Al Provost was just a teenager when he first worked on an oil rig. One day -- as he was laboring away on a drill, cold and covered in mud -- he looked up to see a well-groomed man in a nice suit walking through the site. “Who’s that?” he asked a pal. It was the project’s engineer. “Well, that’s the job for me,” he decided.

That decision was just the first step in a half-century journey that included the creation and growth of a successful company -- as well as many significant contributions to the mining and natural resources industries.

In June of 2010, Al fell ill while bear-hunting with his grandson in Canada. An initial diagnosis of dehydration and exhaustion turned out to be an aggressive form of leukemia. He died only two weeks later, on June 20, 2010. He was 74 years of age.

While he was still in the hospital, the head and pelt of a record-setting black bear he’d shot in Canada on a previous trip arrived. “If you meet up with that bear again in heaven,” said son Don Provost at Al’s memorial service, “my money’s still on you, dad.”
Growing up in Canada

Al Provost was born in 1936 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Throughout his life, he remained a Canadian citizen and stayed close to his brother, Murray, and sister, Linda. He returned to Canada often for work, family and outdoor recreation.

When Al was just 13, he got a job delivering telegrams on his bike for the Union Pacific Railroad and Telegraph office, said family friend Dave McDougall. “He earned 25 cents per delivery. In the winter, this was a mighty cold job. On one assignment to a destination eight miles away, Al decided to take a short-cut across the frozen river. He lost his way. He also lost the address. Cold and angry, he returned to the office. ‘If you don’t deliver, you don’t get paid,’ said his boss. Al never forgot that lesson.

“Al was always a tough guy,” said McDougall. “As boy growing up in Canada, he loved to play hockey and liked to think that he was pretty good at it – until he went up against some players who would eventually go professional. This caused him to reassess his personal talent. But no matter how good the opponents, he always held his own.”

Even as a teenager, Al was strong-willed. “He seemed to enjoy challenging his parents and his teachers,” said McDougall. “He learned so quickly that he got bored – and turned to mischief. Thinking that he would do better in an outdoor environment, his parents sent him to work on a cattle ranch and attend high school in a rural environment.

Al remained restless and quit high school to work in the burgeoning Canadian oil fields. At 18, he moved to Sacramento to live with family friends; he attended junior college there and earned his high school diploma. His aptitude in math and science led his advisers to encourage his dream of being a mine engineer.

Colorado School of Mines

To earn his degree in this field, Al Provost attended the Colorado School of Mines in Golden, Colorado. He graduated as an Engineer of Mines in 1962 – wrapping up an intensive program in just three years.

Throughout his life, he credited his success to CSM and maintained extremely close ties to his alma mater.

“Al Provost personified the absolute best of the traditional Colorado School of Mines mining engineer,” said M.W. “Bill” Scoggins, president of CSM. “Our graduates are great engineers – innovative and determined – some might even say bull-headed. We like to say that they have hard heads to match their hard hats.

“Al worked hard, achieved success in his career, and always found time to play hard, too,” said Scoggins.

In 1984, Al was awarded the school’s Distinguished Achievement Medal. He created two scholarships at the school: The Niles E. Grosvenor Scholarship in Underground Mining Engineering, in memory of a favorite professor and mentor; and the Allan G. Provost Endowed Scholarship in Mining Engineering, to provide tuition awards to undergraduate students in mining engineering or extractive metallurgy.

In addition, Harrison Western recently endowed the Harrison Western Professorship in the Department of Metallurgical and Materials Engineering -- as well as several research projects related to the processing of mining waste products.

When it came time to plan for Al’s memorial service, it made sense to hold it on campus. His family asked that, in lieu of flowers, contributions be made to the Colorado School of Mines Foundation. There were 500 people in attendance.

At Al’s Memorial service, Scoggins summarized his remembrances with a stanza from the Colorado School of Mines fight song:

Like every honest fellow,
I take my whiskey clear.
I’m a rambling wreck from Golden Tech,
And a helluva engineer.
The birth of Harrison Western

After graduation, Al Provost went to work as an engineer/estimator for Patrick Harrison Construction in Canada. In 1964, he worked as project manager and chief engineer for BorTunCo Boring and Tunneling Company in Houston, Texas. In 1965, he became vice president and project manager at United Construction, in Detroit.

In 1968, Al was once again recruited by Patrick Harrison Construction to launch an American branch of the company in Denver -- Harrison Western. He became the new company’s vice president and general manager.

“I first met Al Provost when he came to Colorado Capital Bank in 1968 looking for a $1 million line of credit – which was a heck of a lot of money at the time,” said Travis Townsend, currently a director at the bank.

“We were both young guys just starting to build our careers,” said Townsend. “Al appreciated that the bank was taking a risk with him. He never forgot. He remained loyal to our relationship -- and our friendship -- for 42 years. He was one of the few people I ever met that I could trust to do business on handshake basis.”

Al was a shaft-sinking specialist; in its early years, Harrison Western focused on tunneling, shaft-sinking and mine development. He staffed his young company with talented miners recruited from Canada. Over the course of his career, he personally directed the excavation of 21 major shafts, totaling more than 55,000 linear feet, through virtually every type of ground formation.

The AMAX Henderson Mine in Colorado, for example, is the largest primary molybdenum mine in the world. In 1969, Harrison Western started work on Mine Shaft No. 2 at this operation; more than 40 years later, the company continues to provide this customer with underground and surface construction and maintenance services.

Al's innovations at Mine Shaft No. 5 (a combination of equipment modification, work deck design, scheduling and crew selection) were recognized when this project set a world record for 29.84 cubic yards / man day.

“With Al's reputation for quality and safety, experienced miners would follow him to hell,” said Bob Martin, former vice president and current employee.

“My first project with Harrison Western was sinking a 1,700-foot shaft in Leadville, Colorado,” said Henry Lavigne, who joined the company in 1969 and continues as an employee. “It took a year and a half – and we did not have a single accident. Al hired experienced miners and made sure they had the equipment and processes they needed to get the job done – and stay safe.”

The Lilley years

As the result of a project in England, Harrison Western came to the attention of Scotland’s largest civil engineering and construction company, F.J.C. Lilley. Lilley liked what it saw, and acquired Harrison Western in 1978. Al Provost stayed on as president.
Lilley provided a major influx of capital and encouraged Harrison Western to shift its focus from mining to underground construction of massive public works projects. During the 1980s, the company grew dramatically and took on a large number of significant projects. These included:

The **Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage System** Deep Tunnel project involved the construction of tunnels to capture overflow from the combined sewers in older parts of the city – preventing sewage from being discharged into Lake Michigan during storms. In this $15.5 million project, Harrison Western excavated twin-bore tunnels, 6,200-feet long and from 54 to 90 inches in diameter. The company also sank three shafts and constructed valve chambers, meter vaults and sewer taps.

For the **Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority**, Harrison Western excavated two subway tunnels under the Anacostia River. For this project, Al selected a $2.5 million Hitachi Zosen earth-pressure balance tunnel boring machine -- the first use of this innovative technology in North America. In this $25.6 million project, the company excavated twin 2,270-foot tunnels, 18.8 feet in diameter. The project also included 240 feet of cut-and-cover construction and two shafts.

For the **Montreal Urban Community** (a regional government), Harrison Western excavated and finished 21,000 linear feet of sewage system tunnels. This $23 million project also included four shafts and connecting structures.

For the **Tyee Lake Hydroelectric Project** in Alaska, Harrison Western excavated and supported tunnels, shafts, a gatehouse, a lake tap and a powerhouse. “That was one of the most complex jobs we ever bonded,” said Charlie Fleck, bonding agent at Talbert Corporation. “Al was asked to speak about the project at an industry event.

“After Al’s presentation, fellow bonding agents came up to me and asked me how on earth we ever persuaded anyone to underwrite this extremely complex project,” said Fleck. “I replied that no one else could have done it. The project was underwritten only because of Harrison Western’s Al-Provost-driven reputation for experience, integrity and performance.”

Under Lilley, Harrison Western went from a small company with 120 employees and $35 million dollars in annual revenues to a major player with as many as 1,000 employees – including 60 engineers and $400 million dollars in annual revenues.

“Lilley demanded astronomical growth in revenues,” said Martin. “Al met their requirements, achieving $400 million in revenues in 1985, but he always felt that the company was over-extended. As someone who prided himself on skill, integrity and client satisfaction, this posed a problem for Al.”

In 1988, Lilley began to divest its assets. Seeing the opportunity to return Harrison Western to its core values – “We always do what we say we will do” -- Al became sole owner of Harrison Western in the company’s 20th year.
**HW Process Technologies**

As owner, Al Provost shifted Harrison Western’s focus away from public works and back to mining and natural resources.

“Throughout his life, Al was a man who never rested,” said Chris Hassel, president of Harrison Western Construction. “He was gifted with raw intelligence and endless curiosity. Al was always looking for a way to find the best process or equipment for a given project – and make it even better. He was always looking for a new solution.

“Al recognized that the mining construction industry was mature and had not changed much in the past 50 years,” said Hassel. “He started to look for something new.” Globally, the extractive industries faced pressure to comply with strict environmental regulations – especially in the area of mandated water discharge standards.

In 1988, Harrison Western established a new corporation – HW Process Technologies. “HW Process Technologies was a direct result of Al’s strategic vision and passion for engineering and technology,” said John Raeder, president and CEO.

“HW Process Technologies’ patented EMS water processing solutions have brought about significant improvements in the area of precious-mineral recovery,” said Raeder. “The process dramatically improves mining and operating efficiencies -- and yields environmentally compliant clean water.

“Al built this company from the ground up – by recruiting hydro-metallurgical industry veterans from GE, US Filter and Osmonix,” said Raeder. “He successfully built and deployed major water processing plants for large global mining companies throughout North America, South America, Europe and the Asian Pacific.”

HW Process Technologies’ clients include Fortune 500 giants like Newmont Mining, Barrick Goldstrike, Inmet Mining, Freeport McMoRan and Grupo Mexico.

“Thanks to Al’s foresight, we are positioned for explosive global revenue growth in the sectors of mining, natural resources and water treatment,” said Raeder.

**Cobre Las Cruces**, for example, operates an open pit copper mine and hydrometallurgical processing plant near Seville, Spain. In 2010, a consortium headed by HW Process Technologies was awarded a $22 million contract to design, supply, install, commission and operate a new water treatment plant at this facility.

Today, Harrison Western Construction and HW Process Technologies continue to provide mine engineering, development, construction and services to mining companies. The companies have completed more than 200 projects around the world.
**A passion for learning**

Al Provost believed that education was a lifelong process – and the obligation of anyone who worked for him. He was a voracious reader, with a strong preference for trade, business and travel publications – which he read cover-to-cover.

“Al was the most well-read man I even met,” said Hassel. “He was always circulating books and magazines to his managers – with sections marked for our attention. Then, he would check back with you to make sure you’d read it. On my first day at Harrison Western, I arrived to find a whole stack of books on my desk – courtesy of Al.”

After a seven-hour plane trip to Hawaii for a family vacation, Al remarked to one of his sons, “I am three books smarter than I was when we left this morning. How about you?”

Al was elected to the American Society of Civil Engineers Committee of Tunneling and Underground Construction – “Beavers” in 1985 and “Moles” in 1987. These are the west- and east-coast associations of prominent individuals in the heavy civil construction industry. In addition, he belonged to 14 other well-known professional associations.

Al regularly attended a wide range of industry conferences – and expected that his senior engineers would do the same. “I once commented on the cost of attending a particular conference,” said Martin. “His response was, ‘What did you learn? If you learned just one useful thing, the cost was worth every penny.’”

A mining engineer spends a lot of time traveling to client headquarters and operations sites around the world. Lucky for Al, he loved to travel – and to learn as much as he could about the places he was headed. In the first five months of 2010, he was rarely home in Lakewood, Colorado. Instead, he spent most of those months traveling to Germany, France, South Africa and Chile – and, of course, Canada.

At the time of his death, Al was well into the process of planning a major trip to China. He was going to work for two weeks; then, his wife would join him to see more of the country. “He traveled often to China,” said son Chris Provost. “He was looking forward to traveling by train to Lhasa, Tibet – a train that is only possible because of ground-breaking feats of engineering.”

Al also enjoyed learning about – and investing in – new and creative business opportunities. “I loved Al because he was always looking for a deal,” said banker Townsend. “He was a tough-minded businessman whose ventures over the years caused consternation for his chief financial officers.”

**A passion for excellence**

Al Provost expected excellence from the people who worked for him, and did not like to be disappointed. “Al had only one speed, full out, and only one direction, straight ahead,” said Hassel. “That’s what he expected of us, too.”

Quite a few talented senior engineers worked loyally with Al for more than 30 years. They admired his skill, his experience, his integrity and the fact that he would always honor his business commitments – no matter the cost.
“Al always had a lot of ideas,” said Lavigne. “What others saw as a barrier, Al saw as an emerging business opportunity. He was always positive and direct about what he wanted done. He truly believed that anything was possible. He did not like to hear your objections. He did not like to hear the word ‘no.’

“He might lose his temper and get angry, but his anger had no duration,” said Lavigne. “Ten minutes after chewing you out, he was fine. A few days later, he would call to say that your suggestion was a good one – and to go ahead make the change. This ability to be flexible was one of his best qualities.”

As a boss, Al liked to hire people who were smart and hard-working. “He could deal with someone who may not be the smartest person but someone who was a really hard worker. One thing he would not tolerate was someone who was lazy. That would get you in trouble – every time,” said Teri Roberts, his personal assistant.

**A passion for life**

“Al Provost more than compensated for his short fuse with his personal charisma – and his compassion,” said Kenneth MacGregor, vice president and controller.

“When an airplane carrying two of our engineers, the pilot and three others disappeared in Alaska in the mid-1980s, Al was personally devastated,” said Martin. “After the Coast Guard stopped searching, the company paid $300,000 to keep efforts going another month. The wreckage and the bodies were never found. It was a low point in company history.”

Many of Al’s other efforts were not so public. “My grandmother passed away when I had a bid due on a big project,” said Martin. “When I went to Al, he told me not to worry about it – and provided the company plane to fly my family to the funeral and back.” Many others came forward with stories (that they wanted to keep private) about times Al had quietly supported them in their hour of personal need.

Al often turned his business relationships into enduring friendships. “He was a man’s man, who liked to do ‘manly’ things like hunting and fishing,” said Martin. “He also liked hockey and football. He often invited his colleagues to join him on his adventures.”

“Al worked hard – but he also played pretty hard, especially when he was younger,” said Lavigne. “There are so many stories that are unfit for public consumption! He loved to tell them, and would lean back in his chair – laughing and laughing.”

“We were celebrating completion of a tunnel project in a small town in Utah,” said Fleck. “As the night wore on, Al wanted a venue with a little more excitement. ‘Let’s get in the plane and fly to Las Vegas,’ he said. Luckily, the pilots were still sober, so off we went. When we arrived, some of us gambled a bit and then we all flew back to Denver. We were home in time for breakfast. That was not an atypical night with Al!”

“One time, Al’s brother Murray called and invited him up to Alberta for some goose hunting,” said Townsend. “That sounded good to Al, so he flew some of us up in the company plane. Turns out, it was bitter cold and the ground was frozen solid. The owner of the land had been unable to dig the pit blinds.

“As we all know, Al rarely took ‘no’ for an answer,” said Townsend, “and he tackled the problem with his usual full-on attack. He got some shovels and we started to dig. After an hour in the cold and darkness, we had excavated a pit blind about three inches deep. Finally, Al tossed down his shovel and said, ‘I’ve had enough of this (expletive deleted). I’m going back to bed.’ It took a lot to make Al quit, but that was it for goose hunting.”
Family was also an important part of Al’s life. He met his first wife when he traveled to New York and dropped in on a former CMS classmate. Christine Baer was the classmate’s younger sister, and promptly invited herself along for the evening’s activities. Al and Christine were married in 1965 and had five children: Donald, David, Douglas, Christopher and Jennifer. Al’s first child, Kristine, was born while he was in college.

“When Christine died of lupus in 1986, Al had not only a growing, complex, international business to run, but also a young family to care for,” said Townsend. “In doing so, he hit not only a home run – but a grand slam.”

Al married Sue Watters in 1993, and became stepfather to her four children – Darrell, Rob, Kim and Don. At the time of his death, he had 17 grandchildren. Sue was Al’s loyal companion to the end. Together, they spent many great days traveling to China, Russia, South Africa and France.

When a young Al Provost had a test in grammar school, his mother would ask him, “Did you do your best?”

From the day he delivered his first telegram to the day he shot his last bear, Al worked hard to meet that standard. In between, he honored his parents; gave back to Colorado School of Mines; built world-class companies; tried to learn something new every day; raised a family; shared drinks and good times with family and friends; and traveled the world for work and pleasure.

“My father earned his professional reputation building complicated projects around the world,” said Don Provost. “His most important projects, however – and the ones in which he took the most pride – were the building of colleagues, family and character.”

*Throughout his life, Al Provost did his best.*