
THE
YUKONER
MAGAZINE
$3.95
ISSUE
No.13
• The Mountie's Wife
• The Buick
• Building the White Pass
• Asahel Curtis, Photographer
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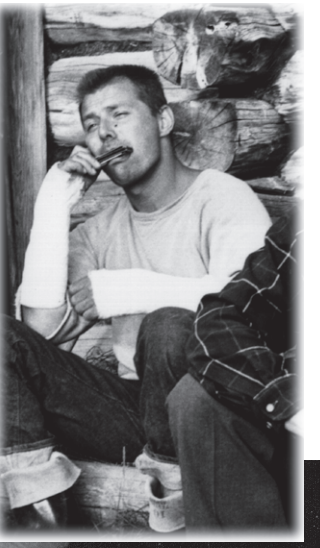
Joe Loutchan



Champion Fiddler of the Yukon

Joe Loutchan, trapper, river guide, machinist. Said by many Yukoners to be the best fiddler in Canada. He won the Rendezvous CBC fiddle championship so often they had to make him a judge rather than a participant.

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Cover photo: Lorraine Marshall at Silver City, Yukon (a ghost town on Kluane Lake, accessible from the Alaska Highway). Photo by John Hatch.

Old Dodgie, Yukoner Magazine office & print shop, and the editor.

THE YUKONER MAGAZINE

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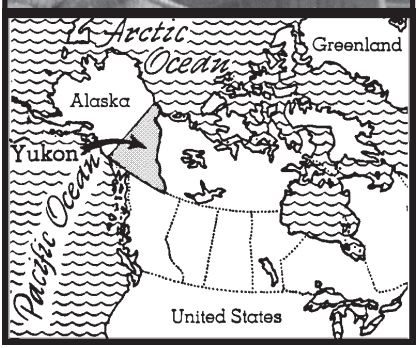


From the Editor

When you grow older, there are two things that give out on a person: the first is memory and... I can't remember what the second thing is. But I do remember a story I heard at the Carcross Cut-off the other day

A couple got downsized from their jobs and were raising chickens for a living, selling eggs all over the place. The wife lost one of her gold nugget earrings and later they found it inside a chicken they had killed for their supper. It seems that chickens like shiny things. Last spring the couple headed for the Klondike with 200 chickens and turned them loose on Bonanza Creek. Sure enough, by fall they had a freezer full of dead chickens and enough gold to take the winter off and head south.

Yes, there are many ways to get rich in the Yukon but I haven't hit on one yet. Many thanks to all of you who renewed your subscriptions. Without those renewals we would be sliding backwards and I could wind up plucking chickens or selling vacuum cleaners, both of which I have done in the past.

This issue is a little bit late, for a thousand reasons I don't have the space here to explain.

I wish I could squeeze more stories into every magazine but the only way would be to cut down the type size until you needed a microsope to see it. I hate reading small type. If we increase the page count, our postal costs go out of sight, pu tting us into another weight category. So I guess we'll have to stay with what we have.

In the meantime, all is well here. Hope the same for you.

Sam

The Mail Run

Dear Editor:

A friend passed on the April '99 issue of *The Yukoner* as he thought I would be interested in the article, "The Bank Where a Wild Time Grew."

Indeed I was, as I also worked at the same bank as Wally Beech at the same time. I even have some of the same pictures that are shown in the article as we used to exchange pictures with each other so we could send them to our families "outside."

A woman's view of his story is quite different from a man's. I laughed at some of his remarks. I was the youngest member of the bank team at that time and the whole experience was a big lark from my point of view.

When asked what I did during the Second World War, all I can say is, "I had the time of my life." They were wonderful days and busy days and I don't even think I felt the cold. I spent the winter of '43/'44 up north.

There aren't too many of us left that were sent up to the bank at that time, but if anyone who was up there reads this letter and would care to write me, I would love to hear from them.

As an added note, when we were cleaning out old ledgers and files, we came across the original letter given by the Superintendent of the Bank of Commerce in Vancouver to Robert Service, introducing him to the bank manager in Whitehorse. It is dated Dec. 4, 1904 and I have it in my possession to this day.

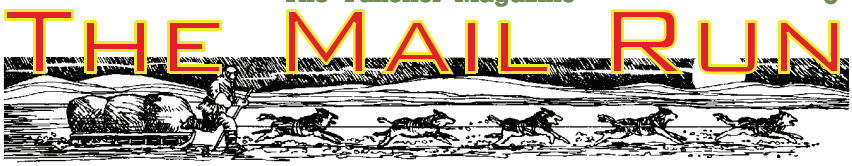
Sincerely,
Mrs. Joan E. Robinson (nee Parker)
#42 - 680 Valley Road
Kelowna, B.C. V1V 2J3
Tel: 250-762-5358

Dear Editor:

I have a daughter who has lived and worked in Dawson City for about six years. The interesting change from her "big city, four inch heels" lifestyle fascinates me. I was brought up with no plumbing, electricity or telephones, but she wasn't. I want to see the north but have not managed it yet. Since a child on a prairie farm, hearing my Dad recite Robert Service around the farmyard (he was still reciting it when he died at 94). I now read it to whoever will listen. I look forward enthusiastically to your publication.
Kathie Nash

Dear Editor:

In June of 1998 I went to the Yukon with two friends. I had been obsessed with the Yukon for 15 years, since 1984. I think I knew it was the last



place of back and beyond. We tented the whole way coming up the Alaska Highway. Silence reigned as we took in the Top of the World Highway. Dawson City was only meant to be 2-hour visit. Well, we stayed 6 hours. I loved the feel of the old Klondike days t here. I sat througha reading of Robert Service. It was awesome. It was difficult to come back to the crowded life. All of us had trouble with that. But we want to come back and we will. Next time I want to bring a bike and maybe cycle through. It's a special place of peace amidst the ruggedness. Thanks for such a great magazine.
Sue Robinson

Hello Sam.

In the winter of '49—'50, I was a single clerk with the Hudson's Bay Company in a community within a day's walk of the Arctic Circle on the MacKenzie River. My betrothed became homeless by the fiery destruction of the local nursing station, on Valentine Day. Rather than have her go "Outside" until June when my promotion to manager would allow me to marry, I wired head office for permission to wed.

Permission was granted but required relocation from the manager's residence. The local R.C,M.P. acted as rental broker on a trapper's cabin and we made preparations. The local single chaps at the Signal Station contributed mess supplies, the sergeant's wife made a three-tiered cake (top tier baked in a Fort Garry coffee tin) and the Signals cook "iced" the cake on a day when a planc had brought him some booze.

On the 18th, the plane arrived with Canon Montgomery (brother of the famous Field Marshall Montgomery) to perform the ceremony. My wife-to-be had made her own suit and hat. There were two cameras, one colour with flash, one black and white antique. The flashless black and white shutter had to be held open while the colour camera flashed. The colour didn't work but we got black and white anyway. The event was the first Protestant and second white wedding in that community. Before the end of the month, temperatures went as low as —72° F.

My tranfser the following summer was an adventure. Our new section manager opted to make a name for himself by reducing staff travel expenses and he chose to move me (now married) on the return trip of the Banana Boat, necessitating my transfer temporarily from the Fur Trade Division to the Mackenzie River Transportation Division. This boat was the small tug and open barge that followed the ice out of Fort Nelson, B.C. all the way down river bringing fresh goodies.

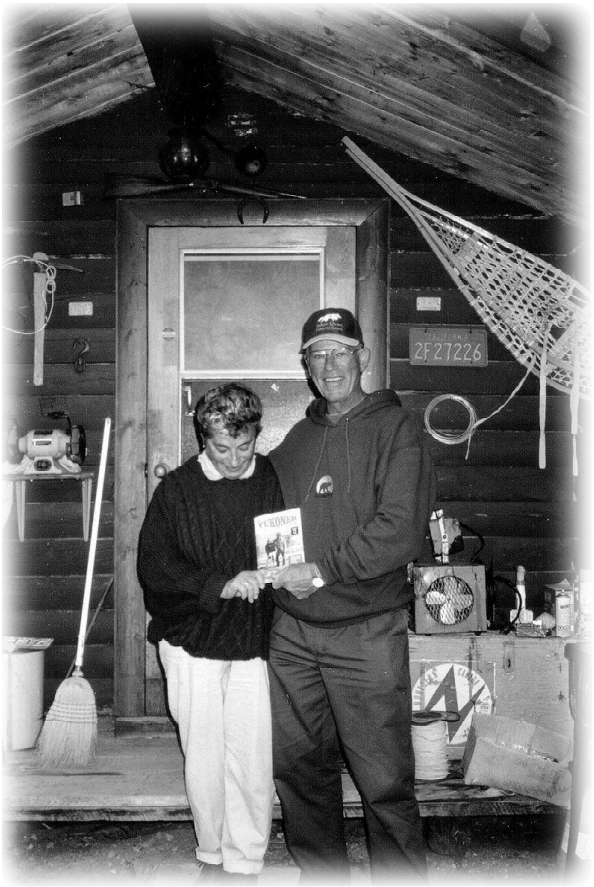
A mildewed tent and mattress were borrowed from the R.C.M.P. (later returned) and mosquito bar from the ship's purser. An uneventful embarkation gave no hint of the week ahead. That is, the same view out the porthole

The Mail Run

at lunch and again at suppertime during the full powered many-houred ascent of the Sans Sault Rapids. Offload and unhook to pull the barge off a sand bar at Windy Point, seasickness (not me), mosquitoes, no bathroom facilities (embarassing for female passengers), etc.

Arrival and welcome effected one week to the hour after departure (some honeymoon). The engineer was the chap who had made the historically famous oak sleigh board and moosehide propellor that flew a damaged Junkers aircraft out to civilization from Fort Simpson, N.W.T. in the late 1920s. It was great hearing the story first hand.

Sincerely,
R;J. (Dick) Thomas,
Drumheller, Alberta



Mr. & Mrs. Headford of Lumsden, Saskatchewan stopped by this fall to renew their subscription in person. Thanks for the camera batteries, Norm.

I Married the North

By Elizabeth Reid

"Do you really think you'd like to go North? It's for a three year period, you know, not just a week-end." Jim, my husband of two years looked at me closely, waiting for my answer. He had joined the R.C.M.P. several years before and after being on the Musical Ride for two years, gone north for three more years serving at Arctic Red River and Aklavik.

We were engaged while I attended University in Toronto. But in those days a Mountie had to have been in the Force seven years before marrying. Even then one had to get permission from the Commissioner. And let me tell you—my retired army officer father didn't exactly appreciate having his daughter's background investigated before permission to marry was granted. But it was the order of the day, so that was that.

We married down East, immediately moving to Regina, Saskatchewan where we remained for just over two years. During that time our first son was born. But I could tell Jim was still enthralled with his life in the Far North. He spoke of it often and kept in touch with friends there. So when he asked if I'd like to apply for northern service I readily agreed. After all, we

The author on the Northern Transportation supply ship going down the Mackenzie River, May, 1944.

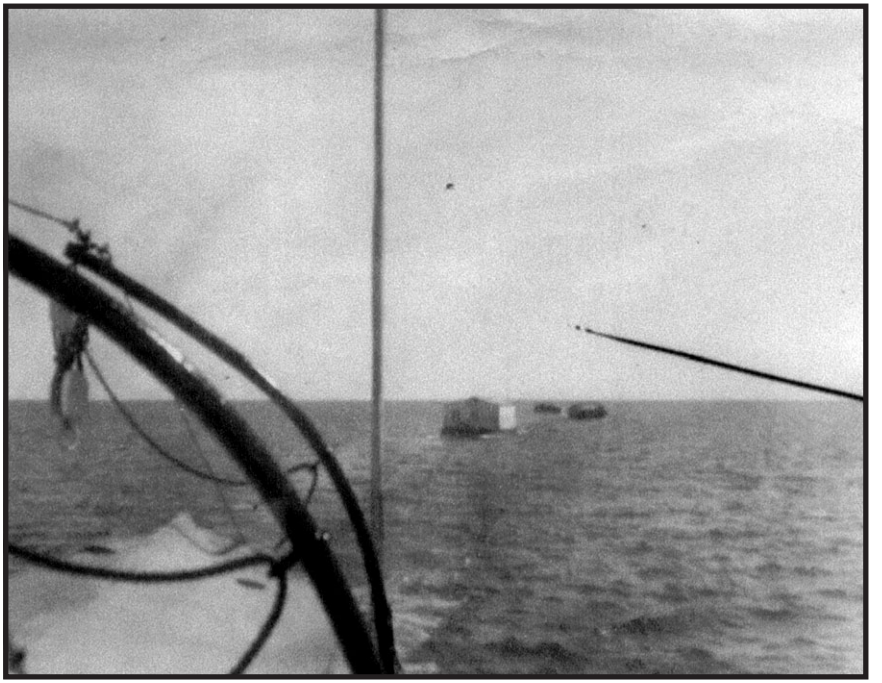
would get 50 cents per day extra pay. Eventually we were posted to an isolated place called Fort Liard, Northwest Territories, 1800 miles north of Edmonton, Alberta. All of these events took place in the late 1 940's.

My introduction to life in the Western Arctic began when our freighter, the "Northern Queen" eased up to the dock in front of the Hudson's Bay Company store, at Fort Liard in the North West Territories. My husband Jim–the R.C.M.P. officer, my three month old son Jamie and I were the only passengers on board with the crew -Captain Barney Goodman, his four deck hands and a purser.

Our trip began from Regina, Saskatchewan to Edmonton, Alberta on May 24th. There we caught the second slowest train in Canada and much later arrived at Fort McMurray. Some passengers said they had gotten off the front car and picked berries until the last car caught up and they then hopped back on.

We spent two days at Fort McMurray before making a portage to Fort Smith where we were scheduled to catch the boat down North. What a disappointment to learn we missed the supply boat by only one day and now had to wait until it resumed from Aklavik. Since our posting was a three year term we were anxious to get under way and see our new home.

A week dragged by but the supply boat finally resumed. With our belongings and freight on board at last we began the final leg of our journey.



Towing a barge across Great Slave Lake.

We got stuck on nearly every sand bar while crossing Great Slave Lake.

One late night my husband and I were up in the wheelhouse talking to Captain Goodman and I wondered out loud if it was too early to go to bed since it wasn't dark outside yet. The good Captain said if I didn't go to bed until it got dark I'd have to stay up until October! Thus was my introduction to the far North's continuous daylight.

The good Captain said if I didn't go to bed until it got dark I'd have to stay up until October!

Towing a barge weighted with 100 tons of freight made a slow trip and the diesel motors pounded day and night. Finally we left the MacKenzie and started up the fast flowing Liard River. All went well if not slowly until we came to a small riffle in the river. It resembled only a tiny waterfall but with a loaded barge it was too much for the diesel motor. For 24 hours the boat traveled back and forth across the water, trying to find a calm spot to move up the river. The men even used winches to try to advance the encumbered vessel but to no avail. Finally we tied up in a small bay and sent a radio message to Fort Simpson to send on additional power.

Two days later another freighter arrived and helped push the heavily laden barge over the riffle — once again we were on our way.

On July 6th we arrived at Fort Liard and the long journey was over. After the freighter and barge were secured my husband and I went ashore climbing up a path leading to the Hudson's Bay Company manager's house. We received a warm, friendly welcome from John Forrest and his Scottish wife Bea who came out to greet us. Their hospitality was overwhelming, partly we felt, because we were the only white couple they had seen in months. We gladly accepted their invitation to tea, so grateful to be off the smelly, vibrating boat.

Later that afternoon, carrying our small son, we walked several hundred yards along the river bank to our new home. It was not an impressive first sight. The compound consisted of a bungalow-style dwelling surrounded by tall weeds. A large warehouse stood off to one side and behind it were a few other large buildings.

The house itself hadn't been occupied the past 12 years when it had last been home for two single officers. In the interim countless generations of mice had taken over. The place now presented an abject appearance. There was no plumbing, no electricity, no running water–not even a kitchen sink. In fact it was a shell of a house–four rooms and a path. We returned to The Bay and boarded with the Forrests.

During the day we worked on making the place livable installing drywall sheets that we painted a cream colour. We eliminated the bare wooden floors by covering them with battleship green linoleum. A Vilas Maple chesterfield and chairs, a Duncan Fyfe table and sheer curtains soon softened the

austere living room. The gift of a white polar bear rug contrasted with the green floor and added a necessary splash of colour.

One day while painting we were surprised to see a young man standing in our doorway. He wore high boots topped off with breeches and a turtle-neck sweater and lounged casually in the entrance way while smoking a cigarette. He introduced himself as Father Levesque. I had never seen a priest so casually dressed and my expression betrayed my surprise as he laughed but said he was a ready and willing volunteer whenever we needed help. He was in from Fort Nelson visiting the resident brother and priest and we came to enjoy his candid and quite entertaining company.

Father Levesque was very interested and amused in our sole source for heat and for cooking. It was a bug-ugly, black cast iron stove like the ones used in lumber camps and weighed about six hundred pounds. The flat top had six large lids, had no warming oven but a large water reservoir adjacent to the firebox The oven underneath was huge and could accommodate sixteen loaves of bread. With no heat indicator on the door one had to guess the baking temperature. I learned eventually to judge the amount of heat required by the type of wood that was burned!

That wood was our most immediate concern. We didn't have a dog team because distemper had gone through our region and decimated the dog population. One dark, dreary morning two natives brought a small, reddish dog to us to be destroyed (natives never shot their own dogs.) They said he

Some houses at Fort McPherson

was lazy and wouldn't pull. The little beast was so thin and in such poor shape he couldn't have begun to haul heavy loads no matter how hard they beat him.

Jim agreed to take the dog. But instead of putting him down he tied him up and started feeding him two hearty meals a day. It wasn't long before a new animal emerged. We called him Toby and he showed fondness for his new master in every way he knew how–but if a native came into the yard he went crazy with rage. Together Jim and Toby pushed and pulled in that winter's supply of wood. You can imagine what a shock I got one morning when looking out the kitchen window I saw our little boy sitting beside this working dog. Jamie had pulled his tam on the dog's head and Toby sat stoically staring straight ahead.

In our settlement the Roman Catholic Mission that Father Levesque was visiting stood on a solitary hill, overlooking the Liard River. It commanded a view of the native's encamped directly across the river. It was a two storey building and Father Mary, the priest in charge knew pretty well everything that went on in his parish.

Living with Father Mary was a helper by the name of Brother Halter. He took care of the menial tasks, constantly supplying fire wood and caring for a very large and very bountiful garden. Brother Halter was from Alsace Lorraine. A full beard hung down to his stomach, and it bobbed up and down when he spoke and combined with his broken English it made him very difficult to understand. He was very short and appeared to be half human and half whiskers! But he was a man of stature when it came to knowledge.

Back door of the detachment

His garden was a veritable showplace. He was proud of his crops of cabbage, several weighing in over fourteen pounds. Each fall he presented us with a three pound lard pail full of home-made sauerkraut. Those who liked the stuff said it was excellent.

Brother Halter sometimes dropped in to visit us on a summery Sunday afternoon. He arrived at the front door, gave it a gentle tap and walked in. Invariably, he wore a black homburg hat, a woolen shirt and a heavy black suit coat on top. Woolen trousers -better worn on subzero wintry days — were tucked into ankle-high moccasins. And our summers were hot.

He sat upright on a straight backed chair and his eyes twinkled as he asked how our garden was growing and were the children well. Jim knew he was anxiously waiting for an offer of a cigar or a cigarette, always expressing great surprise and profuse thanks!

Then the suspense began. Brother Halter struck the match and held it up to the cigarette. We watched how carefully he guided it through the maze

of beard. But the most stressful period was when the cigarette burned down to a stub and was barely visible. More than once we heard a little sizzle as a whisker singed off.

The kind old man also relished his cup of tea and home-made cookies, limiting himself to three or four. As he would leave I 'd slip him a bag with extra cookies in it — I imagine they disappeared before he got back to the Church.

In the winter Brother Halter stayed close to the Mission while Father Mary travelled by dog team to visit the parish. The Father was a forbidding, austere man who seldom smiled. He got along well with the men in the settlement but seemed condescending to the women. One day, on hearing dogs barking and a bit of shouting, we looked out front to see the Father's dog team racing along the trail at full speed — with the hapless priest dragging along on his stomach! Dressed in his long black robe and still wearing his black triangular hat he gamely held onto the rope dragging from the front of the toboggan. They all disappeared through a patch of raspberry canes, but when we saw him a few days later he was no worse for wear — or tear.

Toby in a buggy on skiis

We were told about a fellow named "Old John". He lived close to the river bank and when he died he was buried even closer to the river's edge. Some said his coffin was visible and really should be moved back. The spring before we left, the river rose very high and John and his cabin both went out with the ice.

As time went on we encountered more unusual characters. One chap, who closely resembled the 'missing link' would sit on a nail keg at the Independent Fur Traders and crack frozen Brazil nuts with his teeth. He wasn't what you'd call handsome and didn't speak English but he was never out of sorts. The other natives often depended on Ju-zitsee to help them out.

Another fellow, a big Swede trapper and an excellent cook, lived in the settlement or fort as it was called. He worked on the Northern Transportation supply boats in the summer as the company cook. His name was Andy and he was always well groomed and being of fair complexion and hair–he sometimes seemed to shine. He was an avid cribbage player and a great admirer of good rum.

On one trip down North on a supply boat he had a little too much of his favourite drink and became sick. Thought he was going to die–in fact he looked forward to it. He lost his dentures in a pail but fished them out, washed them off and set them down on the open oven door of the big oil stove. When his alarm clock went off early next morning, cook Andy crawled out of his bunk, pulled on his trousers and headed for the galley. Still half asleep he lit the stove and kicked the oven door shut. It wasn't long before the smell of coffee permeated the air and Andy came to life.

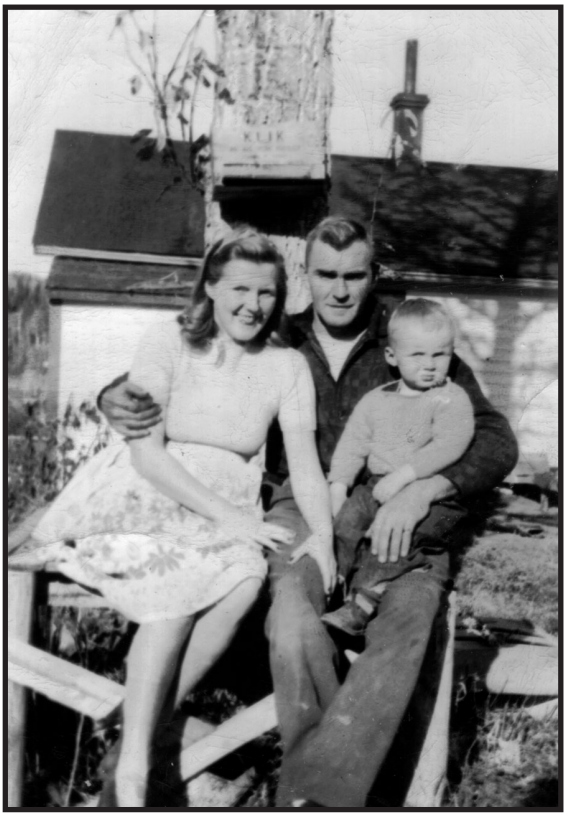
The author with Andy Jensen

Suddenly he remembered his false teeth. Quickly he opened the oven door and there they were but they had changed quite drastically. Warped and misshapen, some teeth pointed up and some faced outwards. Andy was devastated—there

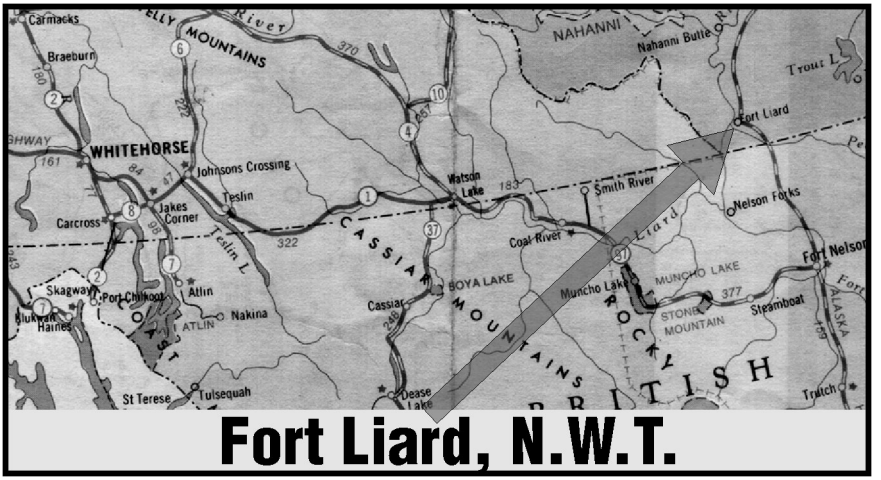
he was enroute to Aklavik with lots of people to visit along the way and–no teeth. Worse still it would be at least three weeks before he'd be back to where he could catch a plane to Edmonton and a dentist.

At one of the forts along the MacKenzie River where they stopped to unload freight, Andy located some beaver teeth and with glue he tried to construct a temporary plate. But he had no success, just inconvenience during the trip and no lack of ribbing from the crew.

Another episode with his dear friend Rum was not quite so disastrous. It was New Year's Eve and all the neighbours (two families and two trappers and us) were at our



Author, husband and 14-month-old Jamie at Fort Liard, 1945



place to bring in the New Year. We gathered around a big table and played Rummoli. As it neared midnight all glasses were filled and of course Andy's glass was half full. He drank it neat.

Suddenly for no obvious reason—although the table must have been shaken Andy's glass fell off the table and landed upright on the linoleum floor. Not a drop was spilled. We all looked at Andy. No one said a word but I'm sure we all thought 'here's a man with great connections'.

The author at Fort Liard with the Widow Shaugnessy and Widow Lepea

Bill King was a resident in our little settlement. A bachelor, he was a revenuer from England, harmless enough and fairly well-educated. But he had one flaw–he was totally allergic to work. He liked to visit and dropped in daily looking for a cup of tea and he smoked incessantly, rolling his own cigarettes.

Occasionally he would call on the widowed natives who lived in the woods near the detachment. They were jolly ladies who didn't understand or speak English but they were very friendly. And living in a tent with only a little metal camp stove for heat revealed how self-reliant they were. They chopped their own wood and dragged it to their tent, made bannock on top of their stove and melted snow for drinking water. They were very fond of my husband Jim as occasionally he would take the team and haul a load of dry wood to their tent. How they would chatter and beam—so appreciative for such a small gesture.

But these two old ladies–widow Shaughnessy and widow Lepea—had a disconcerting habit of reaching through their layers of sweaters, pick out an annoying, biting tiny creature and crack it with their front teeth. And your presence didn't deter them from this practice. Every month they appeared at Jim's office for ration vouchers that they could take to either the Hudson's Bay store or the Independent Fur Traders. There they received ten pounds of flour, eight pounds of sugar, five pounds of tea, maybe five pounds of lard and if a new tent was necessary they received a voucher for that too.

Living in a tent with such a small source of heat was no trial to them, even when the temperature went down to -74 degrees. But during a severe cold snap one of them stayed up half the night to make sure the fire didn't go out. In the summer when the temperature was slightly over 90 degrees they threw a blanket over the top of the tent. This helped shut out the burning rays of the summer sun making their small living space cooler inside.

Through Willie MacLeod our interpreter and special constable these natives would often inquire about the health of Jim's boss. The first time this happened he was surprised–- and puzzled. Where had they heard about his Commanding Officer? Then it was explained to him that the Indians all considered the white man's boss to be the Queen — ``across the big water".

When my first Christmas was pending, the other two women warned me to expect company such as a group of the various native widows in the settlement. I baked brownies and I put my precious walnuts in the mix. You can't imagine my consternation when I passed the plate of brownies to the first woman and she took her bandanna and dumped the entire plateful of sweets into it and handed back the bare plate! The other five women, all sitting in a circle on the floor waited expectantly. I made a hasty retreat to the kitchen and buttered our freshly made bread and passed it around–individually–to each one. Pleased they all smiled a lot. What a relief- I survived my first social crisis.

The month of April meant Spring and it arrived overnight. First the ice in front of the house rotted, eventually breaking up into massive, grinding ice floes. These rolled huge rocks along and ground full grown trees to splintered shards left to float down river like overblown match sticks. The power of rushing ice was awesome.

It was a time of utter isolation. Completely cut off from the outside world until the river cleared and ran free, we relied upon our own ingenuity and entertainment. I made up my mind to accomplish three things during the wait — to learn to play bridge, to read all the Bible and finally how to turn the heel of a sock. My experiences with learning to play bridge were varied but for the most part a staggering success. My worst experience was a reply to a demand bid.

I attempted to read the Bible several times. Some parts were very familiar, others suggested a need for rationalization. After several starts throughout six years I wasn't exactly quotable. Mostly do's and don'ts. I still think the golden rule should be universally stressed.

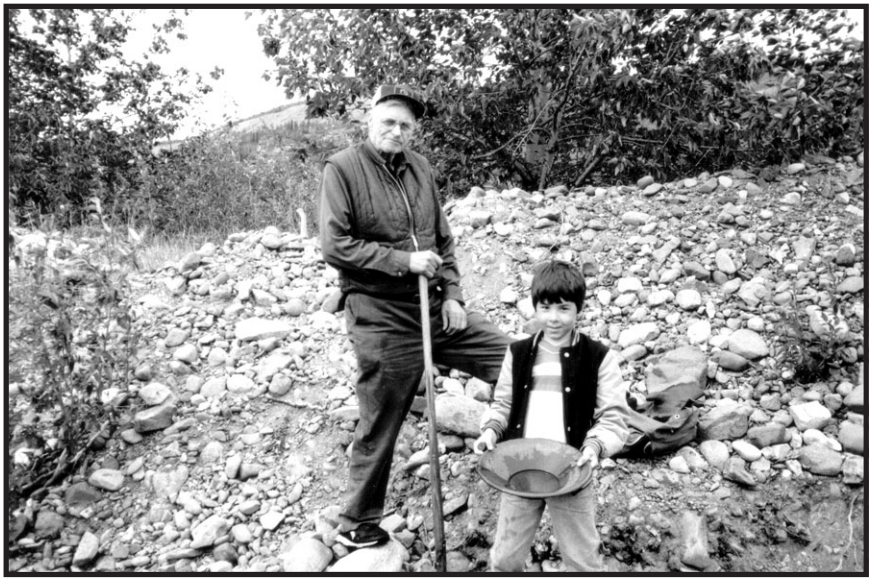
My final resolution — the sock. Although I had survived a successful career on the staff of an Eastern university, I discovered it was next to impossible to get the starting stitches to remain on a knitting needle. Eventually, I did make a pair of socks for my father with a beautiful maple leaf adorning each instep. I learned later from my mother he couldn't wear them. They were so loose they kept disappearing down into his shoes. But the New Year brought new resolutions and I looked forward to another Northern year.

To be continued...

The Ballad of Hard-Luck Henry

By Robert W. Service

Now wouldn't you expect to find a man an awful crank
That's staked out nigh three hundred claims, and every one a blank;
That's followed every fool stampede, and seen the rise and fall
Of camps where men got gold in chunks and he got none at all;
That's prospected a bit of ground and sold it for a song
To see it yield a fortune to some fool that came along;
That's sunk a dozen bed-rock holes, and not a speck in sight,
Yet sees them take a million from the claims to left and right?
Now aren't things like that enough to drive a man to booze?
But Hard-Luck Smith was hoodoo-proof—he knew the way to lose.
'Twas in the fall of nineteen four—leap-year I've heard them say—
When Hard-Luck came to Hunker Creek and took a hillside lay.
And lo! as if to make amends for all the futile past,
Late in the year he struck it rich, the real pay-streak at last.
The riffles of his sluicing-box were choked with speckled earth,
And night and day he worked that lay for all that he was worth.
And when in chill December's gloom his lucky lease expired,
He found that he had made a stake as big as he desired.
One day while meditating on the waywardness of fate,
He felt the ache of lonely man to find a fitting mate;



The late George Peel, showing a young Yukoner how to pan for gold.

A petticoated pard to cheer his solitary life,
A woman with soft, soothing ways, a confidant, a wife.
And while he cooked his supper on his little Yukon stove,
He wished that he had staked a claim in Love's rich treasure-trove;
When suddenly he paused and held aloft a Yukon egg,
For there in pencilled letters was the magic name of Peg.

You know these Yukon eggs of ours—some pink, some green, some blue—
A dollar per, assorted tints, assorted flavors too.
The supercilious cheechako might designate them high,
But one acquires a taste for them and likes them by-and-by.
Well, Hard-Luck Henry took this egg and held it to the light,
And there was more faint pencilling that sorely taxed his sight.
At last he made it out, and then the legend ran like this—
"Will Klondike miner write to Peg, Plumhollow, Squashville, Wis.?"

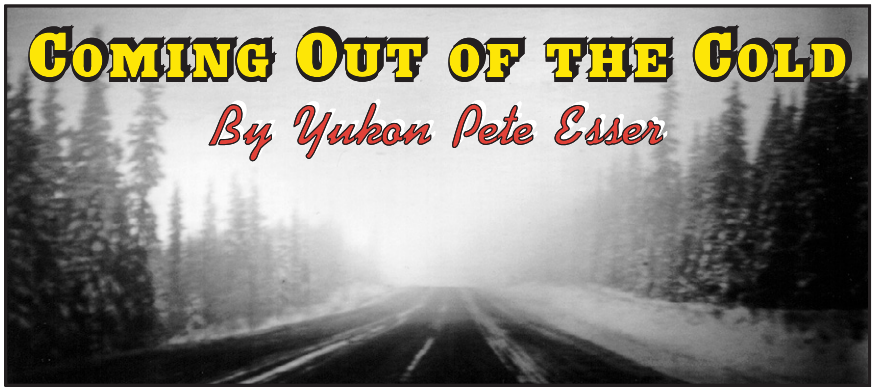
That night he got to thinking of this far-off, unknown fair;
It seemed so sort of opportune, an answer to his prayer.
She flitted sweetly through his dreams, she haunted him by day,
She smiled through clouds of nicotine, she cheered his weary way.
At last he yielded to the spell; his course of love he set—
Wisconsin his objective point; his object, Margaret.

With every mile of sea and land his longing grew and grew.
He practised all his pretty words, and these, I fear, were few.
At last, one frosty evening, with a cold chill down his spine,
He found himself before her house, the threshold of the shrine.
His courage flickered to a spark, then glowed with sudden flame—
He knocked; he heard a welcome word; she came—his goddess came.
Oh, she was fair as any flower, and huskily he spoke:
"I'm all the way from Klondike, with a mighty heavy poke.
I'm looking for a lassie, one whose Christian name is Peg,
Who sought a Klondike miner, and who wrote it on an egg."

The lassie gazed at him a space, her cheeks grew rosy red;
She gazed at him with tear-bright eyes, then tenderly she said:
"Yes, lonely Klondike miner, it is true my name is Peg.
It's also true I longed for you and wrote it on an egg.
My heart went out to someone in that land of night and cold;
But oh, I fear that Yukon egg must have been mighty old.
I waited long, I hoped and feared; you should have come before;
I've been a wedded woman now for eighteen months or more.
I'm sorry, since you've come so far, you ain't the one that wins;
But won't you take a step inside—I'LL LET YOU SEE THE TWINS."

Coming Out of the Cold

By Yukon Pete Esser



He is now 23 years old and not too many of his kind are around anymore. He is still in good condition and I love him as much as I did when I first saw him at Dawson City Motors at Dawson City, Yukon. Now when I walk past him in my carport, I find myself talking to him, while my hand gently slides over his stylish and rounded body.

Yes, we had some good times together and some adventures under our belt. Over the years we both have picked up some scars and needed some repairs, but I can't let go of him, my 1976 Buick Estate Station Wagon. In 1997, I had to turn in my drivers license because my vision has deteriorated so much, and I am now legally blind.

But at times I do like to sit in the Wagon, and all kinds of memories come to mind.

1977 was the last year for my family in the Yukon after spending nine years with me at the mining town called Clinton Creek, 67 miles northwest of Dawson City. As it is with all mining towns, one day will be the last day, so well ahead we got informed that in midsummer '78 the Cassiar Asbestos Mine will shut down for good, and the town of Clinton Creek will cease to exist.

So, while I was still employed we bought a new house in Abbotsford, B.C. and in the summer of '77 I moved my family into it. After a short stay I had to go back to the mine for my last year of 11 years' employment. If I had quit my position in 1977, I would have lost my severance pay and I needed it for the new start in the south. It was not easy to say goodbye to my family and to leave them 2084 miles behind me.

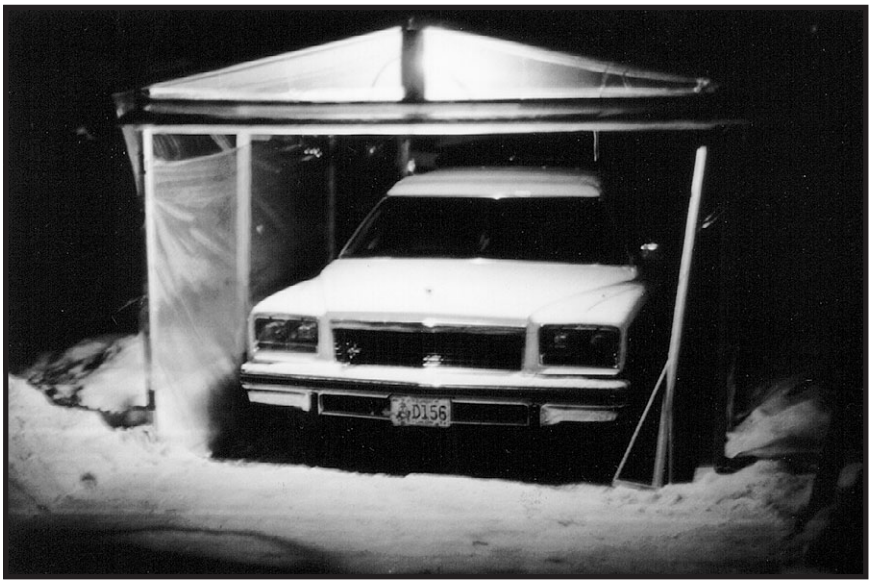
Looking out of the window in my room at the staff house, I could see across the street the place we used to call home for so many years. It is empty now and the flowers in the garden Karin had raised with so much love are still in full beauty, the night frost had taken over to keep it this way till the first snow will bend them. The colours are changing, geese and ducks

are leaving for the south and the days are getting shorter by the minute, while the sun is slowly losing its place on the northern sky. The river has lost its power and is dragging the water between the shores for the waiting ice to close it slowly.

The North is getting ready for a long sleep and winter is taking over. Last spring I had built a garage behind our house out of 2X4's and plastic and there I had the car parked. It was my last hunting season in the Yukon and while alone now, I spend a lot of time in the bush and bagged a good moose bull. I kept one quarter and the rest of it went to some friends. By December I had a few rabbits, plenty of salmon and the moose meat well packed, to take with me to my family over the coming holidays. I had two and a half weeks coming and this would be long enough for me to drive out to my new home in Abbotsford B.C.

I had driven the Alaska Highway at least ten times but never in mid-winter. To drive it is a adventure every time. When it was built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between March and November of 1942, I was still in diapers and when later in school I learned about it, never I would have thought it would play such a big role in my life. Once, we drove it from Dawson Creek, B.C. mile O to Fairbanks Alaska mile 1520, and had to use up two spare tires in order to get there. The windshield took a beating and my girls (wife and daughters) were not too happy to eat all this dust. But the beauty of the country along this highway made up for all of it.

It is mid December 1977 and the temperature is -30 F. and dropping. The control light on the power cable to the engine block heater is on and this I check once a day. Only four more days and I am going south. For days I have had most of my gear packed as I wanted to speed it up and shorten



My 2X4 garage at Clinton Creek, Yukon, winter 1977.

the time of waiting. To live in the staff house I liked very much. There are at least twenty single rooms all taken by women and men staff employees. The big living room looks like a lounge in the Hilton with deep piled carpet and furniture one can easily fall asleep in. A T.V. and a bar are there too and it was like being with a big family.

The only thing I did not like, the walls between the rooms where built too thin. My neighbour next door, she was a beauty all right, black hair blue eyes and built like Venus herself. Pretty well every night her boyfriend spent with her. After a while, the squeaking bed, her moaning and their dialect of love was for me too much to take. So I went to the local store and got myself a good set of earphones. Boy, did I ever listen to a lot of music in those days.

Finally it was the last day of work and at 1600 hours the shift was over. The evening I spent playing chess, but lost two games, watched some T.V. and turned in at around 2330 hours after the news and weather report.

After a good breakfast at the cafeteria, I walked down to my car to start it up. It was frozen solid, the seats felt like rocks. I put the key into the ignition, pumped a little gasoline and turned it. Slowly the motor turned but would not start. I knew I had a problem, so I did not try it again. It was so cold and still the sweat was running down my face. I walked back to my room and called my good friend Hartmut, the best handyman I know and always willing to help.

"Hartmut, here is Peter."

"What? You are not gone yet?"

"No, I have a problem. The car will not start."

"MMMMMMM, let me think. It sounds like the battery is just too cold, but I have a small space heater we could put under the oil pan. I will meet

The Alaska Highway at —55° Fahrenheit, winter 1977.

you at your garage in 15 minutes O.K."

I grabbed a few blankets and walked to the garage. It was now 45 F. We put the heater under the oil pan and the blankets over the hood to cover the front and sides of the motor. "Give yourself at least 3 hours and when you have it running, please drop the heater at my house, but do not shut off the motor till you hit Whitehorse, O.K., Peter."

"O.K. and thanks for your help."

I had time to kill and went once more over my checklist. In my station wagon as standard gear I had one cable hand winch, 24 feet of cable, one extra HD tarp, class B fire extinguisher,. one snow shovel, a box with 12 candles, a full tool box, 2 spare tire, 4 L. antifreeze, 4 L. motor oil , one jumper cable, 2 fan belts and for this trip 3 five-gallon jerry cans with gasoline

Twenty-two years ago we had not too many service stations along the Alaska Highway or on any northern road. So 15 gallon spare I think is good to have. On top of it I had ready in my room to take with me, one Winchester 30/30 with one box of ammo, 1 shotgun, 12 gage with one box of shells, fire starter, sleeping bag, a pair of snowshoes, Yukon frame pack, waterproof matches, first aid kit, 3 red aerial flares and my hunting knife as well as the food I had picked up at the store. The game meat and salmon I had in the wagon for a month.

Well, it's sounds like overkill, but it is not, believe you me. In the wilderness there is no pity for the unprepared or for fools and dreamers. At around 1400 hours I walked back to my car. Now or never, I said to myself and turned the key. Oh you sweet sound of running motor. Karin, I am coming.

I love you old boy, just keep running and don't stop on me. O.K. It was so

The Alaska Highway at —55° Fahrenheit, winter 1977.

cold I had the motor idling for at least 30 minutes, added more gasoline antifreeze to the fuel and drove slowly to the bunk house, bouncing along the road till the tires gained their form back.

I called Karin in Abbotsford and told her that I will be on the road by 1530 hours.

"Karin, if you hear on the news some idiot is camping along the Alaska Highway, it will be me. I would not leave this car alone if it breaks down.

Down the road I went on my way to Dawson City. By now it was dark and in this temperature, the traction was the best, no wind, just ice crystals in the air slowly settling on the windshield.

The water temperature gauge I had installed under the dashboard showed 165 degrees. The winter thermostat, would only open by 180 degrees even with the cardboard in front of the radiator. At 50 miles per hour, this was the best the motor could give. So it was not too warm in the car. I had to have my parka on and a blanket around my legs in order to stay warm.

I crossed the frozen Yukon River by driving over the ice bridge to Dawson City in snow and in the moonlight, the town looked frozen in time. The smell of wood fires was in the air and the smoke was hanging low over the town, giving it a ghostly image. I passed Madame Tremblay's store, the old post office, the Palace Grand Theatre where Klondike Kate gave some moments of happiness to the miners. I drove past the famous Hotel Saloon Westminster (known around town as the Pit).

At St. Mary's Church I stopped to see my good friend Father Bob. I had to say good bye and to wish him a very nice Christmas.

"-Minus 55 is not the best temperature to travel in," he said, "but I used to do it by dog team. But this was many years ago. Well, at least come in for a little while and have something to eat with me. Even better stay at my place and start in the morning."

"No, thank you, I want to push on."

An hour later he came out with me, blessed my car and me to have a safe trip and waved when I drove off. Well old boy, it is you and me and the Klondike Highway, take me home. The weight of the car, the studded tires, and the positive traction rear axle gave the car a stable drive. The first miles out of Dawson City, the highway turns and winds through the tailings the gold dredges have left behind. I passed the airfield and shortly after the cabin of my late friend Chester Henderson. It is now called now Henderson Corner. I was getting very tired, so only 26 miles out of town I stopped to take a room at the Klondike River Lodge located at the turnoff to the Dempster Highway. I told the clerk that I had left the motor running and he promised too keep an eye on it. I will leave when ever I wake up so I better pay for the room now. Good night. At 0530 hours I was back on the road by under bright moon light.

Not a soul was out, no wildlife showed along the road. Only the northern lights were dancing and moving in the sky. Some of them so beautiful, I had to force myself not to look at them in order to stay out of the ditch and this was the last thing I needed. A few miles out of Pelly Crossing, I came to

a car without tires.

It looked as if they had been burned one by one in order to keep who ever it was alive. Hope they made it. Slowly I passed this grim looking place, hoping for the best for me. Daylight was showing itself in a haze of dark gray with blue lilac lining . The hours passed by and so the miles. Small settlements along the road I left behind without stopping and by early afternoon I drove into the City of Whitehorse. It was so nice to see neon lights again and buildings and to feel the pulse of a community. I delivered the small parcel my friend Bruce had given to me in Clinton Creek, at the given address. Was I lucky to be in town, the car would not start, not even the motor would turn.

With the hood open and my jumper cable in my hand, I only had to wait a few minutes. A fellow with a pickup stopped right in front of my car. "Guess you need a boost." The motor started, "You better have that battery of yours checked." "I will, and thank you very much." "Good luck partner," and he drove off. Never asked him for his name. Yes, the Yukoners are a special breed of people, always willing to help and acting like we are all one family.

At a nearby service station I had my battery checked only to be told " Mister you have a 3/4 frozen battery." "How long it will take to have a new one put in?" "Well it has to be charged, so give it 45 minutes." I went to Hougen's Department Store, which was just around the corner. Looked at several guns and bought some small items as gifts to take home,

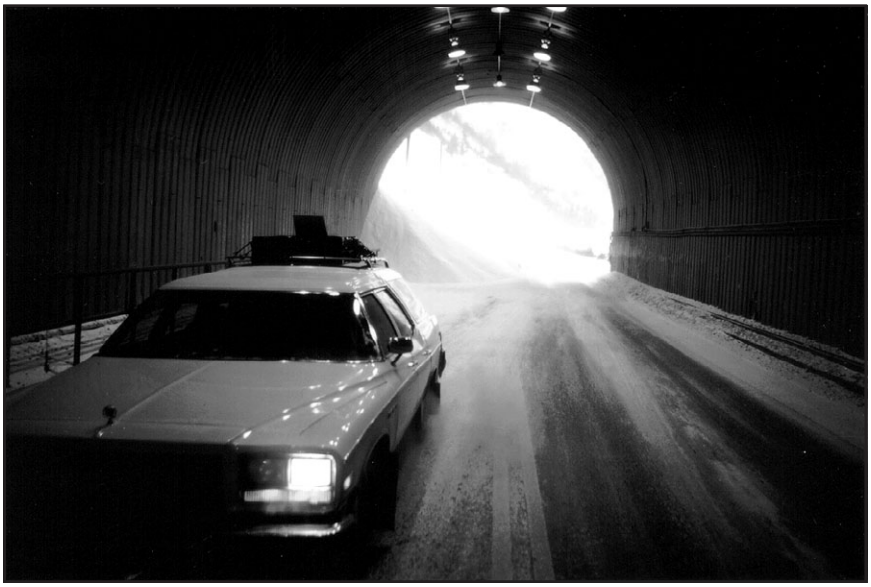
How is the car doing? It is ready to go. Thank you. Let's top it up with gas and let me have 10 bottles of the gas line antifreeze, please. Where you are going? South, Vancouver. You surly picked a bad time. Why is this? Well there is a cold snap warning out. Yes I know, but I have not the time to wait it out. In darkness and at -48 F I left the town of Whitehorse behind. I had at least 20 eight track tapes with me from Kenny Rogers, the Beegees and Donna Summers, helping me to fight the feeling of being lonely out there.

Have a smoke Pete, it will be a long night. Hello Mr. Moon, nice to see you again and the thousands of stars around you, how beautiful it looks. Never mind Pete, keep your eyes on the road. Good evening my name is Boredom and I will be with you at times as will my assistant, Miss Sleepiness. That's all I need, get lost, have a Coca Cola, I said to myself. Every mile brings me closer to home.

There is no difference between evening and night in the North in December. It is dark and that's it. At Teslin I took on gas again and kept pushing on and on, singing with Glen Campbell By the time I get to Phoenix (Abbotsford). At around midnight I left Watson Lake behind me and so my awareness. In my headlights I saw a line of rabbits running over the road. I slowed down and looked again, no rabbits. Well, this is strange. A few miles later I spotted a truck in the ditch upside down with its wheels still turning. I stopped to help, but with a second look, there was no truck. Wowwwww! this is frightening. Pete you have to take a rest. OK. I will. I need to find a service station, there I will stop. Keep the window open, have a smoke, the cold air is helping me stay awake but not for too long.

I had to close the window again. Keep your eyes open, but they are so heavy. An electric shock went down my spine and my mind was fresh in an instant. The car was still rolling and I was still on the road. I must have dozed off for a few second. There is a light down the highway, yes, it is real. There I will stop. Two old cabins and a gas pump with a small light over it. I stretched myself over the front seat, had the side window open a little bit, and with the motor running I fell asleep like a rock.

"Hey mister. Are you OK in there? Hello, hello. " I looked up and saw



The avalanche at Fraser Canyon, winter, 1977.

this old face inside a parka hood looking down at me. "Yes I am OK." I got out of the car and the cold air cut off my throat. I flipped my parka hood over my head and closed it all the way. How cold is it, sir? I ask the old face looking at me. Well, the thermometer shows - 72 F. Let's go in my cabin. He turned around and walked towards it. I had no hesitation to follow him and did so. The smell of a wood fire, the warm air in the cabin, and the coffee he gave to me was very welcome. I found out I was at Lower Post and it was 0630 hour. The cabin was not larger than 20 by 15 feet—half store, half garage and looking like the home of a pack rat.

I love those northern people, especially the oldtimers with their endless desire to tell the stories of their lifetime. But I had no time this morning as much I would have liked to listen to it. I bought some cigarettes, some sweets from him. You think that gas pump of yours will work in this temperature? Let's give it a try. With a full tank and a so long, I was back on the Alaska Highway.

Feeling good now and well rested, I made easy miles, the sun was coming up at Muncho Lake and ice fog was hanging low and thick, but the beauty of the countryside was breathtaking once it cleared and some wildlife was showing up too. A moose along the road looked at me with big eyes and a quick photo kept it forever. It was getting warmer and daylight was getting longer too. A short break at Fort Nelson, on the road again, was playing the radio and it was so fitting. The car was driving well and I could feel that I was *coming out of the cold.* With the coming darkness it started to snow too and this I did not like. Heavy flakes where coming down and the strain on my eyes showed very fast. A few hours of driving and a break are the routine now.

At Tompson Esso at the turn off to Hudson's Hope Loop Road to Chetwynd, I left the Alaska Highway. I was not alone any more and the traffic increased as I drove south. The Fraser Canyon was under heavy snow and this 18-wheeler in front was plowing the road for me. The snow was so deep that without the positive traction on my car I never would have been able to make it. One of the tunnels at the Fraser Canyon gave a welcome shelter to me from a small avalanche I never had seen coming. A look into my mirror showed all black behind me when I drove into the tunnel. By the time I had taken the camera out, the snow had settled down. Home was not too far away and I was the last car to come out of the Fraser Canyon, then it was closed for a few days. Was I lucky. Shortly after Christmas we received a letter from Father Bob which shows very well how hard life in the North can be.

"Pete, Pete where are you?" I heard Karin calling. "I am sitting in the car." "Lunch is ready." "O.K. I am coming." Well old boy, thanks for the memories. I will give you a wash this week. I stepped out of the car, closed its door softly, gently my hand went along its rounded body and I walked to the house

Yukon Pete Esser

Father Bob's Letter
St. Mary's Church
Dawson City, Yukon
December 24, 1977

Dear Karin, Peter and Family;

I am so glad to hear that Peter made it safely ... when he left in such cold weather. Now we have it nice and warm: to 15 above Fahrenheit. I was so worried that I was ready to call you on the phone. Peter, you are the best driver I know.

I am sure you will have a grand time and if mother Esser is with you, really this is better than anything in Clinton...

On Sunday, tomorrow, I will have supper with the Haniluks at Joe and Elaine's and on Monday with my neighbours, the Websters.

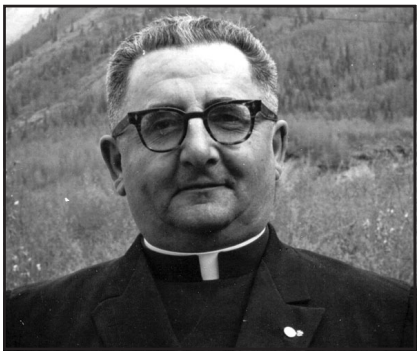
Yesterday there were three funerals in Dawson. I officiated amd preached for the first time in a Protestant church with Ken Snider at the funeral of my friend Francois Perret from Upper Bonanza and Dzenke, his companion, who froze to death on her way to get help. The other was Walter DeWolfe who died of cancer.

This evening I will have supper with all the Kingstons, see every body and miss you. Thank you for signing the Christmas card.

You have all my love, at least a great part of it. Love also to Mother Esser.

Father Bobilier

Pete and Karin Esser. See Issue No. 8 for Peter's wonderful story about the birth of a child at Clinton Creek.



The late Father Bobilier. (See Issue No. 8)

St. Mary's Church
P.O. Box 277
Dawson City, Yukon

December 24 1977

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I am sure you have a grand time and if mother Esser is with you,really,this is better then anything in Clinton...

I will be going there this afternoon with Tony Kosats. As my little truck is still sitting in my garage with the four flat tires,I have ask d Tony to take me there and back after Midnight

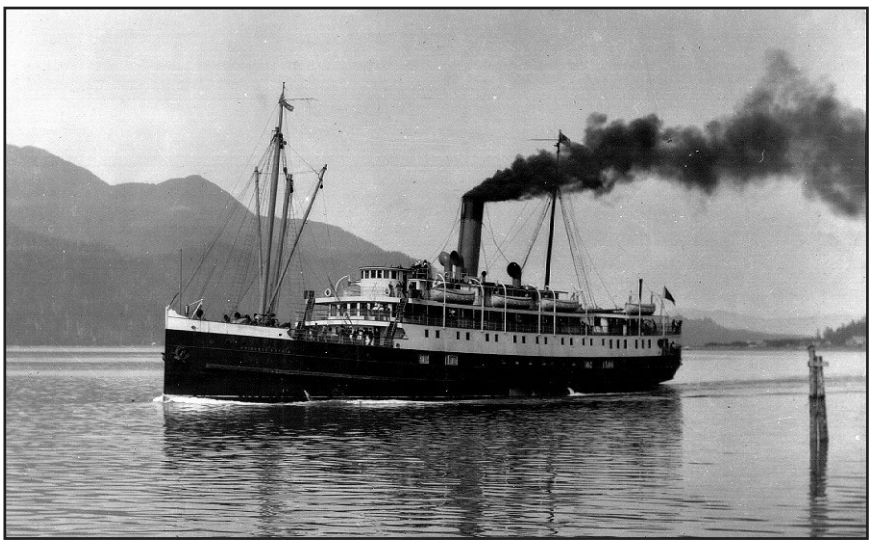
The Sinking of the Princess Sophia

By Don Sawatsky

The Klondike capital of Dawson City, Yukon, suffered floods, famine and fire during its early history and, while people died and possessions were destroyed and the community staggered under the blows, she always fought back. Such has been the tenacity and determination of its northern pioneers.

But, one of the stiffest body blows to hit landlocked Dawson occurred in October of l9l8 when the cream of Dawson commerce and society was all but wiped out in a single crushing blow by the sea. More than l00 gold miners, businessmen and including 84 employees of the White Pass rail and steamship company died in the freezing, gale- whipped Lynn Canal, 65 miles south of Skagway, Alaska, when the luxury ship Princess Sophia grounded and finally sank on the night of October 25, l9l8.

The 2,320 gross ton Sophia struck Vanderbilt Reef and hung there until her hull was punctured and she sank with the loss of all 343 passengers and crew, two dozen horses and five tons of freight. Only a dog—an English Setter—survived. He was found half-frozen and soaked in diesel oil "and very much afraid of salt water" at nearby Tee Harbor. The dog was ultimately taken back to Dawson where it lived out its life as a grim reminder to all Dawsonites who had lost friends and relatives in the sinking of the Sophia.



The Princess Sophia pulling into Juneau, Alaska. [Alaska State Library, Winter & Pond collection]

Built at Paisley, England in 1911 for the CPR, the Princess Sophia was 245.2 feet long with a 44-foot beam. She sailed between Vancouver and the Alaskan ports of Skagway and Juneau. The Sophia made her first run into Juneau around June 13, 1912.

From the beginning the Sophia had her share of problems, running into the treacherous shoals and reefs on an almost annual basis. Her first accident occurred at 2:10 a.m. on April 13, 1913, exactly 10 months after she was put in service. She bounced off rocks on the north side of Sentinel Island not far from where she eventually sank. It was at almost the same spot that another liner—the Princess May—was grounded on August 5, 1910. (All the passengers and crew were safely evacuated from the May and she was soon refloated.)

The Sophia managed to back off the rocks at high tide with only slight damage to her bow. Less than a year later—on January 25, 1914,—she again ran aground near the entrance to Blinkinsop Bay while she was trying to find shelter from a mounting storm. She lost a propeller and remained stuck for six hours before she was refloated. Around the first part of July of the next year the Sophia lost part of her railing and suffered some superficial damage to her hull from an anchor when the good ship Alameda was docking at the Alaskan port of Wrangel.

She left Wrangel and hours later steamed into Juneau only to slam into the wharf, again causing a small amount of damage.

So when the Princess Sophia ran aground on Vanderbilt Reef on October 24, 1918, the news was of only passing interest. After all, northerners were more concerned about the rumors of the end of the first World War when their sons and husbands would be coming home from overseas.

The Sophia had left Skagway, Alaska, at 10 p.m. on the 23rd, heading fom Vancouver. Only five hours later—at 3 a.m.—she struck Vanderbilt in mounting seas. Lynn Canal is a long, narrow, deep neck that forms the northern section of the Inland Passage from Seattle to Skagway. It is protected on the west by large islands and the mountainous Chilkat Peninsula. But, the long strip of deep water also acts as a north-south funnel for winds that can gust to 70 knots, particularly in the fall of the year.

Vanderbilt was well known at the time but it was treacherous because at high tide it was concealed by water. Besides, the night the Sophia ran aground the weather was becoming nasty and the light on the lone buoy marking the reef was out and Captain J. P. Locke had no warning of the impending disaster.

The 268 paying passengers—33 women, 17 children and 218 men—were all sleeping peacefully when the Sophia struck, dreaming, probably, about a relaxed winter in warmer climates. The ship settled on the rocks and there didn't appear to be anything to fear, at least not yet.

Within 15 minutes of the stranding, Captain Locke sent a wireless message to Juneau reporting the accident and assuring authorities that there was no immediate danger. One passenger, Auris W. McQueen, an American soldier who was stationed at Fort Gibbon, Alaska, wrote his mother just

hours before he died with the rest of the ship's company. The letter was dated October 25, l9l8:

"It's storming now, about a 50-mile wind, and we can only see a couple of hundred yards on account of the snow and spray. At 3 a.m. yesterday she struck a rock submerged at high tide, and for a while there was some excitement but no panic. Two women fainted and one of them got herself into a black evening dress and didn't worry over who saw her putting it on. Some of the men, too, kept life preservers on for an hour or so and seemed to think there was no chance for us.

"But, we passed through the first real danger point at high tide at 6 a.m. when it was thought she might pound her bottom out on the rocks and everybody settled down to wait for help. We had three tugboats here in the afternoon but the weather was too rough to transfer any passengers. The most critical time (nobody but the ship's officers, we soldiers and a few sailors amongst the crew and passengers were told of it) was at low tide at noon when the captain and chief officer figured she was caught on the starboard bow and would hang there while she settled on the port side and astern. They were afraid she would turn turtle, but the bow pounded around and slipped until she settled into a groove, well supported forward on both sides. The wind and the sea from behind pounded and pushed her until she is now, 30 hours after, on the rock clear back to the middle and we can't get off.

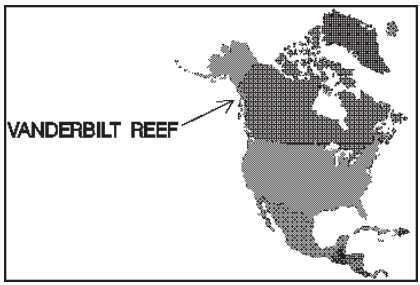
"She is a double-bottom boat and her inner hull is not penetrated, so here we stick. She pounds some on a rising tide and it is slow writing, but our only inconvenience is, so

far, lack of water. The main steam pipe got twisted off and we were without lights last night and have run out of soft sugar. But the pipe is fixed so we are getting heat and lights now, and we still have lump sugar and water for drinking.

"A lighthouse tender, big enough to hold all the 400 passengers and one big launch are standing by. And, as the storm quits we will be taken off and make another lap to Juneau. I suppose after three or four days there, we can go to Seattle, after I reckon we will be quarantined as there are six cases of influenza aboard. The decks are all icy and this wreck has all the marks of a movie stage setting. All we lack is the hero and the vampire. I am going to quit, and see if I can rustle a bucket and a line to get some sea water to wash in. We are mighty lucky we were not buried in the sea water.

"Lovingly, Auris."

Only hours later, Auris W. McQueen was dead, buried in the sea water, as the Sophia started to take on water through a jagged hole in her bottom. Most believed that her boilers exploded when the icy sea water hit them and literally blew her off the reef. The next morning when the rescue boats came out of their coves and lee-side islands after the storm all that could be seen of the Sophia was her mast.



The Sophia was double bottomed and in between the two hulls was heavy crude oil for additional floatation. Ironically, it was this oil that caused the deaths of all but two of the victims.

According to a report to the NWMP detachment in Dawson from Inspector A. L. Bell of the Whitehorse detachment, dated November 6, 1918: "When the vessel was finally driven over the reef it ripped both bottoms off and the ice cold water rendered the oil into one huge and heavy floating mass and it would only require one or two swallows of this to make even the strongest man unconscious."

At least eight rescue ships and tugs were standing helplessly by during the raging storm. In the beginning Captain Locke thought it better that he wait out the high seas, particularly since the barometer was steadily rising, indicating fair weather ahead. His decision was fatal because the barometer was wrong and before more than a couple of hours had gone by, his stranded ship was caught in the teeth of one of the worst gales to hit the area. The pounding sea simply battered the hull to pieces.

Captain James V. Davis, skipper of the Estebeth, described the scene in a newspaper interview in the Skagway Daily Alaskan following the disaster.

"We arrived at the Sophia at 10:20 Thursday morning (Oct. 25) and remained close to her for some time. No attempt was made to put her passengers aboard, so we tied to a buoy 500 feet to the leeward of the Sophia at

ll (a.m.). We launched one of our skiffs and tried to pull up to her but the wind was too stiff for one man to handle the boat.

"At 2:30 the Sophia lowered one of her boats loaded with men. We let go of the buoy and pulled within twenty fathoms of the Sophia but the boat was called back. Those in it got aboard the Sophia.

"Captain Locke of the Sophia said they were resting securely on a shelf. He said he wished us to stand by until the wind went down and then to come alongside and take the passengers off. He asked me if I thought the wind was going down. I could not make him hear, but signaled by shaking my head that it was not.

"We remained close to the wreck until 5:45 Thursday night. The tide dropped and we anchored at Mab Island, twenty minutes' run and in sight of the Sophia. The Peterson and the Amy still were near her.

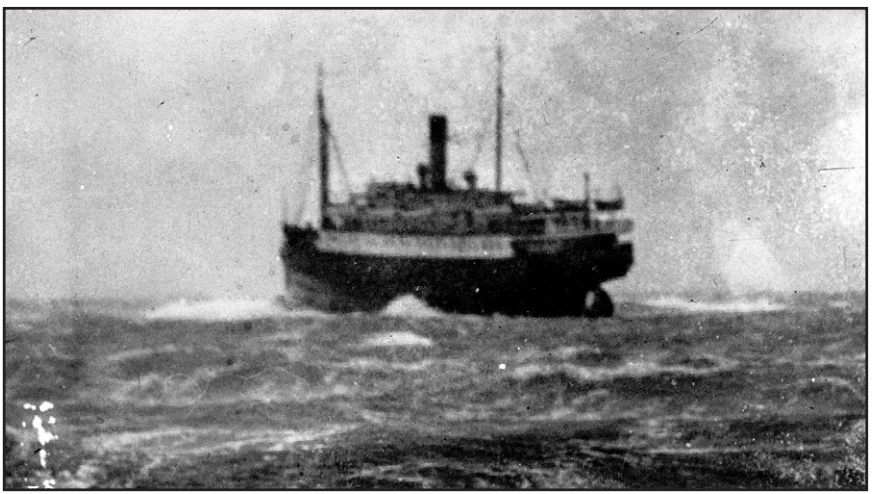
"At eight o'clock the lights showed four boats standing by. Friday morning the Cedar and the King and Winge were hove to near the wreck and the Sitka, passing near, headed for her. The Elsinore and the Excursion had come in and anchored near us Thursday night.

"The Sophia was visible all day Friday and had steam up and fire in her boilers.

"Friday night at seven o'clock a raging blizzard came. Snow and a heavy wind continued all night.

"We dragged anchor several times and finally moved to Bridget cove out of sight of the wreck.

"Saturday morning we landed at Mab Island and walked to the outside beach. Nothing was visible but the mast of the Sophia. We went to the scene of the wreck and found she had shifted clear over the rock and swung nearly completely around and was resting level fore and aft with a slight list to port.



The windward side of the Sophia, stranded on Vanderbilt Reef in stormy seas, October 24, 1918. [Alaska State Library, Winter & Pond collection]

"Her hull was open and dented at the bow. At high tide the water reached the water line aft. It lacked two to three feet forward of reaching the water line.

"Saturday we cruised the east shore of Ralstone, Lincoln and Shelter islands. No wreckage or boats were sighted. We went to the Tee harbor with the Adolphus. It was too rough to make landings.

"From the Adolphus we received reports of seven bodies and three boats which had stranded on the northwest side of Shelter Island. We lay in Tee harbor Saturday night. Sunday morning we cruised the east shore of Shelter Island, down Lincoln pass and sighted two boats, bottom up, just through the pass.

"We reported to the Cedar at anchor under Lincoln Island and then cruised Barlow cove on the northern end of Admiralty Island. No wreckage was sighted and it was too rough to make a landing.

"We came back around Barlow Island and spoke to the Sitka. They reported twenty bodies aboard and said the King and Winge had twenty-three, all picked up near Young's point. We came down between Horse and Colt islands and sighted no boats or rafts. As it was getting dark, we headed for town. Much oil and wreckage, chairs, buckets and such were in the water as long as we could see.

"I wish to state that any time Thursday we could have taken all the passengers and the crew off the Sophia. It was not too rough for a fourteen-foot skiff to go to the windward of the Sophia. Boats and rafts easily could have come down with the wind. Captain Locke simply gambled that the wind would go down instead of coming up or figured his vessel could weather the gale. The passengers evidently were satisfied to stay aboard as not many were on deck and at one time we could hear a piano being played.

"The nearest we got to the Sophia was fifty feet."

It was the Cedar that received the distress call shortly before 5 p.m. It was frantic. "We are foundering on reef. For God's sake come and save us."

Captain James N. Leadbetter of the Cedar immediately replied that he was on his way. The Sophia answered: "Alright, but for God's sake hurry. Water coming into room."

Captain Leadbetter faced the Cedar into the teeth of the gale as icy sea water slammed over the decks. It was hopeless. He was risking his own ship and crew. The Cedar retreated back into the safety of the cove in utter despair just in time to receive one last message from the Sophia: "Just in time to say goodbye. We are foundering."

Some of the bodies were never recovered. Two months after the disaster, 160 bodies were still unaccounted for. Almost a year later, 283 bodies had been recovered, 85 from the wreck itself. At last report there were 60 bodies still unaccounted for.

One body was hauled up the following summer snagged on a halibut hook about 2,000 yards from Vanderbilt Reef.

In January of 1919 official hearings into the wreck were launched. Captain Davis testified that the passengers and crew could have been saved

before the blizzard hit. Captain Miller of the King and Winge said it was not possible. Captain Leadbetter testified he would have done the same as Captain Locke. The hearings continued until August of l920.

But, in the meantime, a salvage firm, Deep Sea Salvage Co., started preparations to raise the Sophia and began selling shares to the public to help finance the operation.

The company actively promoted and sold stocks throughout the Yukon and Alaska but the entire scheme was doomed to failure.

In a story in the Whitehorse Star, dated September 3, l920, the final chapter was written to the story of the sinking of the Sophia.

"The word 'finis' probably has been written in the story of the raising of the Princess Sophia by the Deep Sea Salvage Company of Seattle for last week the work was abandoned and it is almost certain the company will go into bankruptcy.

"For two years the newspapers of the north have been filled with doings of the company which earlier carried big display ads inviting the public to buy shares in an enterprise that was sure of success and that would return to the stockholders unheard of dividends on money invested. The prospectus set out in addition to the large sum secured through salvaging the wreck of the Princess Sophia there would be at the least calculation $50,000 in cash and gold dust in the vessel's safe....Many people were gullible enough to accept the statements as true and took shares in the business that held out such alluring prospects of 'big returns'.

"And now, after two years of worry and disappointment, in which time several unsuccessful attempts have been made to raise the wreck, the disillusionment comes. The purser's safe on board that vessel was recovered a few days ago and upon being opened was found to contain only about $l0,000 in cash and gold dust.

"As the Douglas Island News remarked: 'It was a romance all right, but sordid romance with a touch of bitterness in it at the end'."

Deep Sea Salvage did, in fact, go broke and the scheme collapsed two years to the month from the time the Princess Sophia went down in the worst sea disaster on the entire Pacific coast.

Dawson City never really recovered completely from the loss and numerous businesses folded because there was no one to pick up the threads of commerce.

Virtually no one in Dawson City escaped losing a relative or friend. Flags flew at half-mast and the city mourned.

The Dawson Daily News of October 28, l9l8, wrote:

"Never before has the hand of sorrow been laid so heavily on this community. Never before has the toll of a single occurrence even approximated that of this day."

About two weeks after the tragedy, on November ll, the Armistice was signed to end World War l but it was met with a heavy pall of gloom in Dawson.

All that was ever retrieved from the sunken hulk of the once-luxurious liner were souvenirs such as bottles, poker chips, glass lamp shades and

the few articles that could survive the indomitable salt sea. According to one report, divers who visited the wreckage about 50 years later found only a formless white mound which was slowly sinking into the mud in 60 to l00 feet of water, covered completely with large sea anemone.

She lay on her side with gaping holes in her body, stark testimony of the Sophia's last agonizing death throes.

A Royal Commission set up by Ottawa found the ship was lost "through the perils of the sea." As to why the passengers were not landed is a matter of conjecture.

Litigation dragged on for years. There were 227 claimants that charged that the Sophia didn't carry a sufficient number of lifeboats; that she didn't have a full and competent crew nor was there a sufficient number of seamen skilled in emergency procedures.

In l922 the CPR, feeling it had no defence, went to the district court of Alaska and admitted its liability and procured an order compelling the U.S. Commissioner at Juneau to assess all damages in favor of the claimants on two acts of negligence:

- negligently navigating the Princess Sophia at night at full speed in a blinding snow storm.
- failing to have a lookout man on the bow at the time she stranded.

Slightly more than $2 million was awarded but the legal battle wasn't over. In fact, it was just beginning. The CPR's lawyers, Boggle, Boggle and Gales, suddenly came across an old law from the clipper ship days. It was called the Limitations Act and it limited the amount of damage to the amount that the company collected in insurance. It also included the money earned in freight and passengers after expenses.

The CPR, armed with this new argument, appealed the Alaska court decision before Judge Jerimiah Netter in Seattle on August of l929—nearly ll years after the tragedy.

The company asked the judge to set aside the judgment and Netter complied, ruling that the Sophia, being of Canadian registry, was not subject to American law. He reduced the number of claimants from 227 to l3 on five specific grounds. The relatives of the dead were shocked. They had asked for $l0,000 for each person who died.

They appealed but it wasn't until three years later, on October 4, l932, that a circuit court at San Francisco upheld Netter's decision. They took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court but, whether that court thought the case wasn't important enough or that it was already swamped with work, it refused to review it.

The l3 relatives received the grand sum of $643.50 to be divided between them.

There are always stories of fate stepping in and sparing or dooming individual lives and the saga of the Sophia is no exception. Two such tales involve two Whitehorse residents Brud Cyr and Ralph Zaccarelli.

Brud Cyr was only five years old when he and his mother arrived in Whitehorse from Dawson City in October of l9l8. His mother had purchased

passage on the Sophia but just before they were going to board the train for Skagway, she was offered a job in Whitehorse and cancelled her trip outside. It saved their lives.

However, fate was not so kind to Ralph Zaccarelli's father, John. He had moved his family to Berkeley, California, and had stayed in Dawson to close out his cigar store business. He had purchased a ticket on another ship but when he arrived in Skagway he met his sister, Mrs. C.J. Vifquain and her daughter, Joy. In order that he could travel with them, Zaccarelli traded tickets with a lawyer named Austin Fraser.

The trade doomed Zaccarelli and saved Fraser's life, albeit for only a matter of weeks because Fraser died two weeks later of the Spanish flu that was raging throughout North America at the time.

Mr. and Mrs. Murray S. Eads, owners of the fancy Royal Alexander Hotel in Dawson, hadn't been outside since they arrived during the gold rush of '98.

They made an attempt in l90l when they went so far as to book passage on the Islander but changed their minds at the last minute. The Islander sank on that trip.

The near tragedy shook the couple up and they feared the sea. But, a holiday was long overdue so they swallowed their uneasiness and booked passage on the Princess Sophia and joined the 342 other doomed men, women and children.

Captain Locke was 65 years old when he went down with the Sophia.

Divers and workers on boat above sunken Princess Sophia, her mast visible on left. [Alaska State Library, Winter & Pond collection]

Ironically he was due to retire within a matter of months. His body was never recovered.

Born and raised in Halifax, Nova Scotia, he ran away to sea when he was about l2 or l4 years old and the sea was to be his life.

J. J. George of Vancouver sailed as a helmsman with Locke on the Sophia in l9l7 and said later: "He was very highly rated as one of the finest seamen on the coast." Another person who knew Locke personally described him as "a terrific seaman."

The Princess Sophia was to have left Skagway at 7 p.m. October 22 but carpenters were busily putting together 70 additional berths to add to the usual l98 passenger limit. The delay was three hours and by l0 p.m. the ship was on her way, missing the tide and probably sealing her doom.

George said the hills all along the Inside Passage are filled with metal and compasses were virtually useless. That, coupled with strong tides and blizzards, made navigation purely guess-work.

The Sophia's Chief Officer Frank Goss was a noted British Columbia swimmer and he was the only one aboard the Sophia who actually managed to make it to shore. His frozen body was found well above the water line, dead of exposure.

With him was the small brown and white setter which had originally belonged to Mr. George. George took the dog with him on most of his early trips up and down the Inland Passage and even trained it to climb the ship's ladders, something that most people thought was impossible. He gave the dog to a sea captain in Victoria when he joined the Royal Air Force and the captain, in turn, gave it to Goss.

George would have, in all likelihood, been on the ill-fated Sophia except for a friend of the George family.

The friend, an amateur astrologist, visited the George apartment one night and during the course of the evening asked for George's birth date. He read his stars and promptly urged him to "leave the water" because it was becoming a very dangerous time.

"I promised that I would although I had no intention of doing so," George recalled.

The friend realized it and as he was leaving the apartment he turned to George's mother and said: "Mrs. George, it's up to you to see that your son comes off the water. If he doesn't, you're the one that's going to suffer."

George sailed next night but when he returned home he found his mother almost ill from worry. He had no choice. He made one more trip and quit the sea. He got a job in a wholesale drycleaning business and soon after joined the Royal Air Force.

But, he was to have at least one more trip to sea. While he was waiting for his call-up from the air force he received a frantic call from the captain of the S.S. Montegal that was to carry the first contingent of Canadian troops to Vadavostok. He would hire on as Fourth Officer.

On the urging of his mother, George contacted his astrologer friend and asked him if this danger was past. The astrologer said it was, so he shipped out for Japan and Vadavostok. On the way, he heard of the Sophia disaster.

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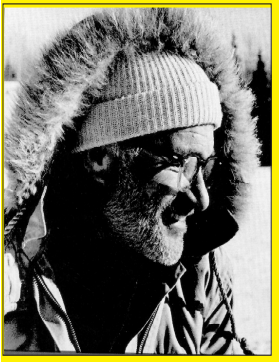
Joe Loutchan & Gang



Richard Harrington

Richard Harrington shot this photo in 1972. Some of the photos he took on this trip appeared in *Richard Harrington's Yukon*, published in 1974.

The cabin, which once belonged to a riverboat woodcutter, is at Hootalinqua and at the time of this photo was being used by Monty Alfred (author of *Yukon Water Doctor*).

From left to right: **Russ Graham** (now a consultant in Whitehorse), **Wayne Towriss** (publisher, Studio North), **Keith MCall** (a B.C. film maker), **Joe Loutchan** (the Yukon's champion fiddler), and the late **G.I. Cameron** (retired Mountie who once patrolled by dog team and boat from his headquarters at Fort Selkirk. His daughter, Ione Christianson, is the Yukon's new Senator in Ottawa).

A horse threw Joe Loutchan over its head on a guiding trip and he broke his wrists, hence the casts. Joe says it took him a long time to re-learn the fiddle. Also shown is his dog, Duke, a lazy, deaf Malemute. See the back cover of this issue for more photos of Joe.

[Photo courtesy of the Yukon Archives, Harrington collection]

HANDSTEELING

When I was about sixteen years of age I was hired by a small mining company to work on a prospect about twenty miles from the railroad.

The property had just been found and several veins showed promise. Our task was to dig off the overburden and expose the bedrock to establish the length, width and value of the veins found. Once bedrock was exposed and the vein located we then had to drill and blast a trench across the vein to a depth of two to three feet in order to sample uncontaminated material. This was done by handsteeling.

Handsteeling was an art and a skill and not everyone was suitable or capable of it. The holes were drilled by using a three-quarter inch diameter drill steel which came in lengths of two to five feet. One end of these rods was hand forged to a chisel shaped cutting edge. The forging and tempering of this steel on a small, portable forge was a highly skilled job and a good smith was much valued. The other tool was an eight pound sledge hammer. One man sat and held the steel while the other man swung the hammer and struck it. A good pair of men could drill ten to fifteen feet of hole in an eight hour day, in hard rock.

I was paired off with a small, wiry, grey-haired man named Sam Barclay. He was a superb handsteel man and a fine instructor. He was master of the skill and I later found that in the 1920's he had won the world championship of handsteeling at a contest in Cobalt, Ontario which the best in the world attended. He had little to say and never got upset or lost his temper, no matter the provocation. I had just enough brains to pay attention and watch closely everything he did.

Sam's first action was to select a hammer. He didn't take the first he came to. He examined hammer heads and chose one whose faces were exactly normal to the axis of the hammer and whose handle hole was free of

* A grab sample is a representative piece of rock from a vein or mineral deposit, taken to show the character of the deposit.

metal. He then examined dozens of handles. He picked one from the lot that was absolutely straight-grained and with no sign of warping or checking.

Once the handle was chosen, he trimmed the top ten inches to a small, five-eighths inch diameter, using a piece of broken glass to trim the wood. Then, a three-quarter inch wide strip of thin leather (from an old shoe tongue) was wrapped around the top of the handle and it was driven home into the head. A wedge held it securely to the hammer and it was ready for use. It seemed a little fragile to me as the head moved on the handle and the handle could be bent like a limber buggy whip. I was to find out later that this flexibility gave a large added force to the blow.

The first day we drilled, Sam got a gunny sack which he stuffed with dry grass. He called this a "Dry Ass". He picked the spot where we were to drill the holes and gave me the Dry Ass.

"Sit here," he told me, "and hold the steel straight up and down on this exact spot. I will hit it and it will bounce a bit. When it comes down grasp it, give it a quarter turn and hold it firmly on the same spot. Don't move the steel or flinch, I won't hit your hands."

I sat and grasped the steel. I watched Sam. He swung the hammer well over his shoulder and with a full swing brought it down on the steel. I had an awful urge to snatch my hands away but held still. The hammer bounced back and down it came again and again and again. I was stiff with tension but managed to start turning the steel and was pleased to see it making a hole in the rock.

Sam paused. "You are going to wear your neck out watching the hammer go up and down. I told you to turn it and hold it still. Now do it right!"

The compulsion to watch the hammer was finally overcome and I

began to believe that Sam wouldn't hit my hands. The proper placement and position of the steel began to engross me and the day passed quickly.

Sam never seemed to tire and I began to watch his style. How he held the hammer, how far he swung it and how much effort he put into it. I wanted to try it myself. Expressing these desires several times I was told, "When I think you are ready."

After about a week we went to work one day and Sam grabbed the Dry Ass and sat down holding a steel. He waited for a while then asked why I wasn't working. I picked up the hammer and then noticed a peculiar change; the steel had shrunk to a minute spot of metal surrounded by two huge, bony hands. I picked up the hammer and grasped it in a death grip and with every muscle tensed I lifted it about a foot above the steel and gently tapped it. This action went on for five or ten minutes and I was becoming weary from the utter tension of locked muscles. Sam had not said a word. As I paused to relax Sam looked up and told me; "You had better swing that hammer a lot harder, throw it over your shoulder and let it rip! It would be nice to finish this hole before Christmas."

All I could see were knuckles and did not improve the swing. Sam muttered something about useless young bastards and a few other choice in-

sults. They produced the result he wanted. I became so angry that I swung the hammer from my heels, feeling that now his knuckles were his own look-out. To my great surprise I hit the steel dead centre. The hammer rebounded nearly to its starting point so I swung again. Getting the same result I continued. Once the rhythm had been established, the work was easy, like paddling a canoe or trotting steadily. After while I was taking a great deal of pride in my new accomplishment. Sam called for a break and I smoked. I was full of chatter about the joys of swinging the hammer and how hard it had been to start. Sam looked at me and said, "Sorry for the bad time I gave you but had to get you mad enough to forget my knuckles. Same thing happens to everybody. Lets get back to work."

Things went very well from then-on and I held my end up easily. I started to brag about our footage in camp and probably was very tiresome to some of the other men. But an old saying has it "Pride goeth before a fall." It did.

One hot and muggy afternoon the blackflies were more bothersome than usual. I was hammering and Sam was holding. Just as I started a swing, a blackfly bit me on the eyelid. I flinched and in the next instant was bent over watching the blood spurt from Sam's knuckles.

I was completely horrified but Sam, expressionless, calmly raised his hand and spat a mouthful of tobacco juice on the wound. He then rubbed it in. I was bent over Sam with my hands on my knees and babbling.

"Are you all right Sam? Is your hand broken? I'm sorry Sam." And other foolish things.

Sam regarded me impassively but did not reply. Then, suddenly, he whipped the steel from the hole and rapped me sharply across both shins. I dropped to the ground doubled up. The agony was unbearable. In spite of myself, tears spurted from my eyes and I couldn't get enough breath. I knew that both legs were broken. This condition lasted for some time until Sam in his usual laconic voice said, "Stop rolling around on the ground like a damn fool. When you are rested enough, we can start work again!"

I tottered to my feet and swung the hammer. I could hardly see the steel but there was no way that I was going to miss it.

Sam never mentioned the incident but others noticed his scabbed knuckles with glee after my previous boasting. They mentioned them.

But... I NEVER HIT ANOTHER KNUCKLE!

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Klondike Photographer Asahel Curtis

By William J. Betts

There have been volumes written about the gold rush to the Klondike: how the stampeders struggled over the Chilkoot and White Passes, how thousands went north to the Yukon but few found the riches they'd dreamed about.. But little has been written about those rugged individuals who photographed this epic piece of history. Their riches were not in gold but in the many great photographs they made on their trek to the gold fields. One such photographer was Asahel Curtis.

When the *PORTLAND* sailed into Elliott Bay that July of 1897, with over a ton of gold aboard her, there was a photographer there to meet her, Asahel Curtis. Curtis worked for his elder brother , Edward, a Seattle commercial photographer. The news of the returning miners loaded down with gold spread like a prairie fire across the city, the state, the nation and finally the world.

At the time there was a bad economic slump that had thrown many men out of work. Seattle was full of loggers and mill workers looking for work. The gold fever that swept the nation was like food to the starving. It was to boost Seattle from the worst of times to the best of times. With stories of claims on the Klondike producing as much as $50,000 and even one that went to $130,000, the fever burned hotter than ever. So little wonder that men went wild with the urge to go to the Klondike and become rich.

Like thousands of other young men in Seattle, Curtis was fired with an ambition to head north on the very next steamer, but not as a miner but as a photographer. He was engaged by a Seattle newspaper to follow the route to the goldfields and secure a photo record of this great event. In September, just three months after the *PORTLAND* steamed into Seattle, Curtis booked passage on the *S. S. ROSALIE*, captained by John A. O'Brian, a veteran skipper of Alaska waters.

There was more to it than just boarding the steamer and sailing to Alaska. First, Curtis had to find a couple of men to go with him and then there were the supplies. Each man had to have a year's supply of food

before the Canadian government would allow him across the border. And also there was a year's supply of the proper clothing as well as camping gear. Then there were certain tools one would need, especially if one chose the Chilkoot and White passes—the river/lake route to the Yukon. Then he would have to build a boat to transport these supplies and gear. Curtis, in addition to all this, had to bring cameras and the photographic supplies that would permit him to develop and print his film, not to mention the glass plates he would need. Curtis's party would need tons of supplies and it all had to be loaded on the *ROSALIE*.

When the ROSALIE dropped anchor at the headwaters of the Lynn Canal, a new city was springing up on the Skagway Flats, with tents everywhere. There were no docks although there was one being constructed at the time. At high tide, supplies and equipment were off loaded onto barges and lighters and then towed to the beach. At low tide, when the barges were left high and dry, the supplies were carried above the high water mark and dumped. If it was horses or other stock, they were simply lowered over the side of the ship and forced to swim ashore.

Asahel Curtis and most of his supplies were unloaded in the first barge , but before he could secure the rest of his equipment, including his precious cameras, a gale blew out of the mountains. To save his ship, Captain O'Brien was forced to pull up anchor and steam down Lynn Canal to a haven at Pyramid Harbor. Curtis watched the disappearing *ROSALIE* and wondered if he would ever begin his career of photography in Alaska. What is the *ROSALIE* left for the States with his cameras still aboard? Worse yet , what if she foundered in the storm? But then the wind died down and Curtis was relieved to see the *ROSALIE* steaming back to Skagway.

There were many newspaper correspondents already in Skagway from the Pacific Coast area as well as from Chicago and New York. They had to send their copy out by steamer as there was no telegraph to Skagway. The newspaper men were curious about the photographer from Seattle.

"Are you going to the Passes?" he was asked.

"Yes," answered Curtis, " I want to take pictures along the trail before I head for the Yukon."

"Ha, that's a good one. You'll be just like the rest of us, Curtis. You won't get any further up the passes than Liarsville."

Liarsville, he was told, was a point about five miles up the Passes beyond which no reporter ventured. The going was just far too rough for them—they depended upon returning packers for their stories, or just fabricated their own. Hence the name, "Liarsville."

It wasn't long after Curtis had made many trips up the trails to the passes with his camera that the reporters were changing their minds about this rugged photographer. They were soon clamoring for him to sell some glass plates to them. They began pleading with him.

"No" Curtis told them, "I came here to photograph the goldrush, not to set up a commercial studio."

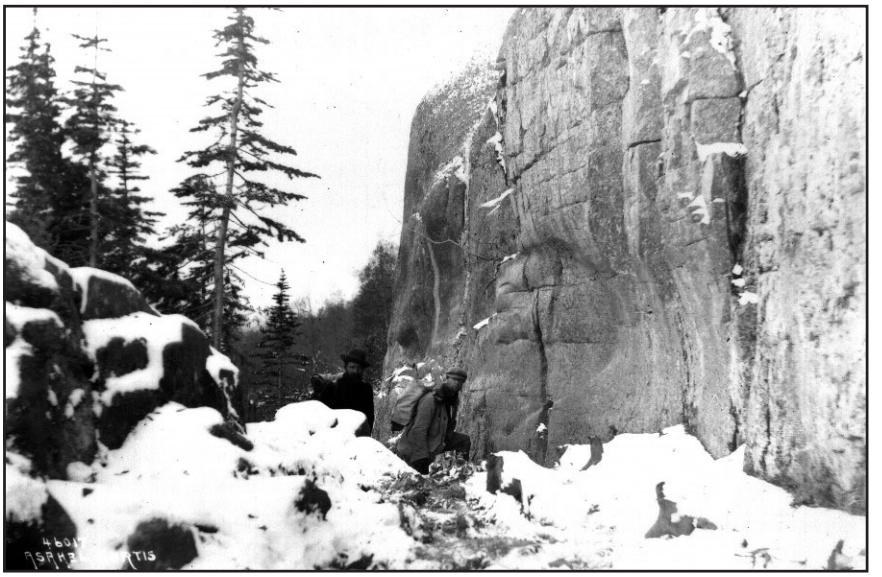
Skagway was growing fast and every time Curtis returned to the burgeoning town, which he'd made his base camp, the reporters clamored for

stories that they could send to their home papers. So Curtis became a sort of mailman delivering letters from those at the summits back to Skagway where they would go out on the next ship bound for the states. He would also deliver mail to those he knew at the summit or to the packers on the trail. Sometimes when he returned to Skagway he would be packing as much as a hundred pounds of mail.

But Curtis was a photographer and dedicated to his craft. His primary interest was to capture the life on the trail. And this he did very well. He pictured man and animal struggling on the trails as well as the disillusioned men at Skagway who were waiting for a return voyage back to the States. He photographed the tragic death of horses on the White Pass. He estimated that over a thousand horses gave their lives on the cursed trail of blood. So bad did it become that it was called "Dead Horse Trail" by those who used it. A horse would fall dead from exhaustion on the trail and rather than moving it, packers walked over it, trampling the poor animal into the muck of the trail.

It was late in the fall of '97 when Curtis and his party decided to move on to the Yukon. They hoped to beat the freeze up even though it was late in the season. But it takes time to move over a ton of supplies per man over the rugged White Pass trail so the Curtis party didn't reach the summit before the snows set in. Just below the summit they met a group of former business men from Seattle camped in the deep snow. They told Curtis they hoped to get their supplies across frozen Summit Lake the next day.

"Maybe you fellows better wait a few days," Curtis admonished them. "That ice hasn't had a chance to freeze deep enough for a crossing. It's too thin yet."



Curtis and partner on the White Pass trail in 1897.

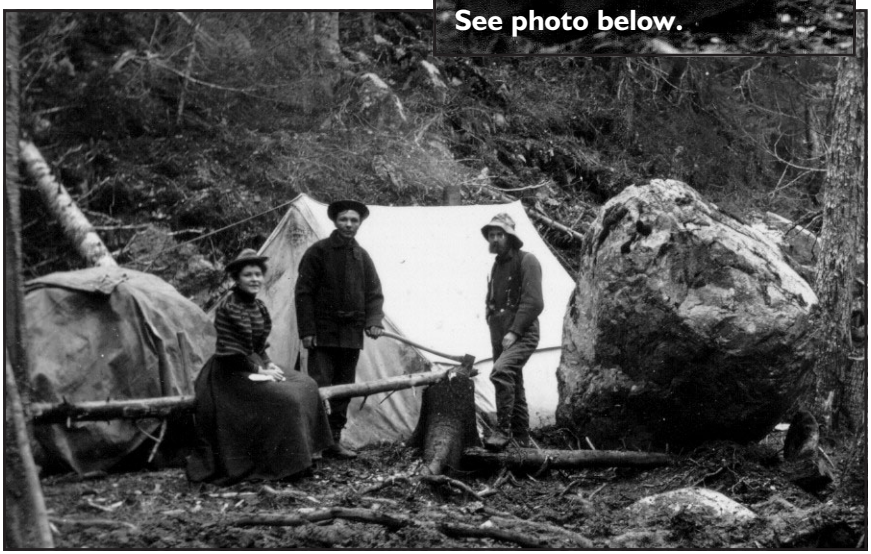
Wesley Young, their leader replied, "We've got to take our chances tomorrow. We've wasted too much of our time now. Maybe we can still hit the Yukon if we hurry." The next day two of Young's companions drowned when they broke through the thin ice of the lake. It was an occurrence that happened more than once to those who took too many chances on the trails.

At frequent intervals along the trail men and women, had set up small eating places. They were usually nothing more than wall tents with very few creature comforts. Yet these places afforded the weary traveler a chance to stop and have something to eat that he didn't have to prepare for himself. Usually the menu was nothing more than bacon and beans and if he were lucky a piece of pie.

See photo below.

Curtis told about one experience he had at these wayside eateries that was both amusing and sad at the same time. The owner and chef of one of these places surprised Curtis. "How about a nice beef steak?" the owner asked. "I just received it fresh today. Very nice. Very tender."

"No thanks," Curtis replied, "I'll just have some bacon and beans."



French camp on the Skagway trail above the ford.

Curtis was having no part of that "beef" steak. He had just passed the carcass of a dead horse that had died along the trail and he could readily tell that someone had cut it for "fresh beef." The poor animal had probably died from malnutrition and exhaustion about a mile back down the trail.

Like thousands of others making their way to the Yukon, Curtis was stopped by the winter freeze-up of Lake Bennett. Camps were made here and time was spent felling the spruce from which they whipsawed lumber and constructed, a better word perhaps would be concocted, boats and scows to transport them down the lakes and rivers when the ice went out.

The following spring the exodus began with the spring breakup. A thousand boats and scows set out for the headwaters of the Yukon. Some of these amateur mariners were to lose their lives shooting the rough waters of Miles Canyon and Five Finger Rapids. None of Curtis's party were lost and miraculously there weren't that many others who died. Curtis made sure that he got pictures of men shooting the rapids to add to his mounting collection of exposed glass plates. These he was most careful in handling when he shot the rapids.

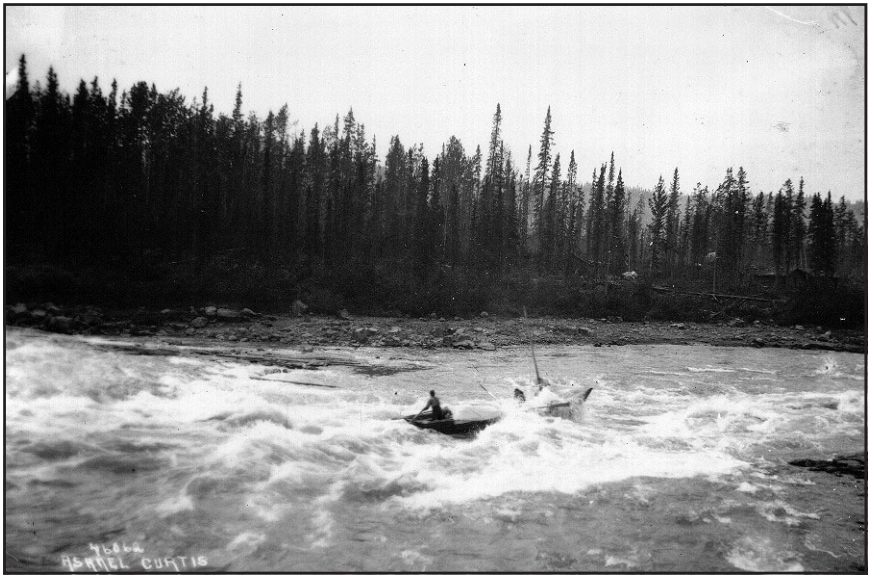
Later Curtis wrote in his journal about watching the procession running through Whitehorse Rapids when he saw a boat approaching with what appeared to be a dark object huddled in the stern. It appeared as though the occupant had collapsed from fright. As it entered the swift flowing current it swung crosswise to large rocks and it seemed that it was surely doomed. Then just as the craft approached the head of the rapids, a side current caught it and turned the bow into the rapids. Just as if there was someone steering it.

Down the white water it came, riding the dangerous rapids perfectly. Then as the craft swept swiftly by Curtis' position on the bank, he saw sitting in the stern, calm as you please, a lone dog. Later he remarked, "That was the only dog to win his laurels as a perfect swiftwater pilot." Perhaps Curtis fabricated this story but he swore that it was true. So many stories just seemed to grow with each telling.

Curtis and his party were among the first to arrive at the new city of Dawson, sprawled along the Yukon where the Klondike entered that mighty river. Over the coming months he was one busy photographer. He recorded the activity in the town, the stern wheelers, the hundreds of makeshift boats that seemed everywhere along the banks. Later he recorded the disastrous fire that nearly wiped out the business district of the bustling town. He was out on the diggings photographing the claims on French Hill, Bonanza, Hunker and Eldorado.

Curtis, in his spare time, took a claim himself on 60 above Sulphur. Here with his partners he built a snug cabin that boasted a window of real glass. Their claim on the Sulphur never became a rich producer like so many others on the fabulous creeks of the Klondike. Curtis had set up a small photo lab and since the miners wanted his pictures he did quite well. In a way you might say that he "mined" the Klondike gold with his camera.

Some of the miners wanted pictures of their diggings, the cleanup from



Stampeders shooting the famous White Horse Rapids. In modern times, many artifacts have been found in these waters by divers. Much of the rapid is now covered by a man-made lake, Lake Schwatka.

“Their hearts turned to stone—those which did not break—and they became beasts, the men on the Dead Horse Trail.” (Jack London)

the sluices, especially the gold. Charlie Hutchinson, one such rich miner, wanted to really show the gold in the picture. He kept dumping nuggets from the previous cleanup into the pans. When he was through dumping the gold there was well over $50,000 in gold lying about, then he left Curtis to take the desired pictures.

"I gotta go down and check on my workers," he told Curtis. "You just go right ahead and finish here."

It was some time before the trusting miner returned. Curtis had long since finished his picture taking, but he hadn't dared leave with all that gold lying about.

"Weren't you concerned about leaving so much gold with a stranger?" Curtis asked the miner when he returned. Charlie Hutchinson looked him up and down for a moment. "No," he drawled, "You looked honest to me."

As a matter of fact, the Klondike had little theft in the diggings. Gold had lost its glamour, it was so common place. The miners and workers just sort of took it for granted.

When one thinks about photography as it must have been during the Goldrush it seems amazing how Curtis managed to get so many great photographs. And how difficult it must have been for him to transport so much equipment over so many hundreds of miles without disaster. And yet he did. But as far as striking it rich in mining, he came up with an empty poke.

When news of the Anvil Creek strike reached Dawson, Curtis was ready to pull up stakes. So he sailed down the Yukon on one of the stern wheelers. Along the way he recorded with his camera the life on the river. At Nome he recorded the diggings on the beach as well as the shipping, anything that seemed interesting to him or had historical value.

Finally in 1901, he left Alaska for the States. Curtis had not struck it rich in the his claim on the Sulphur but he brought back a far more lasting wealth in his collection of glass plates.

Back in Seattle Curtis set up a commercial studio, specializing in industrial photography. His great photographs of Mt. Rainier as well as other areas of the West became well known. But to the historian, the collection of his glass plates of the Yukon gold diggings will long be remembered. Curtis died at work at his studio on March 7, 1941. He was sixty-seven years old.

Editor's Note:

All photos in this story are by Ashahel Curtis, from the Bill Betts collection. Bill wrote this article in the 1960s and interviewed Curtis' sister for some of the details.

Engineering the White Pass Railway

By W. J. Swanson

Part Three*
Construction—Skagway to the White Pass Summit

The charges would be arranged by electrical timing, by the use of detonating cord, or sometimes by cutting fuses to a predetermined length, so that the outer row of holes would fire in sequence along the face of the lift, followed by the second row, the third row, etc. The firing of the blast would be done after most of the workers had returned to camp - others, still working in the area, would be moved out of harms way until firing of that lift had been completed. Cleaning the area, rolling and levering rock over the edge and getting ready for the next lift of drilling would begin with the following shift.

Blasting rock to form the railroad bench was under way; hundreds of men were working at wages considerably higher than were being paid around Vancouver or Seattle, and men were working longer hours - such employment was a boon to those who had landed in Skagway with insufficient funds or those who had lost their money in the clip joints or gambling halls of Skagway. For many of the workmen, the future was looking brighter.

In the meantime Brackett, although heavily in debt, was still operating his wagon-road and was actually carrying considerable freight for the railroad company from Skagway to their workcamps along the White Pass route; thus Brackett's

operation, while being a threat to the railroad company, was at the same time advantageous. Hawkins, although anxious to keep that road in operation until railroad construction reached the summit, could foresee Brackett cutting rates and becoming a strong competitor once the railroad began operations to the summit and beyond. But, in the belief that Brackett was desperate to rid himself of the wagon-road operation, Hawkins arranged a meeting with him in Seattle during the latter part of June. He then proceed to Seattle a week or two in advance of the meeting date, telegraphed Samuel Graves, the company's lawyer, informed him of the situation and had him come to Seattle to attend the meeting.

*Parts One & Two appeared in the last issue.

At the onset of the meeting, which continued for a few days, Brackett asked for $200,000 for his road, equipment and franchises but Graves declined to begin negotiations at that price. Eventually Brackett, probably in desperation, made an offer too good to refuse. For an immediate advance of $50,000, Brackett agreed to settle all his claims against the company, give the company control of his wagon road which he would continue to operate and, for an additional $10,000, he would give an option to purchase the road outright for another $50,000 on the condition that the option be exercised prior to July 1, 1899. (That option, completing the purchase of the wagon road, would be taken up on November 8, 1898.)

Along with a couple of his henchmen Jefferson Randolph Smith, who had once been booked by the Denver police under the name of "Soapy" Smith, had arrived in Skagway during the fall of 1897. (The name Soapy was apparently derived from one of Smith's con schemes whereby he would purchase a supply of standard soapbars, cut them into miniature sizes and wrap each small bar in plain white paper. Then, after setting himself up in a public place he would laud the healing properties of his soap, "which he'd made in his own factory:" As a further inducement to purchase, working in plain sight he'd wrap a few of the bars with a high denomination bill, cover each with another layer of white paper and toss them into his bag. The first purchaser of his five-dollar-a-bar soap would be to an accomplice in the crowd who would, of course, find a high denomination bill which he would wave at the crowd - and no doubt return to Smith later.)

On his arrival Smith recognized the chaotic town of Skagway as an ideal place to set up his business ventures. The place was disorganized, almost the entire population was transient and most, either coming or going, had money to be relieved-of. He set up a criminal organization which included, crooked games, gambling houses, protection rackets, knifings and armed holdups. He operated saloons, a merchants' exchange, and a telegraph office which had no telegraph facilities. Referred to as the King of Skagway, he had the town in his pocket.

But one group, known as the "Committee of One Hundred and One", headed by the town surveyor Frank Reid, recognized Soapy for what he was. The formation of that group was countered by Soapy's enterprise which formed a group of their own called "Law and Order Committee of Three Hundred and Three."

Tension between the two groups mounted when John Stewart, a miner returning from Dawson, was robbed of a poke of gold valued at $2,700. Following the loss of his gold, Stewart proceeded to Dyea where he told his story to United States Commissioner, Judge C. A. Sehlbrede who accompanied Stewart back to Skagway.

Arriving on the morning of July 8, 1898, Judge Sehlbrede met with Smith about noon and informed him he had until four o'clock that afternoon to return Stewart's gold. That deadline came and went. Later that evening, after consuming much alcohol to boost his confidence, Smith, already armed

with two revolvers, picked up a rifle and left to settle matters. Followed by several of his henchmen, he walked towards a group of men who were talking on the wharf and instructed them loudly, "Now all you people better get yourselves home to bed."

Nobody moved.

Smith then walked towards Frank Reid, with his rifle pointing at Reid's chest, and asked, "Well, what the hell are you doing here." Being in close contact, Reid pushed Smith's rifle barrel towards the ground while he drew his own revolver. But as Smith's rifle was pushed down he pulled the trigger and shot Reid through the groin. During that time interval Reid fired two shots - the first went through Soapy Smith's heart, the second through his leg. Smith died instantly. Reid fell, mortally wounded.

After the shooting Smith's followers began advancing, but on seeing the crowd standing firm, waiting for them, decided to leave. Some kept going far away from Skagway while others were picked up and jailed.

Frank Reid died on July 20, 1898, and was buried in Skagway. His grave was marked by an imposing monument, erected by the local citizens and bearing the inscription, "HE GAVE HIS LIFE FOR THE HONOR OF SKAGWAY."

Soapy Smith no longer presented a problem for the railroad company, or for the town of Skagway.

Work edged forward as crews continued to blast a 16-foot roadbed out of the near vertical rock-face at Rocky Point. Although work trains had been operating between Skagway's wharf and the end of rail since the middle of June, on the 22nd day of July, 1898, the first passenger train wound its way through Skagway and up along the Skagway River. That open-air train consisted of two flat cars fitted with wooden benches; the passengers included many of Skagway's leading citizens, and other invited guests, who were given a complimentary ride. The train steamed up along the east side of the Skagway River, crossed over to the west side for a few miles then, crossing a recently completed trestle, returned to the east side of the river. Crews were still working along that section of the track, scaling down loose rock, levelling tracks, finishing another trestle and cleaning up. Beyond the last trestle the train proceeded slowly, past Boulder where the steep grade to the summit began, crossed another, not-yet-completed trestle over the East Fork of the Skagway River and came to a halt a short distance beyond Mile 7 where drillers and blasters were working to notch-out a grade around Rocky Point.

In spite of dining facilities being somewhat below first-class, all passengers, while enjoying a view of Rocky Point and the rugged mountains beyond, were served a wholesome meal before being transported back to Skagway. Although not a profitable venture in a financial sense, the railroad had carried its first passengers and was accorded considerable publicity.

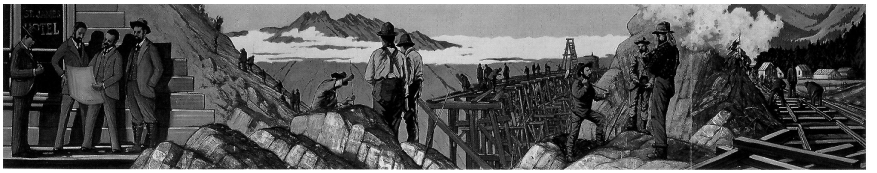
By the latter part of July more than 1,500 men, working two ten-hour

shifts, were strung out in camps all along the route to the summit in an effort to advance the work as much as possible before the onset of the northern winter. That large crew of workmen proved a godsend when, on July 28, 1898, a fire, that had started in a trash heap, spread until it threatened to wipe out much of Skagway. The nearer camps were closed and trains dispatched to bring some 400 men into town to help fight the fire. On arrival, about half of those men were sent to protect the explosives-storage area in which, at the time, some 300 tons of dynamite and black powder were awaiting transport to the work camps. Following the all-day fire, the volunteer fire brigade augmented by railroad workmen and citizens of Skagway working far into the night, finally brought the fire under control.

On August 9th, less that two weeks after the catastrophic Skagway fire, disaster struck again: News of a gold strike near Atlin reached Skagway and railroad workers began quitting en masse to join the rush - many of them left carrying picks and shovels belonging to the company. For the company it was a tragedy. Overnight their work force had been reduced to less than half and thousands of dollars worth of railroad property had been stolen - and it had happened at the worst possible time. A new group of workmen had arrived from Seattle just after news of the strike reached Skagway. Of that contingent, numbering about 250, less than ten joined the railroad workforce - the remainder left the ship at Skagway and proceeded directly to Atlin.

On August 3rd, after reviewing progress and assuming work would continue at the current rate, Hawkins had issued a statement to the effect that the railroad would be transporting freight and passengers to the summit by September 20th. Although his estimate had been reasonable, Hawkins had no way of knowing a gold strike would occur, literally on his doorstep within a few days, and to lose more than half his workers during most of August and much of September - ideal months for construction - must have been a terrible blow. It would take weeks to send an order to Seattle, hire new crews, move them to the job sites and accustom them to such unusual working conditions. Planning of the project had called for a work force of 2,500 men by mid August - the actual work force at that time was less than half that number. But, in spite of reduced man power, by September 30th approximately 17 miles of grade had been completed and more than 12 miles of railway were in operation.

The financiers, far away from Skagway and the White Pass, on hearing



From a mural in the White Pass railway depot in Skagway, Alaska, designed and painted by Roy Minter and Charles Baker.

that the previously announced completion date of September 20th would not be met, had decided to hire their own engineer as their watchdog on site, to ensure the work was being properly done and money was not being wasted. The man they hired to carry out those duties was a Canadian civil engineer, Robert Brydone-Jack, who arrived in Skagway on August 25, 1898, to assume his duties.

Brydone-Jack was a graduate of the Royal Military College at Kingston, Ontario. Although only 36 years old, he had earned the reputation of a capable engineer on several large construction projects, including that of constructing the Canadian Pacific Railway through the Crow's Nest Pass in southeastern British Columbia. He was a clean-cut, well-built fellow who was no stranger to the outdoors and, working along with Hislop and Heney, he made it quite plain that he was not averse to getting his feet wet or his hands dirty. Brydone-Jack and Hislop had developed a friendly relationship and they could often be seen walking the line together, checking construction progress as well as the survey line from the summit to Bennett.

By late September the Canadian Government finally gave its approval for the railway to be built from the White Pass summit to Bennett and beyond and, on October 4, 1898, a ground-breaking ceremony was held at a workcamp, about five miles beyond the summit, to celebrate the extension of the railroad from Alaska into British Territory.

Meanwhile the grade continued to be blasted out of the steep rock slopes along the east side of the Skagway River. One section of the grade, which many observers claimed could never be built, began just past Slippery Rock at about Mile 15.7. At that point a 150-foot-long trestle was required across a deep gorge, and that trestle terminated at a sheer rock-face. Before the trestle could be built; therefore, it was necessary to blast a bench out of the rock face to serve as an abutment on which to seat the northwestern end of the span. Beyond that trestle a 200-foot-long tunnel would carry the grade to the next section of sidehill cut.

Working with ropes and suspended platforms, drilling and blasting crews managed to blast out a notch in the rock, which was eventually enlarged to serve as a benched-out working area where a blacksmith shop, including a forge, was set up to maintain the drilling equipment used in the tunneling operation.

Because the drilling of horizontal holes by single- or double-jacking was extremely difficult as well as dangerous, a coal-fired boiler was also set up, probably on the same bench, to generate steam required for the operation of steam drills used in the tunneling operation.

Black powder, because of its slow burning property, was not a suitable explosive for the tunneling operation; rather dynamite would be used.Nitroglycerin, the explosive agent in dynamite, explodes almost instantaneously - so fast that if one detonated a charge of pure nitroglycerin under a boulder, the boulder would be pulverized before it had time to move.

Dynamite strengths, categorized as 40 percent, 60 percent, etc., identify the percentage of nitroglycerin in that classification of explosive; therefore, the higher the percentage, the faster the burning or detonation, the higher the cost, and the more care required in handling. Also, in general, the higher the percentage the finer the rock-breakage. And, because all rock removed to construct the tunnel would have to be disposed-of manually, a fast-burning blasting agent would have been used; probably a combination of 60 percent and 90 percent dynamite.

Using the full-face method of tunnelling and a pull of eight feet per blast, depending on the properties of the rock, the first drilling may have been four holes, on a four-foot-diameter circular pattern, about the center of the tunnel face. Those holes would be tapered inwards so they would meet at a depth of about four feet; the next ring may have been eight holes on a diameter of eight feet, tapered inwards so the holes would meet at a depth of about eight-and-a-half feet; those twelve holes, forming two cones, are sometimes referred to as 'shatter rounds'. The third ring may have been 12 holes on a diameter of 12 feet drilled, normal to the face, to a depth of about eight-feet-six-inches; and the last row about 20 holes on a diameter of the tunnel size, drilled a few degrees beyond the normal, to a depth of eight-feet-six-inches. The inner two rings of holes then may have been charged with 90 percent dynamite and the remainder charged with 60 percent dynamite. The inner ring would be blown first and each subsequent ring would be blown with a few milliseconds delay.

The theoretical reason for such a procedure is that the first blast will blow out a cone of finely fractured rock, thus leaving space for the second ring to blow into; subsequent rings, which will be more coarsely broken, will also have space in which to break. Such a program would advance the tunnel about eight feet per blast, and the broken rock would be sufficiently small that it could be mucked-out manually.

To advance the tunnelling operation more rapidly, in addition to the crew working from the eastern end, Heney had leap-frogged another crew forward to work from the western end of the tunnel. He had also leap-frogged a drilling and blasting crew to the same area to begin cutting the sidehill bench from the western end of the tunnel towards the summit.

With the Canadian Government's approval to proceed with railroad construction across the international border, a crew of about 200 men were put to work preparing the grade from the summit towards Lake Bennett.

Meanwhile, in order to utilize the existing portion of the railroad to create some income and defray part of the mounting cost, construction foreman Hugh Foy, under Heney's direction, constructed a tramway from Heney Station (about Mile 12.7) down the slope to White Pass City, one of the staging points on Brackett's wagon-road which was then under the control of the railroad. With the tramway in place, freight was carried by the railroad to Heney Station, lowered down the tramway to the wagon-road camp from where it was transported to the summit and beyond by wagon or pack-horse. By the late summer of 1898 the railway was operating two trains daily between Skagway and Heney Station, thus creating its first income.

But the massive loss of workmen, following the Atlin gold strike, set the construction schedule back considerably and that setback was augmented by severe winter conditions that resulted in much of the existing labour being kept busy removing the more than 40 feet of snow that normally fell in the area each winter - it was estimated that, during much of the winter of 1898-1899, more than half of the labour force was engaged full time on snow removal.

On January 29, 1899, the wall of rock remaining, between the tunnel crews working from the east and those working back from the west, was blasted out - tunnelling was finished, and rail laying continued in the dead of winter.

Only one awkward problem remained to be solved in order to complete the railroad to the Summit: at about Mile 19, a very narrow, deep canyon had to be crossed. That problem was solved by crossing to the north side of the canyon and laying a level, double-track, along the west side of the canyon, of sufficient length to accommodate the longest train; about 200 yards beyond that double track a turntable was installed.

Then a train proceeding towards the summit would cross the canyon and be parked on one of the double tracks; the locomotive, or locomotives, would then be uncoupled, switched onto the other track and turned around at the turntable. It, or they, would then back down the track, couple onto the other end of the train and continue to the summit.

Through all those setbacks, caused by both nature and man, Heney and Hislop, usually accompanied by Brydone-Jack, could be seen travelling the route during all kinds of weather. Brydone-Jack, although employed by the financing organization, maintained a close and helpful relationship with both Heney and Hislop, and usually accompanied one or the other, or both, on their inspection trips along the route.

On the morning of February 4, 1899, with enthusiasm mounting as the rails neared the summit, Heney, Hislop and Brydone-Jack left Heney Station on a week-long trip to inspect construction operations from there to the summit - much of the trip would be on snowshoes and all of it on foot. Although all three were physically fit and capable of such travel, for some reason it became a competitive exercise to see who could reach the next objective in the least time; but Brydone-Jack had not been trail-hardened for as long as Heney and Hislop. On reaching the summit that evening Brydone-Jack appeared exhausted; it was extremely cold and their flapping tent gave little protection from the bitter Arctic wind. In spite of suggestions that he return to Skagway for medical attention, Brydone-Jack remained in the tent for another three days while his fever rose and his condition became worse. The next morning, overruling his request to stay, Heney and Hislop wrapped Brydone-Jack in blankets, carried him about one-and-a-half miles to the end of steel, commandeered a locomotive and took him directly to hospital in Skagway. Their efforts, however, did not save Brydone-Jack. His fever rose and he died the following day, February 13, 1899, of "apoplexy brought about by an attack of the grippe."

Heney and Hislop took the loss of such a close associate very hard as

did all others who knew him. To show their esteem, they ordered all company offices closed and all locomotives draped in black during the day of Brydone-Jack's funeral service.

Five days after Brydone-Jack's death, with the temperature hovering at 20 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, the first carload of freight, attached to a work train, arrived at the summit of the White Pass. Only about 20 miles of reasonably level grade remained to be completed between the White Pass summit and Bennett, the nearest navigation point on the upper Yukon River system.

Following completion of that section of the rail from Skagway to the White Pass summit, which passed through some of the most ruggedly difficult construction-terrain ever penetrated by a railroad, the general opinion was that, having completed the most difficult part, the next section from the summit to Bennett - 20 miles or so on a reasonably level grade - would be a simple matter. But nature and unforseen events had ways of interfering with planned progress.

For several days prior to the arrival of that first passenger train at the summit, Heney had noticed that Hugh Foy was not well and that his condition was deteriorating; he'd urged him to take a vacation but Foy refused to leave until after the first passenger train had reached the summit. After the first train's arrival, and the following celebrations on February 20th, Foy made arrangements for a vacation, beginning eight days later, and he booked passage on the steamship Rosalie which was scheduled to leave Skagway on March 2, 1899.

But on February 24, two locomotives became trapped by snow, in a blinding blizzard, between Heney Station and the summit. Foy, along with a large party of men, worked through the entire night to free the engines. On returning to the summit next morning, Foy was exhausted and flushed with fever - he died on the morning he was to begin his vacation and his remains were shipped south on the steamship Rosalie.

As the symptoms exhibited by Foy appeared to be similar to those developed by Brydone-jack, one can only wonder if their lungs may have been partly frozen to bring-on those symptoms. Both had exposed themselves to extreme exertion in very low temperatures - although they may have felt warm because of their intense activity, their parka-hoods would probably have been thrown back and they would have been breathing-in great quantities of frigid air. I believe modern medical practitioners would have found that such patients had their lungs damaged by frost.

To be continued...

The Goldseeker

Part Seven

We sat around the table, shoulder to shoulder, while Clemmy and Faunt brought out trays of caribou meat, baked beans and bannock, with raisin pie for dessert. Then they joined us in the stifling heat of the little cabin. A large coal-oil lamp on a wall shelf sent flickering shadows around the room, and the cabin walls cracked as the temperature dropped outside.

We were a band of adventurers, all of us far from our homeland, but none at the table had any regrets. With the meal finished, Manfred and I lit our pipes. It was time to talk and to listen. We turned to the stranger among us, to hear what this veteran of the northland could tell us—about himself and the country.

Like most oldtimers in the country, he said nothing about his early days or where he came from. The only life that mattered, the only place in the world that counted with Manfred was the Yukon. And now it had been ruined by the Gold Rush. He spoke like a person who had spent many years in school or else he had read a lot of books.

The big strike of 1896, he said, and the resulting gold rush was the ruination of a lifestyle—for Indians and whites—that will never be seen again on this planet. Before the stampede of humanity into the North, the Yukon and Alaska were simply the best places for a man to be on this earth. Almost total freedom and constant adventure—these were the lures that brought a few hundred white men into this country in the pre-Gold Rush days. The Indians here had already lived that way for thousands of years.

Whispers of gold in the far north had reached the ears of southerners for years before anyone headed in here for some serious prospecting. But they had already found gold in California, in British Columbia, in the Cassiar. Civilization moved in and the prospectors left to go north. Here they had set up their own way of life, with their own laws and social conventions. It wasn't the value of the yellow metal that counted. It was the fact that you could dig for it with your own hands, on your own time, with no bosses or clocks or dress requirements. When the gold was in your hand you could sell it for cash or trade it for supplies. There was no need for a middleman or retailer. And then, when the right time came, which was anytime at all, you could leave this piece of ground and go over the hill just to see what went on there.

No other way of living matched placer mining, which means digging for

gold in gravel and sand, rather than rock, for the freedom it gave a person. And then there was the clincher: you just might dig down into a bonanza. As the big strike of 1896 proved, knowing what to do with all that richness was never part of the gold hunter's philosophy.

So, Manfred predicted, all the Kings of Eldorado would squander their riches and then big companies would come in to take over the goldfields. In Dawson they were building houses and stores out of lumber instead of logs. This very year they would have electric street lights. The dancehall girls would be run out of town and the original miners would be outcasts.

"But there is still lots of room out there," said Manfred, pointing his arm to the southwest. Lots of quiet valleys full of moose and grizzly bears, where the wolves answer your call at night and where no church bells ring to tell you what day it is or what rules you are breaking. And little creek valleys with gold.

"Then why are you here, Manfred?" I asked.

He grinned. His good eye looked around at us while the other eye stared upward.

"Because I have a job to do in the spring. For a lady. And I'm thinking if I stayed around town a while, I might find a loose woman to take in as a partner. She would have to be educated so we could talk about other things besides housekeeping."

Clemmy spoke up. "Gert here is going to take lessons from Faunt. She's gonna learn about dead poets and filla-soffa-gers."

"I am?" said Gert. "And what's a filla-soffer?"

"That's a philosopher," said Faunt. "It's someone who has all the answers."

Faunt asked Manfred about his job for the unnamed lady.

"Her name is Elizabeth. She works at the Monte Carlo and has saved a lot of money. She wants me to teach her how to live in the wilderness on her own."

I looked down and caught the table edge with my hands to stop their trembling. Manfred swiveled his head to look round the table.

"You folks know this lady?"

"We know her to see her," said Faunt. "But nobody has ever had a talk with her. Except Hank."

"She's just an old friend from long ago," I said. "But we're not friends any more."

The table went silent for a time. Manfred turned his one good eye toward me.

"You got any claims on this one here?" he asked, flipping his hand toward Gert.

"No, I haven't. But she needs someone who can keep her out of the saloons."

"Gert," he said, "You don't have to study Shakespeare or Plato to come with me. Just be yourself."

"Where will we go, Manfred?"

Her voice quivered as she spoke. She had no fear of men: she had been dealing with them all her life—it was the unknown, the propelling of herself into a new existence that frightened her. I reached across the small table and gently placed my hand over hers.

"It'll be okay, Gert," I said.

I slid my hand away and Manfred reached over to claim Gert's hand again. "I don't know where we'll go," he said to her. "Someplace in the Yukon. We'll have a life... because that's the only life there is, a man and woman together. Anything outside of that is meaningless. Right, Clemmy?"

"You bet." She smiled her beautiful smile and slid her arm through Fauntleroy's. He fairly swooned with delight and spoke to Manfred.

"You mean you might take her away with you? Now?"

We all looked at his face and caught his meaning. The cabin was small indeed. Clemmy's cheeks flushed a bright crimson and the room went silent again as we all stared at Gert.

She looked at Manfred. "You mean you want me to take off to the bush with you, in the dead of winter?"

"I have everything we need for now. A good tent, a good rifle, blankets... In the spring I have a contract with the Queen and I'll able to buy some new traps and mining equipment. We'll have a grand time, you and I, Gert."

"All right. I'll go. But the first time I get too cold, I'm coming back here."

Faunt spoke then. His black eyebrows joined on his sloping forehead like a pair of batwings. "You won't have to worry about being cold, Gert."

And then Gert, the big veteran of the dancehalls of California and the Klondike, turned red too, like Clemmy. Perhaps Manfred was right: that only the bond between a man and woman meant anything at all.

So it was decided that Gert and Manfred would sleep on the floor that night and head out to their new world in the morning. I told everyone I was heading back to town and left them there at the table, talking and laughing.

I crunched along on the hard-packed snow, feeling very much alone in the world. Four hours later I passed the Monte Carlo and paused to listen to the piano tinkling inside, the shrieks of the dancehall girls, and the drumming rhythm of miners' boots as they shuffled around the floor with the girls. I took my old room at the Royal Alex and left a note on Alex MacDonald's door.

At midnight I was drifting off on the soft bed when someone pounded on the door. I opened it to find MacDonald hulking there in the hallway.

"Come to my suite," he said and went clumping down the hall on the crooked floor. The hotel had been built on permafrost and like all the other buildings in town, was starting to shift on its foundation. I dressed and went to his room.

"I've changed my mind about the Monte Carlo," I said. "I want nothing to do with it."

He looked at me from his big chair by the window. I couldn't see his face in the darkness of the room. The smoke from his cigar wafted out the partially open window into the moonlight outside.

"Still interested in some property, though?" he asked. "I have lots of properties. In fact, I just sold some land today. To a lady."

"What kind of property?"

"Just up the Yukon river, maybe 30 miles, there was a roadhouse that was doing all right until everybody moved into Dawson. The land was cleared to grow hay for horses, and there's a big garden. A person could live there the rest of his life. I sold the cleared half of it today but alongside that I have another concession. We thought there would be a town there so we cut some roads and laid everything out kind of square and tidy. Like I said, a lady bought the cleared land and buildings, but you could easily do the same on this other piece."

"Who is the lady?"

"The Queen of the Klondike. Her name is Beth."

"And she's going to live there?" I asked.

"That's what she says. Some trapper is going to show her how to hunt and fish and whatnot and then she will make a life for herself right there. She'll probably hire some man to help her out, soon as she can find one she trusts. But according to rumour, she doesn't trust any man in this world. It'll take one from another planet to get to her, I think. This trapper she's got lined up promised to bring his own woman along. I don't know where he'll get one in this town, especially him being broke all the time and blind in one eye."

"All right," I said. "I'll swap you the gold claim for that other piece of land. Right now."

He turned up the lamp and started scratching words on a piece of paper. He signed it and handed it me. I went back to my room and fetched the deed to the mining claim and signed it over to him, less Jordy's 40 percent. Then I swore him to secrecy.

Beth might wait for spring to move out there. I would be heading upriver in the morning.

I stopped at Jordy's store in the morning and bought a pair of snowshoes and a sled. When I told him about his new partner, Jordy seemed delighted. It would make his share of the claim worth more, he said. I bit my tongue before I repeated my old song about nobody knowing if there was any gold there. Just so one person in the world would know where I had gone, I told him about the concession I had bought. He swore he would tell no one exactly where it was, and if Faunt or somebody asked, I was taking a trip upriver.

Loaded with supplies, I slung the rope over my shoulder and pulled the sleigh out onto the Yukon River. Here the going was easy because a well-packed trail, almost as wide as a road, followed the centre of the river. Every mile or so, I met someone coming into Dawson from Stewart or from as far away as Skagway. Some of them pulled sleighs such as mine; others sped along behind dogteams.

As I left the town further behind, I began to feel a sense of relief. It seemed to me that the air in Dawson was filled with strife, with the energy

of conflict and magnified human emotions. I thought about the dancehall women trying to make as much money as they could before their youth and such beauty as they possessed faded away; and of the miners waking up in the morning to discover they had lost their hard-scrabbled gold to a gaming table to a dancehall queen; of the hordes of newcomers from the south who had followed a fantastic dream of riches, only to find themselves trapped in a dead end, in a place where you had gold to throw to the wind—or you had nothing.

Jordy had given me a map to follow. Big Alex MacDonald said it was 30 or 40 miles to the concession; in fact, it would be 60 miles to my new home. According to gossip, everything Alex described was either bigger or smaller than reality. We were in the Yukon after all. A tiny rumour could start a gold rush; a nickname such as Lord Fauntleroy could turn him into an English duke; a childhood friendship could turn into the love affair of the century.

Such were my thoughts as I plodded along. Before dark, I tied on my snowshoes and pulled the sled over to the left bank of the river where I chopped down a dead tree for firewood and set up camp. On the evening of the third day I camped where the Sixtymile River joins the Yukon River. Somewhere up the smaller river, I heard a pack of wolves howling. I listened to their cries grow fainter as they moved along in pursuit of their prey. For the first time in my life, I felt completely alone.

In the morning I found what would be Queen Beth's new home when she came here in the spring. At least 40 acres of land had been cleared, enough to grow two good crops of hay in one season of the long daylight hours. She would have a small log house to live in, a stable, and between the stable and main cabin there seemed to be a garden, although I couldn't tell for sure under all the snow.

Back from the river, beyond the cleared land, a small foothill rose gently to meet the big mountains behind. As I tramped around the little settlement on my snowshoes, I noticed a log wall set into the first slope of the foothill. This would be for cold storage, I thought, like the root cellars back home. The wall had a small door hung on leather hinges. One hinge had cracked and broken so the door hung crookedly, with an open triangle near the bottom. I ducked down and peered through the small opening. A putrid smell wafted out into the clear morning air, into my face, a smell so evil and unknown that I swayed backward onto the snowshoes and lost my balance.

I brushed the snow off my clothes and was about to head upstream to look over my own land when I heard voices, male and female. I looked down onto the little frozen river to see Manfred and Gert struggling up the embankment.

In a flash his rifle came off his shoulder sling and pointed at my chest. We stared at each other for a moment and he started to laugh.

"So it's you, Hank. Again."

"Yup. It's me. What are you folks doing here?"

"We saw the Queen. She agreed we could come here and get the place ready for spring. She'll be moving out before the river breaks up, in about six weeks. And you, what are you doing here?"

So I told him the whole story about the deal with MacDonald. Secrets were hard to keep in the Yukon. They followed me over to the door into the hillside. Manfred stuck his head through the opening and sniffed the dead air inside.

"A grizzly bear. Hibernating for the winter. We might have to smoke it out of there," he said. "Let's not forget, ay Hank? We don't want that thing hanging around when Beth comes out."

Gert spoke up. "What about me, you jerks? Do you think I want to be here when that bear wakes up? Hey, what about me?"

We looked at her, all wrapped in parka and mitts and high boots, and we laughed. One dancehall queen down, and one more to go.

We unlatched the door and tramped into the main cabin. The brown, smoke-stained logs of the walls soaked up the light coming in through the tiny windows and we could hardly see each other, even though it was still morning. Manfred started a fire in the big stove and I found a coal-oil lamp and lit it. It seemed colder in there than outside so we left the fire roaring in the old stove and set out to look over my own concession.

We snowshoed along the little river until we came to a tiny cabin set on the very edge of the riverbank. A small bit of land had been cleared behind it but the rest of my new home was covered with jackpine. We tramped inside and lit thw stove. The bright mid-winter sun streamed in through the single window and we found something the former owner had left behind.

It was a painting, coated with dust and somewhat yellowed from wood and tobacco smoke. In the painting, three angels with outstretched arms were floating over a pool of water; perhaps it was a small lake or wide river. The angels were coming toward a beautiful woman sitting on the shore who was watching them with big, sad eyes. The woman had dark hair and wore a white gown, similar to a wedding dress. To me, she looked very much like Beth.

"What's wrong, Hank?" asked Manfred. "You see a ghost?"

"No. But that picture isn't staying here."

I took it down and set it outside the cabin. Manfred and Gert watched but said nothing. Probably they had already heard something about my strange experiences, such as being guided by the northern lights, and so forth. We snowshoed back to their cabin and were met by a blast of lovely warmth as we walked in and sat down at the table.

Manfred looked in all the cupboards and found nothing.

"Smart," he said. "Any time you leave food in a place out here, an old griz is likely to break in and help himself. Uh, how much stuff do you have out there on your sleigh, Hank?"

"I'll bring it in," I said. "I suppose you two were going to just live off the land—or on love."

Gert giggled and mentioned how they had been too broke to buy anything in Dawson. I brought in my food and we cooked the old Yukon favourite: bacon and beans and sourdough bread. I went back to my own cabin

for the rest of the day and in the morning Manfred and I set out on a hunt. We brought down a moose upriver and made four or five trips hauling the meat to Beth's homestead.

Leaving Gert behind again, we went out on the following morning to set up a little trapline. We chopped a hole in the Yukon River for a water source and soon we had a life going for ourselves. I always went to my own cabin at night, not staying around to visit them much in the evening. Besides, they had begun to argue and on cold, still nights, I could hear their shouts all the way to my place.

February rolled by, then March and soon the daylight hours grew long. I decided to hike into Dawson with my sled before the river broke up and bring back more supplies, things like tea, sugar, flour, and bullets. Manfred expected Beth to show up shortly after the ice went out. He and Gert began to fix up a smaller cabin on Beth's estate where they would live while he showed the Queen how to operate a homestead.

Of course I went to visit Faunt and Clemmy. She looked ready to burst, so close was she to the end of her pregnancy. Faunt had begun to keep accounts for the miners in the district. He hadn't taken a spell since he cracked his head on the woodpile. They planned to stay in the Yukon forever, they said, and if the newborn turned out to be a boy they would call it... something, and we all laughed. Then I trudged up Eldorado to see if Ben and his lady were still there.

They were home and the woman, whose name was Lucille, hung a sign on their door, CLOSED TODAY, and we sat around talking into the night. They were saving money and wanted to move to Canada. So I set them straight on the fact that the Yukon was part of Canada and I would get Faunt to help them with immigration papers. They had heard different versions of everything that had happened to me. The miners liked to sit around and talk to Lucille after business was taken care of. Everybody knew about Beth and her plans to become a wilderness lady and they also knew I had a cabin close by.

I felt relieved when I heard. The miners would tell the dancehall girls in Dawson everything they knew and they in turn would tell Beth. When she came out to her homestead she would know I was already there. Perhaps she would change her mind and leave for the big cities with her fortune. I wondered too about her attraction to the church. Maybe she would go off to a monastery if she could find one.

She was trying to find herself. Beneath all that beauty and charm, she was just a human being looking for a way to live her life. As for me, I already knew who I was—and who I loved. I could wait here in the Yukon, comfortable in my own skin, to see what the gods held in store.

Over the rest of the winter, Manfred helped me set up a long trapline that took in 90 square miles. He showed me all he knew from his long years in the bush and we built some tiny overnight cabins along the trapline trails. It was too late in the season to actually start trapping, but I was set up for the winters to come. We left Gert alone during these times and when Manfred

and I returned, I could hear them shouting at each other. Their voices echoed off the hills above the river until their door slammed and they settled down for the night.

In May the ice broke up in the Yukon River and all travel ceased while the blocks of ice hurtled past us, clashing thunderously together, sometimes jamming until the river rose to the top of the banks. The sun shone down on us for all but four hours of the day. it never really got dark at all. Except for a few patches of snow in the woods, spring had truly arrived in the Klondike.

A few days after the river cleared, a small packet nudged into the bank below the meadow. Ramps were flung out and men with carts wheeled trunks and boxes onto the grass. A lady walked down a ramp and stood among the boxes. The crew dragged the walkways back onto the deck of the boat and soon it disappeared upriver. Queen Beth stood gazing around at her new home.

I watched from the small rise separating the two homesteads. Manfred and Gert helped open the crates and they carried everything into the main cabin, load after load. That night I saw smoke rising from her chimney and lamplight glowing from her window. I watched till she blew out the lamp and went to bed.

In the morning I saw Gert standing on the riverbank, as if waiting for something, then she waved a kerchief back and forth over her head. The same little riverboat blew its whistle and pulled in. Gert climbed on board and they headed downstream toward Dawson. Manfred came by my cabin that afternoon. *To be continued...*

Military aircraft that crashed along Annie Lake Road. (SH photo, 1976)

From the Publisher

Driving to town during October and November can be tricky. This time of year the weather and highway conditions can change every few miles. It's a 30-mile drive from our end of Marsh Lake to Whitehorse. The dusky, morning sky can be perfectly clear when I leave home at 7:45 for my short-term government job. Ten minutes later, at the top of the escarpment just past the Yukon River bridge, there might be freezing rain or a blizzard.

Owning the right vehicle equipped with the right tires and a sand bag or two can take a lot of the worry out of fall driving. The vehicle of choice nowadays seems to be any kind of SUV but these heavy, four-wheel drive gas-guzzlers are beyond my economic reach. The front-wheel drive cars that so many people swear by may not be such a good choice either. It seems like whenever those baby Chevys and Toyotas hit an icy patch and the driver's foot is off the gas they turn sideways and slide into the path of oncoming traffic.

When Sam went looking for a new, used vehicle to replace my Kcar he wanted an old-fashioned rearwheel drive car that he could fix himself. He found one and it's a beauty, at least it is now.

When Sam drove my new 1985 Chrysler Fifth Avenue into the driveway I didn't get too excited. Compared to the compact cars I'm used to this car is slightly smaller than a tank. It had formerly made its home in the Deep South and suffered severe heat damage. The grey vinyl top had cracked and almost completely peeled off and the silver paint had cracks in it too. Inside, the blue velvet headliner hung in shreds from the ceiling. This car had 26 lights and two of them worked. The tape deck had been stolen, the glove compartment pried open with a crowbar, and the radio was dead. The blue velvet upholstery reeked of gardenia-scented air freshener. But the seats were comfortable with only one cigarette burn, on the driver's side.

At the auto wrecker's Sam found two Fifth Avenue cars that were beyond repair. To make a long story short, my car now has a navy blue vinyl top, a beige velvet headliner, and duct tape around the windows. The most important lights work, as does the radio, and the car's interior is beginning to smell like my kitchen —thanks to Sam's pipe and my dog, Pooper.

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