining group out of Portland. While these plans were being discussed, one of the local clients asked CH2M Hill to do aerial mapping of a new mining venture in Wyoming. This newly formed company, Northern Energy Resources Company (NERCO), a subsidiary of Pacific

in for a completely different experience than what he had seen as an engineer. “That really kind of changed my life,” he says. “I saw a new side to coal mining. One of the first things I did was attend a Western Coal Transportation Association (WCTA) conference.”

### First Meetings

The selling and buying side of the industry was much different than mine production, but John was eager to learn and network with others at the then-WCTA Conferences. “Besides providing a forum for coal producers and users to meet and discuss new business under

“...I found the milder climate to be very attractive and I was considering a change”.



the new private transportation contracts, I remember WCTA being just fun, and an opportunity to meet industry peers and ultimately develop life-long friendships.”

But friendships weren't the only relationships John was beginning to nurture. “Soon after joining the sales group at NERCO, I met my future wife, Cathy. A couple of years later, our daughter was born in Portland and we were hopeful to stay and raise a family in the Pacific Northwest.”

One of John's first sales calls was to the other major electric utility in Oregon, Portland General Electric (PGE). The trip didn't take long, and he even went on foot. “It was an easy walk across the street,” he recalls. “That's where I first met Pat Scherzinger, in PGE's fuel supply group. At that time she was the manager of the fuel supply group, and today is the Director of Communications for the NCTA.” Though they remained friends for nearly 30 years, John doesn't remember that she ever bought any coal from the local mining company across the street. His big break was to come a little later on.



John and Cathy Hart

### Laying the Groundwork

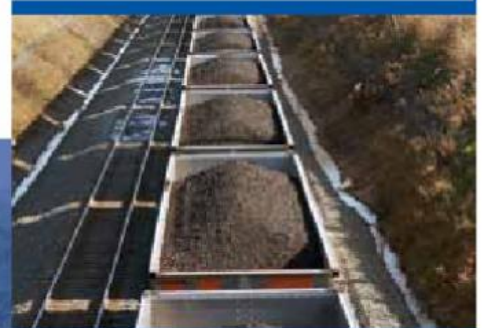
“The first major sales contract I did for NERCO in 1982 is still one of the most memorable because it involved close work and a lot of help from the Burlington Northern Railroad, Helm Financial,

a private rail car leasing company, and about a half dozen sugar producing factories in North Dakota and Minnesota who agreed to buy Spring Creek Coal under a long term contract. I remained friends with some of those involved and through WCTA meetings, Cathy met their spouses and she too remained close and shared many of their family's changes.” Both John and Cathy were grateful for the many meetings that allowed members as well as their spouses to forge these lasting friendships. John's wife, Cathy, recalls fond memories of time spent with Patti Barthlow, the spouse of Norm Barthlow, DTE Energy's Manager of Fuel and one of NERCO's largest customers, at WCTA events in the early '80s. “Patti's subsequent struggle with cancer was, to Cathy, the same as losing a close friend from her earlier life.”

There was another significant deal that John oversaw while at NERCO, and it involved working with several members of NCTA whom he had met previously during its meetings. Detroit Edison Company and its subsidiary, Midwest Energy Resources Company (MERC), were in discussions with the Burlington

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