



*S. Kalozeev*

# PLATO MALOZEMOFF

1909–1997

Elected in 1969

*“For application of traditional and new metallurgical techniques in mining.”*

BY ROBERT R. BEEBE

ON FRIDAY, August 8, 1997, the mining industry lost a leader, this academy lost a distinguished member, and engineers lost a respected colleague. Plato Malozemoff’s career in mining spanned more than five decades, but he is best remembered for his time with Newmont Mining Corporation, where he worked from the end of World War II until he retired, as chairman, in 1985. As he built Newmont into a leading mining house with global reach, his name became associated with many of the world’s great mines and companies.

Plato was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on August 28, 1909. At that time, his father, a mining engineer, was a political exile in Siberia, but under the terms of his sentence he was allowed to work, raise a family, and build a rather enviable career with appropriate compensation and savings. Eventually, however, he fell victim to the Russian Revolution, the Civil War, onerous inflation, and financial turmoil, which forced the family to emigrate to the United States in 1920. Plato finished high school in Oakland, California, became a naturalized citizen in 1926, and graduated *magna cum laude* from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1930, with a B.S. in metallurgical engineering. He was then 21 years of age.

Prospects for young engineers in the 1930s were bleak, but Plato decided to enter graduate school at the Montana School

of Mines, attracted by the opportunity to study under Professor Antoine Marc Gaudin, then the leading teacher of mineral beneficiation in the United States, and, years later, a founding member of NAE. Plato received his M.S. in 1932 and was invited to stay on as Gaudin's assistant for an additional year. While in Butte, Plato made a number of close friends, some of whom later played significant roles in his career. In fact, lasting friendships were a salient feature of his personality throughout his life.

Despite his academic background, Plato chose to follow in his father's footsteps and work his way up in the mining industry. After a short stint at the famous Alaska Juneau gold mine, he became a laboratory and field engineer for Pan American Engineering Company, headquartered in the San Francisco Bay area. His salary was only \$120.00 per month, but the experience he gained testing ores from all over the world proved invaluable. He was also a consultant for Pan American customers, which required extensive travel throughout the western United States.

Along the way, Plato was learning, not just about technology, but, more important, about how mining enterprises were financed and managed. For Pan American, he did field work for the Placer Development Company and Phelps Dodge, which was testing the latest equipment for a large copper mine in Arizona (the Morenci project).

By that time, Plato's father, who was established as a mining consultant in New York, encouraged him to get out of what he called "the peddling business" and concentrate on production. Through his father's contacts, Plato went to Argentina to investigate several prospects, one of which was a copper-gold deposit. While his father was arranging financing for the mine, Plato returned to Pan American, where he had been on leave. But when the mine in Argentina encountered difficulties, Plato returned to take over its management. Soon, he and his staff had solved the problems, and the El Oro mine achieved its rated capacity. Even though this was his first managerial post, Plato felt that what he had learned up to that point, based firmly on his own observations, qualified him to organize a mining operation on a sensible, economical basis. He never looked back!

The outbreak of World War II did not immediately put an end to El Oro, but various financial and supply problems forced the Malozemoffs out. In 1942, father and son moved to Costa Rica to investigate a small gold mine owned by United Fruit Company. This would have been an unhappy episode, had it not been that Plato and Alexandra, his wife and lifelong companion, were married in Costa Rica. A year later, Plato was stricken with a very painful benign tumor on his leg that eventually required surgery. Alexandra had already returned to California to await the birth of their first child, and he joined her and underwent medical treatment. By 1944, Plato, still on crutches and almost broke, was working for the Office of Price Administration (OPA). Ironically, during this time he first became known to several Newmont executives. With the end of the war in sight, Plato began to look around for a peacetime job. Philip Kraft, a Newmont vice president whom Plato had met during his stint at OPA, told him Newmont might have a job for him.

When Plato joined Newmont in October 1945, he found a relatively small company headed by Fred Searls, a legendary explorationist. Searls was rather cool to the idea of hiring him, but Plato was determined to have a place in the company's New York headquarters, so much so that he was willing to take a cut in pay to get it. Once hired, Plato was the only staff engineer in a group of men who had been together for more than a decade and had solid reputations in mining. He later described the situation as "all chiefs and one Indian—me." Among his assignments was management of Newmont's stock portfolio, a job the old-timers called, "working the Wall Street stope." The portfolio was worth \$40 million when he took on the job, but eight years later, he had built it up to \$125 million, plus another \$75 million in unquoted assets. Nevertheless, he embarked on a rigorous program of self-study to redress his lack of formal training in finance, law, and corporate management.

The stage was then set for his rapid rise. He was elected a vice president in 1952, became a director of Newmont in 1953, president and CEO in 1954, and chairman and CEO in 1966. Throughout those years, he was already reshaping Newmont,

from an opportunistic company driven by exploration and acquisition to a diversified organization able to recognize new opportunities and emerging technologies. Rather than being diminished, exploration was actually strengthened, and the search for acquisition targets was intensified. From its foundation in gold, copper, and base metals, Newmont diversified its interests to include lithium, ferroalloys, nickel, cobalt, and uranium. Not surprisingly, Newmont soon became known as “Plato’s company.”

And Newmont really was his company! Beyond his titles, and the power they conveyed, Plato was an engineer, an executive, and a financier capable of dreaming great dreams and finding the money to carry them out. Even these skills, however, may have been less important to Newmont’s growth than his personal skills, his amazing ability to find, hire, and motivate the best people in mining. Contrary to a widely held belief that he was a difficult and distant person to work for, Plato was so confident of his own intellectual powers that he could allow his subordinates to argue and disagree, but only directly with him, not with each other. And when his people were right, he generously told them they were right!

It was well known in the mining industry that it was difficult to get a job in Newmont’s headquarters, which was kept deliberately small. It was less well known that it was even more difficult to get fired! Plato was the epitome of forbearance and caring when it came to employees who encountered problems, even in their private lives. As a manager and leader, he believed that a company had obligations to its employees that could not be disposed of easily. In a way, his philosophy foreshadowed the downsizing phenomenon, except that he believed the best way to downsize was to avoid getting too big in the first place!

To appreciate Plato Malozemoff merely as an engineer, an executive, and a builder of mines and companies would be to misunderstand his true character. He was a cultured gentleman, perhaps a Renaissance man in the best sense of the term. Some knew him as a chess master, a highly proficient violinist, and a patron of the arts, ballet, and music. All of these things were true, and they would have been true if he had never seen a mine!

Plato was a philanthropist and an active fundraiser for causes as various as the American Museum of Natural History, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the Tolstoy Foundation. He did these things not because they were expected of someone in his position but because he sincerely believed that all men and women have obligations to themselves and to society that cannot be discharged by mere business success. The most fortunate of the many people he came into contact with during his long and busy career are the ones who came away with a little bit of his philosophy of life.

Plato Malozemoff was a great engineer, a great builder, and a great human being. How fitting that another man of art and intellect, Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps the greatest engineer of all, wrote in his *Notebook* some 500 years ago:

As a well-spent day brings happy sleep, so  
Life well used brings happy death.

Plato Malozemoff is survived by his wife, Alexandra; his son, Dr. Alexis P. Malozemoff; and his daughter, Dr. Irene K. Malozemoff, now Mrs. Lynn B. Weigel.