

## **JOHN PIHLAINEN (1926–1964)**

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It was not possible to be with John Pihlainen without being caught up in his exuberance and enthusiasm. Perhaps it was his Finnish birth that suited him so well for northern engineering.

John's parents brought him to Canada when he was two years old. After graduating from McGill University in 1950, he joined the Division of Building Research of NRC, where he pioneered the Division's investigations of permafrost and associated construction problems. In the summer of 1950, he made a survey of the construction and performance of buildings along the Mackenzie River valley. His enthusiasm and good humour affected all he met and he became affectionately known throughout the North as 'Johnny Permafrost'.

By 1952, he obtained a Masters degree from Purdue University and began to establish the Division's Northern Research Station at Norman Wells. He was an active member of the Aklavik Relocation Survey of 1954, and spent the next few years carrying out comprehensive permafrost engineering studies at the new town-site of Inuvik.

Johnny Pihlainen had a marvellous rapport with the native people of the North. When the DBR Laboratory was established at Norman Wells, Johnny was warned that an Indian squatter and his family, who lived in a shack on the riverbank at the foot of the property should be removed. John didn't take this advice. Instead, he developed the man's friendship and consequently acquired the best year-round protection for the property. When the laboratory was officially opened in 1956 by President Steacie of NRC, it is still recalled by a few old-timers that the refrigerator which was reputed to hold permafrost was found on opening, to be full of home-made beer.

John Pihlainen left the National Research Council in 1960 to establish his own practice as an Arctic Consulting Engineer and was soon much in demand. It was a great shock when this highly respected colleague was felled by a massive heart attack in January 1964 in his 38th year. In the short span of a dozen years, he had laid the groundwork for permafrost research and practice in Canada.