THE YUKONER MAGAZINE

$4.95

ISSUE No.32

- The flying fiddler
- Katy and Vic Johnson
- The paddlewheelers
- Linda's bridge

Carmacks, Yukon, June 21, 2005

ISSUE NO. 32, NOVEMBER 2006

www.yukoner.com

Click on these page numbers to go to that story. Click on page header (Yukoner Magazine) to return to the contents page.

Cover photo: Kamila Holloway, age 5, coming out of kindergarten, Whitehorse.

Published four times annually by GreenInk Publishing
Whitehorse, Yukon
Postage paid at Whitehorse, Yukon
Canadian Publications Mail Agreement No. 40019654
PAP Registration No. 08098

website: www.yukoner.com e-mail: yukonermagazine@gmail.com
Publisher: Dianne Green Editor: Sam Holloway

From the Editor

Sad to say, but this is the last issue we will print - for the time being at least. We bogged down with too many readers, not enough magazines -- but the our biggest problem became the mailing cost increases from Canada Post. It is hard to set a subscription price when you cannot imagine what the expenses will be during the following year.

Everyone knows about the financial difficulties of the postal service. I think if their union had showed a little mercy and looked around more to realize how lucky they are to just have a steady job, those postage increases might not have happened so often.

We also never succeeded in filling the magazine with expensive advertisements. Dianne and I had decided early on that it would be our readers who kept us afloat and they did for a long time. Maybe we all just got old and tired.

Anyhow, the years spent producing this magazine and its predecessor, *The Yukon Reader,* have been the most rewarding of my life. The best part was the new, lifelong friends we made and all the visitors who somehow found the little print shop on Army Beach Road, even though it was facing away from the road.

My three favourite stories were these (although I liked them all):

"A Bank Where a Wild Time Grew," by Walter Beech, "My Yukon Baby, by Yukon Pete Esser and the "Law Family's Grand Adventure," by Jane Gaffin.

"The Christmas Train," by Jared Storey, although short, is one of the best Yukon stories ever.

Sam

Your publisher and editor in their salad days, May 1989.

The Mail Run

Hi Sam,

I have just finished your #31 issue from cover to cover and enjoyed it as usual. I know Dan Davidson who used to send us book reviews before he got busy with the newspaper in Dawson City. I met him shortly after they moved to the Yukon to take up a teaching position.

94-year old Tensley Johnston's story about his 11-km walk though the bush when he was on the trapline and aged 82-years was inspirational. I read it to my husband, a recently retired surgeon, and he was most impressed.

I am writing to ask if you know how I can get permission to reprint the story on the Alaska Highway by Dick McKenna. It's always interesting for tourists to read as they wander up the highway in June and July. I recognize many of the locations in B. C. You asked for anyone who can, to put names to some of the faces. We still have a few people who worked on the highway living in our area and they might be able to identify some of the people.

Judith Kenyon
Fort Nelson, B. C.

Hi Dianne & Sam,

My husband and I made our first trip to the Yukon in 1975 when we were both 28. We both had a very strong attraction to Yukon and the closer we got the more it felt like we were coming home – like we'd both lived there in another life. We were so happy there but had to pull ourselves away because of previous commitments back in Ontario.

Our next visit was in 1982, this time driving an old school bus camper and with two young kids in tow. We were on our way to a job in Norman Wells, NWT. We were there for five years and holidayed in Yukon for one summer. When we left the Wells, we drove out down the Dempster and lingered as long as we could, but once again we had commitments. We are way past due for another visit. We love your magazine so much and it really helps to keep us in touch.

Neil Agroff
Stratford, Ontario

Hello Dianne,

We stopped in at Jake's Corner in August of '04 for a coffee and a blueberry turnover. We saw a guy with an Old Dodge truck and I thought I had hit pay dirt. I went over and said "Hello, Sam." He said he wasn't Sam but his name was Joe from the Lower '49 and if he ever got his truck repaired, that was where he was going as fast as he could travel!!!

We went in the "new restaurant" and met a waitress who claimed she knew Sam and that we had just missed him by a couple of days. It was a

The Mail Run

slow time of day so she could talk to us. When she found out it was our second time to the Yukon and Alaska and that we had driven the Dempster to Inuvik and flew to Tuk she started telling us story after story about her experiences. We found it very interesting.

The first time we stopped at Jake's Corner in 1994, two guys were digging fence post holes to put up a barrier in front of the old restaurant. One guy took a shovel full of sand out of the hole, looked at us and yelled , "Gold. Gold." We all had a good laugh over that one. Anyhow, maybe our next time to the Yukon we will meet you and Sam.

Doug Benson
Bourgett, Ontario

Hello Sam,

On June 30, 2005, five friends left Edmonton in two pickup trucks with our quads and headed to Whitehorse. From there we drove on to Pelly Crossing. On the highway we came across buffalo, wolves, bears, goats and many other animals. It was quite an experience. From Pelly Crossing we unloaded our quads, loaded all the gear onto our machines and headed on to Tatlamun Lake. We camped on the edge of the lake and enjoyed the lake trout fishing. Some of the fish were 25 – 30 pounds. It was mostly catch and release. The group stayed for six days and returned to Edmonton with a beautiful experience of the Yukon.

Andy Butt
Edmonton, Alberta

Dear Yukoner,

I request a back issue (issue No. 21); the article of interest is "Those Damn Disney Dogs." The story relates a movie Disney did in the early 60s or late 50s about a dog and his adventures with a trapper. The movie is titled Nikki, Wild Dog of the North.

My father Jim Hickling was a RCMP corporal at Fort Norman when the dogs were given to the police to run the dog team patrols, etc. His detachment was tasked with raising police sled dogs for the other detachments in the MacKenzie Valley and Delta. He was given a few of these animals.

Keith Hickling
Norman Wells, NWT

P. S. Missed you at Marsh Lake but did enjoy a swell visit with Tin (Tensley Johnston) at Ross River.

Dear Sam,

Your articles and pictures have given me an insight into a part of the country I've never had the opportunity to travel through. My wife and I live

The Mail Run

on a small holding 40 miles northeast of Brandon. My wife is the secretary for the Hamiota Elementary School. I am a retired school bus mechanic – blew my knee out at work in an accident – so I do the cooking and the gardening. I have several old cars I'm tinkering away at. I've hunted and fished for 50 years so I find those articles of particular interest.
Keith Bennett
Kenton, Manitoba

Dear Dianne & Sam,

I am enclosing two letters over 100 years old that were written at Lake Bennett by Rev. Sinclair in regards to John Cumberland (my grandfather), whom he buried there in 1899. You printed a letter in the Yukoner for me, issue 21, April 2002 with my request for information. I think the letters and enclosed introduction and pictures could be of interest to you and "The Yukoner." I would be delighted if you printed them.
John A. Fulton
Medicine Hat, Alberta

Introduction

John Cumberland died in the Yukon December 2, 1899. He had three brothers: Andy, his partner in the sheep ranch at Maple Creek; Willie, who came to visit from Ontario; and Rev. James in Amhurst, Ontario. Strangely, Rev. James Cumberland and Rev. J. A. Sinclair had been classmates at college in Ontario and were well-acquainted. So, when Rev. Sinclair buried a John Cumberland at Lake Bennett in 1899, he wondered if they might be the same family. When a letter came from Rev. James Cumberland to Rev. Sinclair asking him to look for the whereabouts of his brother, John, in the Yukon, his fears were confirmed and the marvelous enclosed letter was written.

About 1927, Margaret Fulton in some way made contact with Rev. James Sinclair in Amhurst, Ontario, seeking information about her father, John Cumberland. Rev. Sinclair was the son of the Rev. Sinclair who served at Lake bennett in the Yukon and had a wonderful collection of all the letters his father had written while serving there. He searched his father's files and was able to come up with the two letters printed here. My mother was elated in finally finding proof of what had happened to her father. So she and her sister Mary went to Lake Bennett in 1970 and visited the grave of their father, who was buried there over 100 years ago.

The Mail Run

Feb. 13, 1900

My dear Mrs. Cumberland:

Your letter of Jan. 29 is just to hand. Yes, I remember very distinctly burying your husband's remains. He died on December 2nd of Typhoid Fever after a considerable period of illness, I understand. The remains were coffined at Caribou and sent up here by steamer for burial. A number of the railway men here attended the funeral and after services in the railway depot we interred the body in the cemetery just outside of the village.

I not only had the grave marked with a temporary head and foot board, but have made a record of the location in a book which I keep for that purpose. As soon as the frost is out of the ground in the spring, Mr. Heney will fix a nice fence around them and each grave will have a neat, painted headboard with the name, date of death, etc. nicely lettered upon it. The cemetery is beautifully located on a smooth sand hill overlooking the river and every summer receives some attention and care.

I am sorry I know so little about your late husband's illness. He died about 30 miles from here and, consequently, I got few of the particulars. However, I expect to make a trip to Caribou next week and if I can glean any more information I shall gladly do so and write to you.

Had your husband any relatives in Ontario? I was asked to look up a John Cumberland of Stella Amhert Island, Ontario. Do you know if he is the same party? Kindly let me know as soon as possible.

Let me express my deepest sympathy for you in your sore affliction. Death is sad at any time and in every place, but particularly so when we are so far separated from our loved ones. But I assure you that we away up here do not fail to think of those at home who are unknown to us, but who will be saddened by every death. Many a tear have I seen roll down silently over manly, weathered faces as we have together standing around the cold form of strangers, implored Divine Comfort for the bereaved ones far away.

This was not overlooked at our service over your beloved dead, and I hope that the prayer expressed and felt by your stranger-sympathizers be abundantly answered. The affliction and sorrow of our fellow men always stirs in us a new sympathy and interest. How much more must our misfortunes enlist the Divine Compassion and solicit Divine Help. You have lost one great earthly comfort, but may He reveal that in your loss you have gained increased Heavenly communion and comfort. "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you."

In deepest Sympathy, I am
Yours Sincerely,
J. A. Sinclair

Lake Bennett, B. C.
March 9, 1900

Rev. James Cumberland

Stella P. O. Amhurst Is., Ont.

My Dear Cumberland,

I feel ashamed that I have been so long in answering your very kind letter of last spring. I can only plead that I have been very busy, but I did not forget the request made that I should look out for your brother. Consequently, you can imagine how anxious I was when last Dec. I was asked to bury John Cumberland who had died at Cariboo – 30 miles from here.

The railway contractor for whom your brother had been working sent word that he was sending the corpse up to Lake Bennett to be buried and I was nearly writing you at that time but feared that it might not be the same and that I might give you unnecessary anxiety. I had never met him while alive so I made numerous attempts to find out who his relatives were and at last received a letter from his wife at Maple Creek asking regarding his burial, etc. I at once wrote asking her if she knew if he had a brother, a Presbyterian minister in Ontario, but have not yet heard from her.

But Reverend Pringle of Atlin, an old Queen's man was here yesterday and he happened to mention having known John Cumberland in Atlin and in this way I found that I had really buried your brother. So it turns out that my uncomfortable impression at the time was only too true.

I assure you that I extend my deepest sympathies and I know a little of what it means having lost two brothers who died as yours did when I could not get to them.

Your brother was sick for some time at Cariboo with typhoid fever and was attended by a police doctor. He died on December 2, 1899 and was buried here on December 9. We held a service in the railway depot attended by quite a number of railway men, some of whom, of course, had known him. The grave is in our village cemetery on a nice hill overlooking the river. A special fence will be placed next spring around all the railway's dead and each grave will be marked with a neat lettered headstone board – and this Mr. Henry will do at his own expense. Since then I have placed by his grave two others who were accidentally killed while working on the railway. Poor fellows – how hard it seems to meet death in such inhospitable country and so far separated from their dear ones whose tenderness is most of all appreciated in the face of approaching death.

Since coming to this country I have conducted about 30 such sad funerals and I am not yet able to reach out to loved ones far away without faltering. But little did I think my dear Cumberland as I came up here that I was coming among other things to pay the last rites to the remains of the brother of one as well known to me as yourself. My only regret is that I did not know of his illness so as to have visited him. But doubtless he knew of the plan of salvation and it is wonderful how in loneliness and hours of trail up here men recall and respond to early teaching. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right."

In the spring when we have the graves fixed up I shall obtain a photograph and send it to you and one to his wife. This will be some consolation.

From April to July last year, I had Skagway (where I organized a congregation, housed it) and Bennett, on my hands with 42 miles between – only half of which was covered with the railway. Perhaps I didn't have plenty of "mushing" (walking) to do. Besides, I was building here, and as I was architect, carpenter, financeer as well as preacher, you may be sure I had my hands full. Knowing how interested you are in church architecture, I am sending you a photo of the church taken by myself the day after Christmas. It is open and warm for reading room purposes every day and night of the week and well patronized by the best class of young men. We had a patriotic meeting last Tuesday evening in the church at which the voluntary contributions for the Canadian Relief Fund amount to $85. That is not bad for a village of about 300 people.

At a ptarmigan dinner and concert two weeks previous to that, the ladies cleared $100 for the relief of indigent sick men whom we have almost continually some on hand. For a few weeks, I was personally responsible for the payment of $70 per week hospital fees for such. Of course, I had my church people behind me and thanks to them and their liberality we are free of debt. I find that work of this sort is the best kind of apolojectic, and the most effective antidote to Western skepticism, and you may take a fall out of a Western fellow in an argument (quite necessary sometimes to inspire respect) but it will not convince like the quiet devotion to the relief of

Margaret Campbell and Marilyn Wesling, stopping at the Yukoner Magazine headquarters, on their way from Tuktoyuktuk to Vancouver.

the needy, or refusing the less deserving the care because of past bad records.

The second last patient I took to the hospital was an old "whisky stiff" whom I found with an attack of paralysis in the saloon. I provided him with two weeks of hospital treatment and passage to his brother in Washington State. The result is that though the saloon men and gambles occasionally curse me in fine style for disturbing things when they have succeeded in corrupting the police, they can do little harm to my influence. Lately I have been making war on gambling and closing saloons on Sunday. The result was that all the "tinhorn" men – professional gamblers were ordered out of them. Three of them were paying their bills at the hotel. One said to the proprietors, "We've got to go for the present in that damned sky pilot on the hill has been disturbing things." She said she thought they were blaming the wrong man – that she thought it was the Chief of Police's doings. He replied, "Oh no, we know all about it. We had the chief well paid to keep quiet but lately he was forced to act by steps taken by the sky pilot." I now have a trap set for the police and expect to get rid of the chief before long.

Well, I must close for the present as I have another long letter to write and I expect the train in any time.

Again expressing y profound sympathy and commending you to the God of all Comfort I am as ever,

Yours fraternally,

J. A. Sinclair

Art Johns of Carcross visits Army Beach headquarters, with Barfy the Cat running to greet him. (SH photo).

Water Journey to Fort Liard

Bilge Talk

By R.J. Thomas

Discretely ignoring the advice of my friends I decided to sail on with my long, carefully-planned project – a repeat of a river trip I'd made twice many years earlier. Unbeknownst to me, under the tightly fitted floor of my home-built, 16-foot craft there lurked a major threat to the trip's enjoyment, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Having lived for years in Canada's North, I longed to revisit the area. LACKAFFLUENCY forced the budget to be carefully monitored. Self-confidence ruled out the assistance of so-called professionals. I built the laminated, flat-bottomed plywood boat a year before my trip and caulked it thoroughly. Weight and strength were priorities. I acquired a motor as well as a light, flat deck trailer for transport.

The moment of departure arrived and 800 miles later I pulled into a friend's yard near mile 300 on the Alaska Highway at Fort Nelson, B. C. The rivers there eventually flow into the Beaufort Sea, 1200 miles downstream but I knew I couldn't make the whole trip.

The next day we launched the boat in the Muskwa River under the highway bridge south of town. The lurking leak wasn't suspected or fully appreciated until the next morning at which time the "go" or "no go" decision had to be made. A hand pump was purchased and part of the floor was lifted and notched to allow for bailing. The situation appeared controllable so the verdict was "go." Was the huge tree that had fallen in the wind that night blocking the road to the launch site next morning an omen?

It was "bon voyage" as I disappeared around the first bend. The steady rain was no problem for my chuck wagon-type roof system but the strong winds were. Running all night the first night seemed to be a practical plan but the rainy overcast skies darkened the night deeper than the usual summer twilight, which made it difficult to find the right channel. At one point in almost complete darkness I found myself heading back upstream, prob-

ably on the back side of an island I'd gone around.

Constant bailing was required and the hand pump soon gave up the ghost. I had to use a Dollar Store squeeze pump, which was slower and tedious but eventually the water went down. Silently drifting without the motor running, while bailing, allowed me to hear songbirds in the bush along both banks of the river.

The next day, while concentrating on the now more difficult job of bailing, I heard a sudden mighty crash against the tarp roof and thought the craft was about to overturn. I had drifted close to a cut bank strewn with large, fallen trees jutting out into the current at water level and was broadsided by a huge poplar. I pulled the boat, which was held against the tree by pressure of the flow, and ended up back in the channel more wide awake than ever.

R.J. Thomas (of Castor, Alberta) in his tunnel boat on the Muskwa River.

I decided I'd better tie up that evening and get a good night's sleep. Loading the fuel and heavy motor the day before had done nothing for my already aching back. It was so good to stretch out on the floor between the gas cans and the camp stove after one of my bailing sessions. The sky had cleared and the temperature dropped. In my sleeping bag, wearing two light parkas over a jacket, I didn't feel the chill.

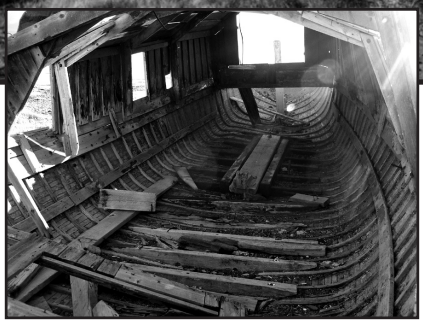
I bailed next morning while waiting for the fog to lift. The cold, the rain, the backache and the perpetual bailing all influenced my decision to pull out at the first community, that being Fort Liard, almost 200 miles from Fort Nelson.

Topping it all off, prior to entering the Liard River at Nelson Forks, my backup pump quit. Last year the boat was used as a float (no pun) in a local parade in which I pretended to bail my bilger using a common kitchen utensil, thus getting a few laughs from bystanders. I thought, in order to generate a little humour at some point during the trip I'd use my parade bailer. As it turned out, this device actually became my lifesaver and it's going to be bronzed and mounted. Never again will I be without feelings of affection and appreciation every time I use a turkey baster! It most certainly saved this turkey's bacon

Once again, in the silence of bailing near a cut bank, a large poplar splashed into the river nearby. In this area, half a day's travel upstream

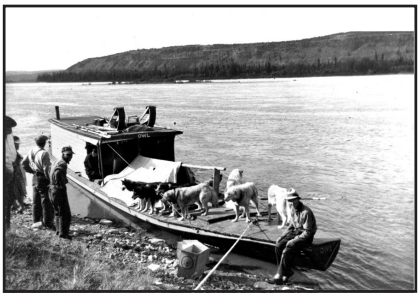
from Fort Liard, the current has eroded a circular bay in the shoreline forming a large swirl into which much of the mail current flows leading one to assume that this is a channel but once in this bay there's no outlet. It took all my horsepower to challenge the current back and get back to the main channel.

A few hours later I landed at Fort Liard. The river, having been fed with heavy rains in northern B. C., was higher than the locals had seen it in years and full of high-water drift logs racing to the sea. A local spectator in a pickup truck at the top of the bank, somewhat amazed that an old codger



R.J. Thomas probably knew he was following an old tradition on the lakes and rivers of the north - getting around in a "tunnel boat." The tunnel boat in the above photo, built around 1920, is called the "Jospehine," named after Josie Jaquot (now Sias) by her father.

It now lies beside Burwash Lodge on the shore of Kluane Lake damaged by weather and vandals. The "Josephine" hauled supplies from Silver City (end of the road from Whitehorse) to the village of Burwash. It is likely the last remaining example of a tunnel boat and should be in the Yukon Transportation Museum.



Above is a photo taken in 1939 by Jim Kirk of a tunnel boat heading for the MacMillan River. S.H.

had come down alone in those conditions, spread the word that he'd spotted a boat and motor for sale and arranged for my ride back to Fort Nelson next morning. The trip left my beard and store-bought teeth a little longer and me with a deeper appreciation of turkey basters.

The Flores - Klaben Rescue

By Jack McCallum (as told to Stephen Hill)

In Issue No. 20, we published the story called, "Against All Odds," about the Yukon's most famous survival—of Ralph Flores and Helen Klaben—in 1963. Here is part of the rescue story that many journalists of the day left out. S.H.

One of the main sources for this story is an article written by Jack's friend, Stan Burton. The Sicamous newspaper, "Eagle Valley News" published it in 2001.

One would think that having a photo they took appear on the front page of Life magazine would be a source of great pride, even though it was taken by a bush pilot and not a photographer. Jack took the photo as one of the key players in the March 1963 rescue of Ralph Flores and Helen Klaben. They had gone down in a plane crash and survived 49 days in the Yukon wilderness. Though many southern newspapers gave him the credit his actions deserved, some confused matters and soured the experience. Thankfully, in 1998 - 35 years after the event, the Flores family set the record straight once and for all.

On that March morning in 1963, Jack came to fuel up his plane at the airport and found an unusual amount of activity around the hangar occupied by the BC-Yukon Air Service (owned by Chuck Hamilton and Hal Komish). When he asked what was going on, he was told that the day before, as Chuck flew over a site south-southeast of Watson Lake, Frank George, a native passenger, saw a large SOS tramped out in a clearing. They flew straight in to Watson Lake and only then figured out that a survivor of the Flores-Klaben crash must have put it there.

Jack was surprised to hear that Chuck hadn't bothered to circle back to investigate or to indicate to whomever had marked out the distress signal, that they had been spotted. For all they would know, they were undetected and were to remain in their misery. Chuck's flight had left them just as had all the other airplanes that had criss-crossed their crash locale during the official air search a month and a half before.

Jack and others had passed over that site many times, even after the search operation was called off after ten days. They hadn't seen any sign of the plane or survivors.

Now Chuck and others were organizing a rescue group to reach the SOS site. Jack was told that there was no landing site close by the signal. The rescue effort would take people out to a trapper's cabin on Aeroplane Lake, some nine miles from the crash site. The dog team maintained by the trapper would then be used to retrieve survivors. Having flown over the area before, Jack questioned the assumption that it could only be reached from Aeroplane Lake, but everyone working on the rescue agreed that this was the only reasonable approach.

Jack was troubled thinking that Flores or Klaben, or both if they had both survived, might linger for yet a couple more days before realizing that help was on the way. The whole organizational effort was taking what seemed like way too much time. One of the delays was in waiting for the CBC TV crew to come on scene.

Jack suggested he fly out to the site to signal them that help was on the way. Realizing this had the added advantage of pinpointing the exact location of the crash itself, the others agreed. Chuck left Jack to the task, stating that he would be taking some of the rescue team to the trapper's cabin.

As Jack was heading off to his plane, Ed McNeill, a Met Tech from the airport came over and asked if he could come along. Jack readily agreed, welcoming an extra set of eyes to look for the downed plane. With the Super Cub refuelled, they lifted off from the ski track paralleling the runway and set a compass bearing that would bring them over the "SOS clearing" indicated by Chuck Hamilton and rescue organizers.

Ralph Flores had gotten himself in the predicament in February when, as a Distant Early Warning radar site worker, he decided to fly back to Los Angeles. A Mexican-born American, he piloted his own plane and used it to get home to family more often than was usually possible for contract workers setting up the radar chain across northern Canada and the US. He stopped over in Whitehorse and met Helen Klaben who had been working in Alaska and was looking for a ride back to the US.

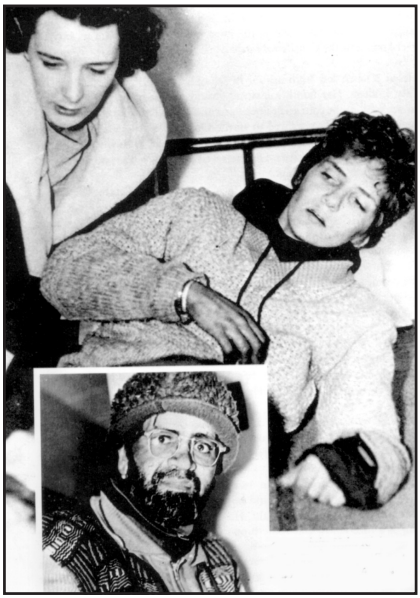
Flores agreed to take her along. His plan was to go to Prince George via Watson Lake following a route referred to as "the trench." In good weather the trip could be made without refuelling. Bush pilots, however, knew that the route was notorious for high winds and few safe places to land. In a storm it could be very unforgiving. The wise pilot topped off fuel at Watson Lake and watched the weather with great care. When Flores and Klaben left Watson Lake, weather was only marginal. They never reached Prince George.

Although the official air search found no trace of the plane and was formally called off, Jack and Dal Dalziel continued to search almost daily. With temperatures hovering around the –40°F mark, hopes of finding the two travelers alive became ever dimmer.

Now Jack was on his way to the SOS, in an area he had flown over many times while searching. He was upset with himself — how could he have missed them? He was also disappointed that Hamilton had not cir-

cled the SOS area to let survivors know they had been spotted and that help would be coming.

As they flew along, he couldn't help but reflect on the fact that the rescue effort seemed wrongly focused. Why would they not have done some reconnaissance of the area before leaping to the conclusion that there was no safe place to land? The dog team rescue was a good option, if it was indeed unreachable by plane. On the other hand, the casual approach made one wonder if the major media coverage featuring BC-Yukon Air Service, CP Air and perhaps some political, municipal and other personalities might have diverted attention from the real need, Flores and Klaben.



Ralph Flores and Helen Klaben on their arrival at the Watson Lake hospital, March 23, 1963.

The SOS was right where Frank George and Chuck Hamilton had said it was. As they came overhead Jack and Ed spotted the pilot, Flores, out at the signal marking! Jack circled the site, tipping his plane's wings to signal Flores that he'd been spotted. Flores flailed his arms in response. Jack made a wide sweeping circle overhead looking for the actual crash location. It wasn't obvious.

There seemed to be some tracks coming out to the SOS from one edge of the forest surrounding the flooded beaver pond upon which the signal had been tramped out, so they decided to head in that direction - still to the south. Wagging the wings one more time, Jack set his flaps and powered up to fly as slow as the PA-18 would allow without stalling. He and Ed looked intently into the evergreens with their desperate cache entangled below.

Passing over an area within a half-mile of the pond, they saw it! Among the "roughed up" tall jackpines, there was the plane, wings missing but fuselage intact! Within less than 100 feet of the fuselage, in a slightly more open area they also saw Helen Klaben waving frantically.

Jack knew that, with the days she and Flores had been locked in their desperate situation, even a warm pair of socks and chocolate bar would be more than welcome. He got his passenger to stuff some bars into a pair of socks and, at his signal, drop them down to the woman. They landed virtually at her feet.

The objective, to let them know that help was on its way, was accomplished. They banked around to head back to Watson Lake. As they lev-

elled off, Jack noticed a tamarack swamp about a half mile from the crash site. He was sure it would be safe to land. As they flew into the area they'd been so intent on finding the crash itself that they hadn't given thought to landing. The rescue team's assumption, "no place to land" was obviously wrong.

Jack circled back over the tamarack swamp. There was at least a good two feet of wind-compacted snow covering the area. Jack told his Met Tech companion he planned to land and got a smile and nod. He set it down on the skis with hardly more than a slight rocking and a few bumps as it slid to a stop.

Realizing how close he was, Jack decided to walk into the crash site to let them know they would be taken out in short order. Of course, no one had any idea that a complex two-day, media-covered rescue event was in the offing. Leaving Ed at the plane with instructions to direct others who might land to follow his trail to the survival camp, Jack headed off, easily making his way without snowshoes on the packed snow.

The contact with Helen Klaben was memorable indeed. She was crying, and so was Jack. The emotion in being rescued after 49 days in the frozen wilderness was infectious! How many times had she and Flores fought the hopeless feeling that they might never be found – only now to realize that their future had been restored to them? Jack later commented, "She was so wasted and haggard that I really don't know how she or the pilot survived."

Klaben commented that Flores had left a few days before to find a clearing where he could mark out a large sized SOS. She related his injuries and the fact that he'd crafted snowshoes from material at hand. He

"Dal" Dalziel, left, fueling his plane with a tent over the engine.

would likely stay at the SOS beaver pond awaiting rescue from that location. Jack told her it was less than a mile away and that it might even be suitable for landing a plane.

Klaben had serious injuries herself. Although she was standing when she waved to them, she had what might well be gangrenous foot problems - the odour was very strong. She seemed rational, though rambled over things which didn't seem important considering what she'd gone through. She asked if the press strike in New York was over. Then she insisted that Jack take three or four photos of her with her camera, from various angles and in different poses. Eventually, when talk turned to how she might be taken out of there, she was very concerned that her luggage also be taken along. Jack took the photos as they waited, hoping that another plane would come in.

After an hour of waiting, they heard a Super Cub landing on the tamarack swamp and, in another 20 minutes or so, saw Chuck Hamilton's large frame coming down the path Jack had made into the survival site. After a short discussion, it was decided that Chuck would "piggy-back" Helen Klaben and fly her out while Jack brought her suitcases out to the planes. The bags were unusually heavy! It was a toss-up as to who had the preferred load. The luggage may have been heavier but, understandably after the 49 days, Helen was not a pleasant smelling burden to hike along even if she was very light with the weight she'd lost.

Chuck said he'd take Klaben to Aeroplane Lake then come back to see how they might reach Flores. With the luggage aboard his plane, Jack couldn't take Ed out on the same flight. They agreed that Jack would drop the luggage at the trapper's cabin then return. As Klaben was still being settled in Chuck's plane, Jack started up and headed down the ski run.

Taxiing up to the lakeshore, several fellows came down to meet Jack, including the RCMP Sergeant who was in charge of the cabin based rescue team. When told that Chuck had Klaben on board and that they'd been able to land close to the crash site and the SOS, things took a confusing turn. Jack outlined Klaben's physical condition as he knew it and what she'd described of Flores' state. Now, with events coming on faster than anticipated, the Mountie in charge decided he urgently needed an air ambulance.

Though Chuck had still not arrived with Klaben (he was about 20 minutes behind) the Sergeant insisted that Jack fly to Watson Lake to get CP Air to send in an air ambulance. Jack objected, reminding the Mountie that he had left his passenger back in the bush and needed to get him before returning to Watson Lake. At that point the Mountie said, "I'm ordering you to head in there right now. We'll take care of your passenger!" There was no question in anyone's mind that the most important issue was doing what was right for Klaben and Flores, so Jack headed out.

When he arrived in Watson Lake, CP Air had already been informed of the need. Apparently Chuck had radioed it in while airborne on his second leg. CP Air sent in a plane with a couple of seats removed to take the survivors on to Whitehorse.

Chuck or another Super Cub apparently picked up Ed McNeill after a couple of hours of waiting at the tamarack swamp.

Although he was back on the job by this time, it was obvious to Jack, as the day pressed on, that news reporters stuck in Watson Lake were working overtime to make something out of the story. They were searching for every detail which could be put into sensational context. Unfortunately, in their grasping, they got aspects of the story wrong and ended up creating considerable discord in an otherwise harmonious community.

Erroneous press narrative, aided by Helen Klaben's account, had Jack jumping the gun on the rescue, even abandoning his passenger in the process. The picture she'd asked him to take was presented as a picture Jack took for profit! Making matters still worse, local officials jumped on board the distorted outline of events and brought DOT officials into the picture. Lines of loyalty among bush pilots, who knew what went on, placed them at serious odds with commercial flying, RCMP and government leadership for some time.

Klaben herself had been taken to Whitehorse to be hospitalized, dealing with frostbite injuries she'd suffered. Had she carefully considered what happened, she would have realized that Jack's intervention brought them out of the crash site a good three or more days earlier than would otherwise have been the case.

With the blizzard that blew in two days later, Flores, Klaben and their dog-team rescuers would likely have been trapped at the crash site until the storm moved out of the area. While they may have been slightly more comfortable with the goods brought in by the rescue team, they would have continued in their isolation for those extra days. This realization did not escape other bush pilots, or the northerners whose ethic was to focus on the needs of the crash victims rather than press coverage and sensationalism.

The Flores family were well aware of the notable intervention by Jack in the rescue, despite his name having been left out of every account of the event, including Helen Klaben's book, "I'm Alive." It remained so until 1998, when Ralph's two sons and daughter came to Watson Lake. They were there to see the crash site and to assess the possibility of retrieving their Dad's plane. While there, they held a town hall meeting, and a friend made sure Jack attended. It was then, in the recollection of their Dad's account of rescue events, that they made it clear to Jack and others that, over all the intervening years, they had known the truth.

As much as Jack was delighted to realize the gratitude of the Flores family, they were equally eager to get to know the one whom their father spoke of as an angel who brought news that they were still in the land of the living. As a pilot, Ralph Flores was obviously aware of Jack's determination, skill, and selflessness in landing where he did and in hiking into the crash site.

Within weeks of her return home, Flores' daughter, Lisa, sent Jack a pair of pink socks – a good-humoured gesture of repayment for the socks dropped to Klaben so many years before.

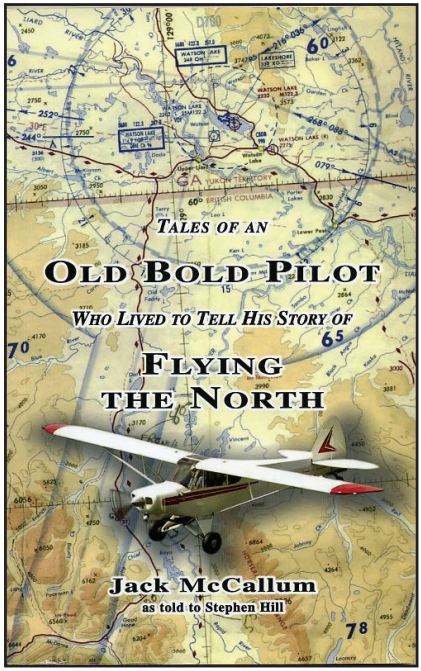
On several occasions since the town hall meeting, Jack has talked to

Flores' two sons, one of whom is a commercial pilot. They took their Dad's plane to California and rebuilt it. They now plan to fly the plane back to the crash site and, to reinforce their appreciation for what Jack did for their Dad, they've invited him to come along on that flight.

Jack McCallum, 2004.

The Flores family in the final telling of the story, proved the press, local officials and some commercial flying interests wrong. As other bush pilots told Jack at the time, "Every aspect of what you did, considering the circumstances, was the right thing to have done. Given another chance to do it again, you wouldn't - couldn't - do anything differently!"

Jack McCallum at his home at Sicamous, B.C. He was 87 when his book, Old Bold Pilots (Flying the North) was published in 2004.
It is available from Hummingbird Press, Box 1089, Sicamous, B.C. V0E 2V0.



Bears, Berries and Blessings

The Story of Martha Collins

By Ellen Davignon

Martha Collins with her daughters, Penny and Freda, ca 1942.

The dusty old brown pickup, barreling out from Dawson on rough and wash-boardy Ridge Road, slid around a blind corner and then scuttled over to the right in a rooster-tail of dust and gravel at the sight of the even-older five-ton taking its piece of the road right out of the middle. The two vehicles slowed and the drivers, in the habit of Yukoners meeting anywhere in their sparsely populated territory, stopped to chew the fat for a moment or two. The weather was discussed, and the condition of the #$%& goat track, and bets were made on the probable bust size of the pretty new server at Gerties'. Then, as they prepared to take leave in their respective directions, the trucker rolled his window down again.

"Hey, Frank," he called. "There's a berry picker back about 3-4 miles. Better stop and tell her I saw a mama grizzly and two babies just around the corner from her. I'da gone back but I was flat out and couldn't get 'er shut down. Maybe you could warn her, though." He rolled up his window and was gone in blast of gravel and acceleration.

The travel-stained Chevy continued on its way, slowing, after a time, to check both sides of the road. Finally, its driver glimpsed the small group of bears on a sunny knoll, the young ones wrestling and playing while the mother stripped blueberries from the loaded bushes with tongue and claws. Okay, he thought, there's that old griz…now, where's that other picker? Rounding the next curve, he caught sight of an elderly sedan parked in the ditch, and recognizing it, smiled to himself and pulled to a stop.

"Hey, Martha!" he hollered. "Martha. You got company just around the bend." He scanned the hillside. "Hey, Martha…"

A head popped up out of a waist-high thicket. "What? Is that you, Frank? What the heck do you want?" The berry picker stood all the way up: a short, robust figure dressed in a man's work shirt and pants, colourful kerchief

wrapped around her hair and a plastic pail hanging from a hank of yellow rope tied around her ample waist.

"Just wanted to tell you there's a grizzle-bear and her cubs in the next patch over. Thought you'd like to know."

"Huh! Okay, thanks, Frank…" As the pickup pulled away, Martha sank back on her haunches and pulled a few more handsful of berries into pail, then got up to take a wary look around. "Darn it all… this is such a good patch." She raked another handful into the bucket but being a berry picker of some experience, she knew to quit while she was still whole and healthy. Lugging her pails and picking as she retreated, she ceded the hillside to the lady with the big teeth and claws, and moved along. After all, she consoled herself, it's a big country and a good year for berries.

The Yukon *is* a big country and to Martha Collins, just about any year was a good one for berries. Oh well, of course some years were better than others. Some years the berries were so thick that you could sit in one spot and fill your pail without even having to scootch over anywhere; other times, you had to traveled to heck and gone to fill a pail. But plentiful or sparse, the sun-browned and tireless Martha Collins took the harvest as a personal challenge, living out of her car for weeks on end until she had filled her pails with as much fruit as she deemed necessary to keep her family in jam and preserves for the winter.

When the berrying was done, she turned her attention to canning and preserving the crop from her large garden, the huge and lush produce resulting from Martha's know-how as much as the rich, deep topsoil in the Yukon valley. Finally, she and her husband Phil, would butcher and store enough moose and caribou, fish and game birds, to fill their larder against the deepfreeze in their immediate future.

The Collins lifestyle was subsistence living at its finest and Phil and Martha exemplified the true Yukon pioneer.

Martha Burian had followed her brothers from Alberta to the Yukon in the middle 30's. While most of the family went into the wood business, supplying cordwood to the steamers that plied the Stewart river, she and brother Rudy bought the roadhouse at Stewart and saw to the more basic, personal needs of the river travelers, young Phil Collins among them.

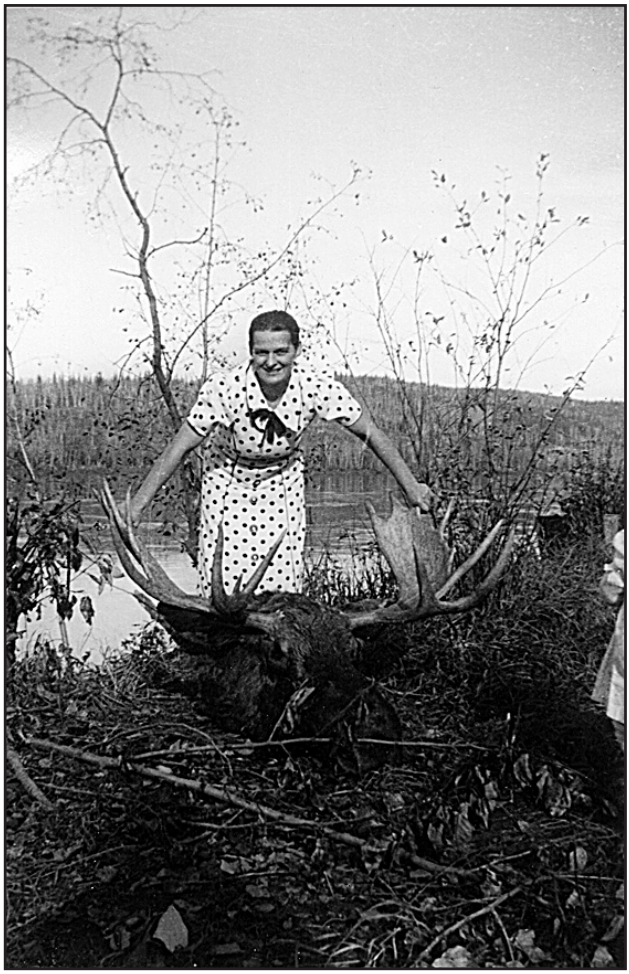
Phil had come into the country some years before and had established himself in the small community of Stewart, long shoring in the summer and trapping in the off-season. He often took his meals at the Burian's road house and he soon realized that there were a few other basic needs that required some attention. Between muscling ore and tanning skins, Phil set out to woo the pretty, if independent, young cook.

His courting style was somewhat unorthodox, his opening salvo a complaint about the cost of a meal and a bed. "I could be sleeping under a spruce tree for nothing," he grumbled, "and frying up my own grub."

"Yes, you could, and welcome to it!" was the spirited reply, as Martha turned her scrutiny to another young man who professed delight at paying one dollar for her good moose stew, and another for a decent bed with clean, fresh-smelling sheets.

Eventually Phil's courtship took a more acceptable turn and in the spring of 1937, he and Martha were married.

It was the start of a long partnership that took them to most communities in the developing North and a few points south. In the ensuing years, they weathered the economic boom and bust that is an established Yukon developmental tradition, by diversifying their own occupations and talents. In addition to raising a crop of five daughters and one much-put-upon son, Martha and Phil put hands to anything that would add to the family coffers. Together they ran the road house at Stewart but as their children grew to school age, the move into the larger center of Dawson seemed a good plan. There, Martha took work cooking in the hotels and cleaning houses "on my hands and knees, mind you!" while Phil freighted and, with Ed Whitehouse, operated the ferry across the Yukon River at Dawson for two seasons. When summer work slowed to a trickle, they turned to provisioning for the lean months ahead, and all winter long, they both ran trap lines.



Martha in the bush, ca 1947.

In 1949, they left Dawson and while Phil went to work on the newly built Alaska Highway, Martha followed along, finding eager takers for her cooking skills in the many newly-established highway lodges, the Watson Lake Hotel, Christies' Jac'nMac's at Lower Post, Fireside among others. True Yukoners, however, from time to

time they returned to Dawson where Phil went back to freighting and trapping and Martha's culinary skills were put to good use at the Dawson hospital. Both of them served as "baby-sitters" at the local jail when required.

Martha, ca 2000.

The years went by, as years tend to, and as their children grew and left home there was less of a need for all the berries and furs. Phil and Martha were now in search of a spot to retire and count their blessing.

Dawson was a familiar and well-loved niche but in keeping with the restless spirits that had kept them on the move over the years, they decided it was just a bit *too* comfortable.

A small condo in Whitehorse was tried but that too palled and eventually, they moved farther afield to the whole new scenario of Keremeos, in beautiful British Columbia where most of their family now lived. There, they settled down, secure in the knowledge of a job well done and a life well and truly lived.

Phil passed on in 1998. Martha spent a year grieving and mourning the loss of her life partner and when she was done, she packed her berry clothes and kerchief and headed North once again. For several summers, she worked for Walter and Cami Yaremcio at their gold mining operation, cooking , cleaning, and yes, picking berries, returning to Keremeos in the fall. In 2004, she moved, bag and baggage, to the Yukon to live with her daughter, Penny, and son-in-law, Don Sippel, at Marsh Lake.

Martha turns 90 this fall but her unlined visage is that of a woman many years younger. Arthritis has put the kibosh on her berrying but she still turns out her wonderful baking to add to their Sunday suppers and her hands are seldom idle as she crochets afghans for her many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Smiling, her fingers flying, she reminisces about her life in the Yukon when she and Phil, along with a stringer of daughters and the aggrieved only son, traveled the trails and riverways together, finding work where it was to be found. "And when there wasn't," she says with a shrug, "we made do."

And of course, they did. After all, wasn't it Martha who said, "It's a big country and it's *always* a good year for berries!?"

****

The Story of Herman Peterson

Atlin's Flying Fiddler

By Donna Clayson

Herman Peterson poses by his Fairchild 71, circa late 1940s. [Yukon Archives photos, Atlin Historical Society, H.P. collection]

I spotted the small bi-plane making loops and turns above the air port in Atlin, B.C. The small spot of yellow and red against the blue sky fascinated me as it dipped, appeared to stall, then with a roar its engines came back to life. Gradually picking up speed, it turned 180 degrees and headed skyward again.

This was the man I'd heard about who owned this sporty Smith Miniplane (CF-RKN). Herman Peterson built this little gem between 1963 and 1967 and, as he put his welding and mechanical skills to the test, his wife Doris fitted and sewed the fabric. It was one of the first homebuilt airplanes to be constructed in northwestern Canada.

I waited for Herman to land so I could inspect "Suzy," the nickname Herman gave to his pet project. Richard Ross, a former Atlinite who knew of my love of aviation, introduced me to the Petersons in 1968. While Richard and Herman chatted I looked over "Suzy" and even to my untrained eye I knew I was looking at history in the making. I never asked Herman for a ride, I don't know why I didn't as I now regret it.

Herman Peterson was born in Latuque, Quebec on December 29, 1913. He was approximately 9 years of age when he mentioned to his father he would like to learn to become a pilot. His father wasn't too keen on his son learning to fly a plane.

Herman persisted and managed to persuade his father to take him to see a *Vickers Vidette* flying boat that had landed on a lake while the family was on an outing. The young boy was able to sit in the cockpit and push the controls. This single event sealed his flying destiny.

Years later Herman made friends with the Fecteau flying brothers of Quebec. Both Joe and Art Fecteau were pilots using a base near Montreal. Joe offered Herman flying lessons. In 1936, Herman bought his first airplane for $250, a Simmonds Spartan (registered CF-ABC) that he acquired from Joe. It was a plane that had actually been crashed. However, Joe and his brother offered Herman help to rebuild this aircraft.

Before he completed his flying training, Herman married his fiancée, Doris Bachelder, in 1939. Doris was a girl from Alberta, but had moved to Latuque where she met Herman.

Herman earned his commercial license in 1941 and in 1942 went on to earn his air engineer license. In February of that year, he and Doris moved to Carcross, Yukon. He went to work for George Simmons who owned Northern Airways.

By this time Herman had logged 200 flying hours. His first job with the company was that of pilots' helper to Alec Dame. The assignment was to remove all the equipment from three American B-26 bombers that had crashed in "Million Dollar Valley." Temperatures ranged from minus 40F to minus 50F. Alec and Herman even removed all the ammunition.

During the summer of 1950 the Petersons and Gordon and JoyceYardley were partners in a small store in Carcross where they sold fresh produce grown organically at "Ten- Mile Ranch," which the Yardleys owned at that time.

Herman was employed with Northern Airways, which supplied the Canol Pipeline Project. Another job was flying mail and passengers from Carcross to Telegraph Creek and sometimes to Tulsequah and Iskut.

After a few months' stint as deckhand on the paddlewheeler *Tutshi*, Herman decided to fly for himself. Around 1950 Herman set up his own flying service in Atlin. The new company was called *Peterson's Flying Service* and later the name was changed to *Coast Range Airways*. These air services were the first of their kind to be based in Atlin. Herman had the

Herman and Doris Peterson on their Eastman Flying Boat, Atlin Lake, ca 1940. [Yukon Archives photo, Harbottle collection]

mail contract where he flew mail from Atlin to Telegraph Creek. Herman never lost a single letter or day of delivery even during winter months.

In 1950 a road to Atlin was built prompting some to believe that this would hurt Herman's flying business. True, it did bring its problems, but the downfall for the business came from three major flying accidents.

In 1952 Herman lost the *Aeronca Sedan* at Raspberry Creek, south of Telegraph Creek due to weather. He walked away from the crash unhurt but had to walk six days with a 60-pound packsack '*full of grub*' back to Telegraph Creek. Herman replaced the Aeronca with a Fairchild 71 (CF-AWV) and later added a Cessna 180 to his fleet. Unfortunately both these aircraft were also to suffer accidents, one fatal.

The Cessna 180 was lost north of Telegraph Creek when it was caught in a downdraft, crashed and burned. All on board were killed. Herman recalled the fatal Cessna 180 accident; "I was seriously thinking of getting out of the business then. You get over these things, but you never really get over it."

The worst accident for Herman, in which he was the pilot, happened in a Northern Airways Fairchild in 1948 near Watson Lake. The accident was caused by a rudder structural malfunction while cruising in straight flight. Herman was the pilot on the aircraft and miraculously saved the life of his passenger as well as his own by spiraling down into a small beaver pond. They were alone in the bush for a few days, before a Canadian Pacific Airways DC-3 flight attendant, looking out of a window, saw Herman's smoke signal. It wasn't long before the pair was rescued.

In 1956 Herman purchased a de Havilland Beaver and in 1960 he added a de Havilland Otter to the fleet. By the summer of 1966 the Atlin based *Coast Range Airways* consisted of one Otter, two Beavers, one Cessna 180, a Super Cub and a Bell 47-G4 helicopter with a new Jet Ranger helicopter on order. Until that time Herman kept all his aircraft moored on First Island. In 1966 he moved into the bay by the Taku River First Nations village.

In 1967 Herman and Doris sold their operator's license and all aircraft to a new northern company, *Trans North*. Herman surrendered his commercial license soon after selling to Trans North but kept his private pilot license so he could continue flying.

Herman bought a modified Luscombe Silvaire 8A floatplane (CF-YHQ) for pleasure and local fishing trips. In 1980 he bought another Luscombe Silvaire 8E (CF-EYF) but sold it that same year to Clive Aspinall of Atlin.

At first I found Herman quiet and shy but he quickly warmed to my questions on his flying career. Doris smiled at my queries, not saying a word, quietly preparing tea and dainty desserts for her guests. Lassie, their collie lay down at my feet causing a bit of a stir from Herman saying she normally took five minutes to warm to strangers; three minutes just set a new record. As my toes caressed Lassie's soft, silky coat my gaze kept turning to the plane that was caressing the waves of Atlin Lake, just outside their front door.

Herman talked about the biplane. He explained that Doris, his busi-

ness partner, was actually the bones of the companies they operated. She acted as base manager, radio operator, accountant, customer service and complaint department. In earlier days she operated the boat and hauled freight. In her spare time she washed dishes, clothes and cooked meals.

Over the years I visited the Petersons' as often as I could. I couldn't get enough of Herman's flying stories and descriptions of how he built "Suzy." In 1986 I introduced my husband Bryan to Herman and Doris. They hit it off immediately.

I knew Herman played the violin and asked if he would play a tune. He took us down to the newly renovated basement. Herman had just finished installing surround sound and took some time showing us all the intricate workings of the speakers, tuners, etc. which didn't make any sense to me but seemed to capture Bryan's attention.

When the tour was done Herman got comfortable on a stool, his homemade violin and bow ready. I glanced over at his wife and she was stroking Lassie's fur, her eyes sparkling with love and respect. It brought tingles to my body and I thought of the phrase, "The House That Love Built." Soon, the sounds of music resonated throughout the large room, the speakers literally booming. We were in the presence of an artist.

As the years went by I didn't visit the Petersons as often. I lived in Alberta and only managed to visit Atlin every few years. In 1999 I'd heard Herman was not well.

Herman passed away October 22, 2004 at the age of 90. Herman is remembered as an aviation pioneer who enjoyed life to the fullest, and was a wonderful husband, friend and businessman. Doris, his wife continues to reside in Atlin.

After Herman's death, I contacted pilot Danny Bereza for information that I could use in a tribute I was preparing for an electronic newsletter, the *Moctel*. Danny replied by email and I have included some of his comments here.

Danny credits Herman as "the person who really taught me how to fly an airplane. In 1964 I had a commercial pilot license with the ink still wet but even with my inexperience Herman hired me to fly his Super-Cub on floats for the summer.

"When I arrived in Atlin, he met me in his beautiful, old Ford pick-up that was painted in the bright yellow and red of Coast Range Airways. He had an intense, ruddy face and unruly, curly hair. He drove slowly through the town, shifting gears carefully so he wouldn't do any harm to his vehicle. It was immaculate, as I found out, were his airplanes. One of the first things he said to me was, 'Don't you ever do careless damage to your airplane. If you crash it, that's okay because accidents happen. But if you scratch it you will be in trouble.'

"He took me to his home on the waterfront of Atlin Lake where I met his wife and business partner, Doris. She had a pleasant, smiling face and long, blond hair tied up in a bun. She greeted me warmly and offered me a coffee. So there we all sat, on the shore of one of the most beautiful lakes in

the world, sipping coffee and chatting about flying while their dog, Lassie, lay beside us with her eyes moving back and forth between us as we talked.

"Later Herman took me flying in the Cub. I spent many hours learning how to REALLY fly an airplane from a pilot who was already a legend in the North. He was flying commercially when I was still in diapers. He taught me how to land on fast flowing rivers where any mistake could end up in disaster.

"He taught me how to land on small, high altitude lakes where you approached, flying slowly over the treetops until you passed the last tree. You then pushed the control stick forward toward the water and pulled back at the last minute so the airplane could splash down in the minimum distance. He taught me how to land on water when there was no wind and the water was as flat as glass making it very difficult to judge your height above the surface.

"'Try to land near a shore so you can have some perspective. But if you can't land near a shore for whatever reason, open the side window so you can clearly hear the engine sound and the wind rushing by the airplane. Set up a shallow rate of descent and listen for the change of sound as the airplane nears the water and the engine noise is echoed back to you. You then pull back on the stick a little and you will touch down smoothly,' he said. It took many attempts before I finally got it, but it worked! I used that technique often during my float-flying days.

"Herman loved airplanes," Bereza continued. "He loved to fly them and he loved to work on them. And he did both, with a passion. He was an excellent pilot and in my opinion, a mechanical genius. He was in the final stages of building an Experimental Aircraft Association Biplane that he christened "Suzy," his pet name for Doris. He gave me a picture of it sitting inside the building where he built it. The engine had been installed and it was basically complete, waiting to be covered in fabric. The workmanship was awesome. The aluminum frame had been welded perfectly like a work of art. Later on in life he built violins with the same attention to detail.

"At the end of the float season in September I went 'Outside' but returned again in 1966 to fly one of his Beavers. During that summer he bought a DeHavilland Otter that he used as a water-bomber to fight forest fires in the Yukon. It came with a tube-like cylinder that was attached to the underside of the fuselage between the floats. The pilot would land on a lake and taxi fast so the cylinder would fill up with water through pick-up tubes similar to a snorkel. He would then take off to the fire where the load of water would be dropped. Unfortunately the mechanism didn't always work. The cylinder that held the water was weighted off-centre so that it would roll into the pick-up position after the drop but it didn't always roll and lock into the correct position. Herman spent several frustrating days trying to get the system to work correctly.

"One night I was sitting having tea with Doris when Herman landed and came storming into the house. 'That drop mechanism doesn't work, Christ!' He began to pace around the house muttering to himself and shak-

ing his head. 'I'll just have to invent a new system.' I looked at Doris. She nodded her head and we quietly left him alone.

"The next morning I went to their house to find Herman drinking coffee with foolscap paper full of drawings surrounding him on the table. He had a bedraggled look about him. He was twiddling his hair in his fingers and looked up when I came in.

"'I think I've got it worked out,' he said. He hadn't slept all night but his face was flushed with excitement. His design was simple and it worked better than the manufacturer's version. He asked Clarence Tingley, an excellent jack-of-all-trades who worked for him, to make a small container and attach it inside the cylinder. The container would also fill with water during the pick-up stage and after the drop was made, the weight of the water inside the container would give it that extra kick it needed to roll into the pick-up position. The water would then bleed out through small holes so that the cylinder could roll to the dump position when full.

"Herman was a passionate man, emotional almost to a fault. One time while I was in Telegraph Creek with the Cub he was doing an inspection on a Beaver aircraft that was tied to the city dock on the Stikine River. The water in the Stikine flowed so fast that it actually had a hump in the middle of it. I saw him standing on one of the airplane's floats, holding a wrench in his hand, shaking his head and stomping his foot up and down. He was obviously having trouble with the airplane's engine because the cowling was open. As I approached he suddenly let out a sob and threw the wrench into the river. I beat a hasty retreat back to my quarters. The next day the airplane was serviceable so he must have got another wrench from somewhere.

"On the occasional evening after a hard day's work he would take-off in Suzy, now fully completed, and roll and loop around the puffy, popcorn cumulus clouds in the big, northern sky, relieving his tension and flying just for the love of it. He offered me the chance to fly Suzy but I declined. As much as I wanted to fly it I would have felt terrible if I put even a small stone nick in it from the gravel airstrip.

"The Herman I knew was not a hard task-master. He only expected me to treat his equipment with respect and to do my job to the best of my ability. He treated the pilots well who worked for him, almost like the sons he never had. When I left him in the fall of 1966 he walked slowly with me to the taxi. We stood for a moment talking about — I don't know — maybe the weather. We then shook hands and I told him that I would definitely come back to visit some day. I wanted to hug him but I didn't. Dammit."

A year before his death, Herman was inducted into the Yukon Transportation Hall of Fame. A large contingent of friends and admirers came from Atlin to Whitehorse for the occasion. Doris received a standing ovation when she talked about their early lives together and how their later years had brought them to this day.

As a tribute to Herman's accomplishments and service to the Yukon and northern B. C., the Atlin Airport has been officially named the ***Peterson Field.***

Now, every time I hear the sound of an engine overhead I think of Herman and 'Suzy' still plying the airwaves, happy, content and free. I envy that.

Herman and Doris, August, 1996.

Katie and Vic Johnson

By Doug Bell

Katie and Vic of Watson Lake, Yukon, fit the mold set by Robert Service, and some say, a mold long since broken. They are in that league of people who simply belong where they are. They are like the trees of the land—they sink their roots and they stand steadfast, season after season, year after year, providing their form of comfort to whoever happens by their part of the world. They never cast about seeking, they never question, they know this is where they belong. There is an aura of peace around people like that, an aura that envelopes you when with them. You may not know why at the time, but one day it comes to you that maybe that's why it was so good to be with them. It is impossible for me to consider a Katie and Vic anywhere else. The Yukon was made for them, or they for it. Whichever you choose, the result was good for this place.

Vic's introduction to the land and his response to it bear witness to my words. He was a passenger on board United Air Transport's twin-engined, float equipped, Barkely-Grow aircraft on a summer day in 1938. They came out of Edmonton, bound for Whitehorse with a brief stop planned at Watson Lake. Vic was one of their newest employees, hired in person by owner-operator Grant McConachie. His assignmentwas to open up a base for the airline.

They landed, though high winds made the lake rough. Indeed, the waves were too strong to taxi to shore without endangering the aircraft, especially near an unknown shoreline. In about six feet of water, the pilot held the machine stationery. Vic looped his boots and minimal tools around his neck, said goodbye, jumped into the lake and waded to shore. His boots stayed clear of the water on his six foot, six inch frame. He had food for a couple of days at which time the pilot promised to be back from Whitehorse with food, materials and supplies for the job.

On that day Watson Lake was... well, let's read Vic's description of the place:

Standing, rear, Katie, Vic, and their only daughter, Gracie.

"At a place in the southern Yukon, not far from the Northern boundary of British Columbia and about midway between the East and West boundaries of the Yukon, a beautiful lake nestles in between the hills. It is not a big lake; neither is it a small lake. It has been known to the natives for many years as 'Watson's Lake,' not so much the name of a place, but more of an indication of a certain place where a certain person lives, or has lived, or might be found."

The name "Watson Lake" has of recent years been adopted officially and is of course to be found on maps that otherwise showed nothing.

An old, old Indian trail runs quite close to the lake and was used by the Natives long before the coming of the whiteman. This trail leads to Lower Post, B.C., where stood the only trading post for many miles. It was there of course that the natives did their trading. The original Watson (Frank) was a citizen of the U.S.A. and drifted into the Yukon about the time of the Gold Rush of '98, where he is believed to have made quite a stake and, like so many more, got rid of it as fast as possible.

Vic was alone in his beautiful wilderness.

Anyway, the pilot carried on to Whitehorse, delivered his load, and spent the night only to awake to absolutely terrible weather. For ten days he was unable to get to Watson Lake, though he tried daily. On the eleventh day he finally made it, fully expecting to find Vic near death's door, or even dead. He landed to find a completed dock, a partly finished cabin terminal, and Vic in his usual good humour. Indeed, he acted like a man who had just had the most marvellous ten days of his life. And you know, I think he had. Vic loved a challenge, any challenge, any time. This situation was made to order for him.


Katie in her kitchen.

When asked how he survived, he said, "Oh, I found some berries, and got some fish. No problem at all." It's said he didn't even have a fishing rod and you know, that's probably right too. Just another neat problem to solve.

Grant McConachie had known and worked with Vic before. Tiny, he calls him in his book, "Bush Pilot with a Briefcase," though I doubt he really knew Vic's capabilities when he hired him. There's certainly no question he hired the right man for the right job at the right time.

In these two friends we find some interesting contrasts—Grant McConachie went on to become wealthy and famous in world aviation circles. Vic was to spend his life on the first soil he touched in the Yukon and to marry a lady named Katherine Wills, whom none will know as Wills, but all will know when I say Katie Johnson. These two people made a home on the shores of that lake and became famous in another way: for their caring and giving! They had met in the Grande Prairie hospital, where both worked, some years before. Once established in Watson Lake, Vic began writing to Katherine. He finally convinced her to come for a visit in 1945. She did, and she stayed. She became Katie Johnson on March 28th, 1946, and has been here ever since.

Then Vic took an old pump house and an old military post office, pushed them together with a tractor, added another old building, some doors, some wood stoves, and you had it—a tar paper shack, but a big one. Then add a big man and a big woman, some children liberally dosed with love, and you have Katie and Vic's place at Watson Lake, Yukon. "A rambling, tar paper shack to passers by," as one of their 'daughters,' Jean, described it, just off the flight path to runway 27, Watson Lake airport. More buildings were added as the "family" grew.

Vic truly loved where he lived. He could not make that probing, inquir-

Vic & children out for a ride. It was said he could make any machine run, no matter how old or broken.

ing mind of his accept the fact that there just might be people who did not think Watson Lake, Yukon, was the best place in the world to live. He was always genuinely sorry for those who had to leave.

Walking into their home was to walk into warmth; you didn't just feel welcome, you knew it. Their personal welcome was like a verbal embrace. "W-e-e-ell, Doug," as he reached for his pipe, struck a match on the old barrel heater, "Saaaay," he dragged out both words, adding his own dimension to the greeting. More often than not, he'd be sitting with two, three, or more youngsters perched on his knees, his shoulders, wherever they could find a place to sit, and he'd be telling stories, answering questions, or just enjoying them. Katie always added her "W-e-l-l" too, with a touch of pleasure and surprise, as though it had been much too long since you'd stopped by, though it may have been yesterday.

You were always glad you had walked through their door. In summer the warmth of their welcome made your day; in winter the dry heat from the old barrel stove soaked you like a blanket and added the winter dimension to the hello's. Mind you as soon as he said "s-a-a-a-y" you knew too that you'd be faced with a perplexing question of some kind. As I've said, Vic loved a challenge. They ranged from a math question, (such as "a tree right beside a stream is blown over by the wind; it's 20 feet from the ground to the break; the broken section lies exactly on the other side of the stream. How wide is the stream and how high was the tree?), and on to calculating the "footprint in the sky" to get the satellites up. It was the late 50's when we first met and the space race, satellites and the like were THE news of the time. I don't think I said "I don't know" so often to one man as I did to Vic.

Lucky for me, he was usually sitting in his chair by the stove and the window, the blue tobacco smoke lazily drifting to the ceiling, a pile of burnt matches on one corner of the stove told you how long he'd been there. His pipe was always going out as he enthused about the subject under discussion. He'd simply forget to pull on it. I say lucky he was sitting because if he stood I'd be talking to the first button on his shirt just above the belt buckle. He was a b-i-g man; in his prime he was huge.

Katie attending to Gracie's party, February, 1958.

Shaking hands with Vic was an experience not soon forgotten. Placing your hand into another's, large enough to make a basketball look like a softball, made you wonder if it would be a hand or a crumpled pile of flesh and bone when you withdrew it... and here the gentleness of the man came forth. He seldom pushed that physical power, though there's an American sergeant somewhere who probably remembers it well.

It was during the building of the Alaska Highway. One evening at a Watson Lake "watering hole" this sergeant was giving a friend of Vic's a hard time. Vic suggested quietly he should stop. The sergeant was a big man. He eyed Vic, apparently felt he could handle him, and continued. Vic reached forth with one hand, grasped the man right beneath his neck, holding shirt and tie tightly, lifted him gently off the floor, held him there a few moments, then set him down again.

The harassment ceased. The sergeant had had no way of knowing that Vic was the only man in the area who could lift a 45 gallon drum of fuel onto the back of a pickup.

While Vic was busy solving problems and working at the airport, Katie was busy too. The words of others tell some of their story. It is better I let them speak for I would merely echo their sentiments:

...There was a time in Katie Johnson's life when she had 22 children in her house. They ranged in age from toddlers to teens and kept the home in perpetual motion. "I felt like my hips were on wheels," she laughs.

... Katie has kept in touch with many of the children she cared for. They have been a great source of joy to her. "I'd still be baby-sitting today, if only I could," she says, reflecting sadly on her loss of vision. "I'd hire myself out as a grandmother."

And there isn't a family in the Yukon that wouldn't welcome that offer with open arms."(Macaulay Lodge Newsletter ,Aug/Sept ,1991.)

An undated and unidentified newspaper article says this: "Little do we realize the significance of this home, so much in accord with the meaning of Christmas. Portrayed on a larger scale we could imagine the world at peace if the nations of the world would humble themselves to come together, under one roof, much the same as Katie's Kids have come, from all nationalities and all walks of life.

Our Christmas Bouquet to Katie and Vic for their part in making Christmas a truly memorable occasion for so many homeless children."

Katie and Vic have one daughter, Grace. She can say she has had more sisters and brothers than most, for during her childhood until she herself married, there had been over 150 children come and go. The total finally reached over 200 youngsters being nurtured under their roof.

Katie is credited with saving the lives of two children in her early times. She had an uncommon knack of knowing instinctively what to do and how to do it when it came to helping children in distress. One 'daughter' Janet was brought to her in a cardboard shoe-box. She was 24 hours old and not expected to live. A shoe-box on a warm oven door, fed with an eye-dropper every hour for a few days, and Janet now has her own child, lives in Whitehorse and visits and cares regularly for Grandma Johnson.

There are so many heart-warming stories about these two people that we could go on till we had a book, and one day maybe we will. It's a story truly worth telling.

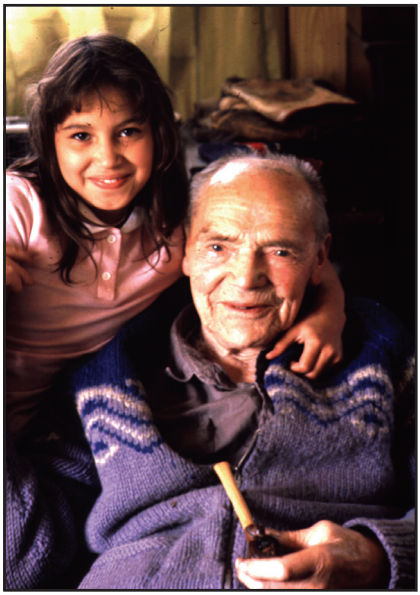
Too often, generous, caring people like Katie and Vic are not known and recognized, but in the Yukon we can be proud of the fact that we have noted, remembered, and recognized them:

"When we requested a snapshot for publication she did not have one of herself alone. This we can understand because anyone as motherly as only Katie can be would never be alone long enough to have a picture taken without at least one of the small fry in attendance. We feel sure we speak for the majority of Watson Lakers when we nominate Katie for 'Mother of the Yukon' award." (From an undated, unidentified newspaper piece.)

The Vic & Katie Johnson Elementary School, Watson Lake, Yukon, was dedicated in their honor on the 7th of March, 1980. The plaque unveiled that day reads: "Special dedication to Vic & Katie Johnson for their many years spent in fostering the children of our community."

On Saturday, February 21, 1981, they were presented with a Commissioners Award by then Commissioner Doug Bell. The certificate accompanying the medal reads:

"No child was ever turned from their door."



Vic Johnson & Melsy, 1981.

"Vic was not born in Watson Lake nor did he grow up there, but none would know that talking with him in his adult years. He seldom left it and for anyone who lived there and had to leave, Vic was genuinely sorry for them."

"Vic knew the southern Yukon as well as any man. He had in his time walked most of it... 150 miles to Frances Lake, 20 - 30 miles to Lower Post...."

The north, to some, is a harsh land that needs people of strength and resolve to endure and to build. Katie and Vic were strong when strength was needed, but both had the ability to be gentle when gentleness was required; and of the two, gentleness is the most powerful. They built, too. They helped build the future with the greatest addition to any society—healthy, children, loved and taught the dimensions of their world and especially love, without which none can grow fully and whole. You may seek far and wide in this land of independent souls and eccentrics but you'll not find the like of Katie and Vic Johnson for a long, long time.

Katie is still going strong as a resident of McCauley Lodge in Whitehorse.

Editor's Note:

This story appeared in *The Yukon Reader* in April, 1992. In the fall of that year, Katie received the Order of Canada medal.

Katie Johnson died on April 5, 1994, at the age of 83.

River Queens and the Men Who Drove Them

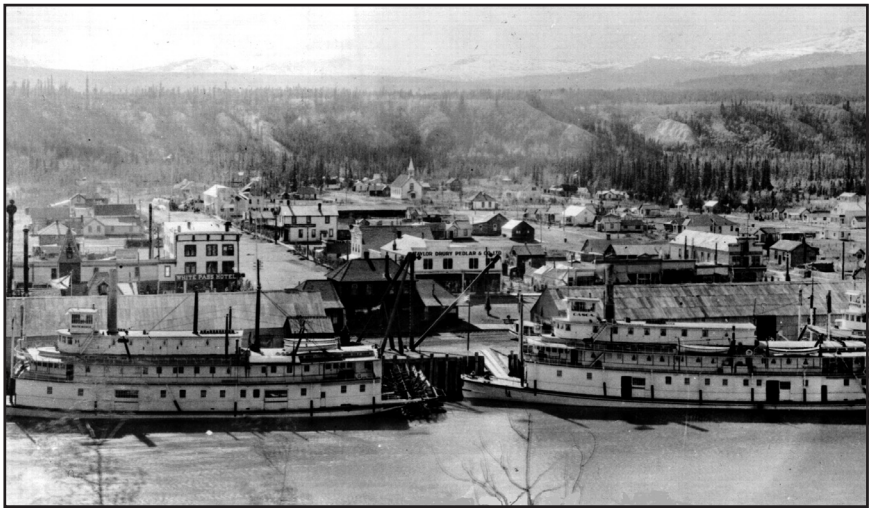
The Story of the Yukon River Paddlewheelers

By Dick McKenna

ONE OF THE MOST colourful chapters in the book of Yukon history is that of the steamboat era. For close to a century these majestic northern vessels were the life's blood of essentially every community in the territory.

It was a common saying in Dawson City during the first half of the 20th Century that "if you got 'er a steamboat brought 'er." Steamboats hauled the provisions, supplies and tools that the Yukon's pioneers needed to eke out a living. They transported passengers from one community to the next and, in many instances, they provided a living for those who worked in their construction, operation and maintenance.

Just exactly how many steamboats plied the Yukon and its tributaries is unknown but Yukon historian Murray Lundberg puts their number at 389. No doubt some, if not many, have slipped through the pages of history unnoticed.



Sternwheelers *Whitehorse* and *Casca* at the White Pass wharf in Whitehorse, 1920. [Yukon Archives photo, Bennett collection]

Early years on the Yukon River

The birth of steam boating on the Yukon River began in 1866 when the Russian-American Telegraph Company launched the *Wilder* to assist the crews in building the line. Not much is known about this historic vessel except that it was a small craft and its career was limited to a few journeys on the lower Alaska section of the river.

The Alaska Commercial Company's 49-foot *Youcon* was the next boat on the river. Launched in 1869, it supplied a scattering of trading posts the company had recently purchased in the new American Territory of Alaska. This modest but sturdy craft was built in San Francisco and shipped to St. Michael near the river's mouth.

On July 4th, with Captain Benjamin Hall at the helm, she set out on her historic voyage up the mighty uncharted and unknown Yukon River. Her destination was Fort Yukon, a Hudson's Bay Co. trading post located some 1,000 miles upriver. Among those aboard was Michael LaBerge, formerly of the Western Union Expedition and after whom the famous lake was named.

Also on board was Captain Charles Raymond of the U.S. Army whose job was to oust the British owned Hudson's Bay Company out of the fort and out of the American Territory of Alaska.

After spending several days negotiating the 50-mile-wide and shallow delta, the *Youcon* set off up the river. It made about 50 miles a day, a time which included several stops to cut wood to feed the boiler.

The natives along the river were amazed at the strange contraption chugging, puffing, whistling and throwing fire and clouds of black smoke into the Arctic air as it passed. The more daring ones approaching the riverbank to accept gifts of good will that Captain Hall had brought along for them. Naturally the Captain and crew were eager to develop a positive relationship with the Natives. The main intention of the mission was to foster the lucrative fur trade in this vast, untapped wilderness.

The *Youcon's* first voyage up the river was smooth and uneventful. By the 20th of July she had made it to the old Russian trading post at Nulato some 600 miles upriver. They found the post to be abandoned but trade goods and a trader were put ashore and the *Youcon* pushed farther up the river.

On the 31st of July the little steamer *Youcon* reached the fort. Captain Raymond then promptly presented the H.B.C. men with a notice of trespassing and asked them to abandon the post at once. They were to move well upriver and out of American territory.

The H.B.C. men had no choice but to comply and they moved their outfits up the Porcupine River about 100 miles where they established another trading post. This new post, which they called "Rampart House," was still 30 miles shy of the boundary.

Following this historic mission, the *Youcon* made many trips up and down the river shuttling trappers, traders, missionaries, scientists, adventurers and the odd wayward prospector deep into the heart of the new American frontier of Alaska. And upon her return to Saint Michael from Fort Yu-

kon, her holds would be loaded with the pelts of fox, wolf, mink, beaver and other furbearers of the region.

In August 1874 the *Youcon*, became the first paddle wheeler to enter what is now the Yukon Territory. With Captain Mayo at the helm and trader Jack McQuesten on board, the *Youcon* arrived at Fort Reliance, eight miles down river from what would later be Dawson City. Here under the employment of the Alaska Commercial Company, Mayo and McQuesten built the first trading post in the Yukon since Fort Selkirk was destroyed, in 1852.

In 1878 the *Youcon's* career came to an abrupt end when she was crushed by spring ice as she lay on the bank at Fort Yukon. Swiftly, A.C.C. built the hull for a second *Youcon*, which was given the modern spelling: "*Yukon*." Measuring 75 feet long and 20 feet across its beam, this boat was larger than its predecessor and was the first of many paddle wheelers to be built at the new American outpost of Saint Michael.

The Western Fur & Trading Company commissioned the second boat to be built at St. Michael and gave the vessel the name of its homeport. Both the *St. Michael* and the *Yukon* were launched in the summer of 1879 and competed for trade along the river until 1883 when the A.C.C. bought out its rival company.

In 1882 a private prospecting venture under Ed Schieffelin put the 42-foot *New Racket* on the river. This stubby tub was known along with the *Olive May*, as one of the ugliest vessels ever seen on the river.

The following year Mayo, McQuesten and a third trader, Arthur Harper, purchased the *New Racket* for the purpose of establishing their own trading post at the mouth of the Stewart River.

This area was beginning to see some prospecting and mining activity. Eleven miners built cabins and spent the winter in the small settlement setting out in the spring to prospect the bars of the Stewart. By the spring of 1885 the men were recovering gold in paying quantities and the pay was good.

One bar called Wynn's Bar, located 100 miles from the mouth, was paying $6,000 per man for less than 50 days work. Soon over 100 miners were working the bars of the Stewart while others were spreading farther out in their quest for the elusive yellow metal.

Finally, in 1886, coarse gold was found along the streams entering the Forty-Mile River. A settlement soon sprang up where the Forty-Mile enters the Yukon. The town of Forty-Mile, named for its distance from Fort Reliance, would soon become the first real boomtown in the Yukon. Within a few years the town of Forty-Mile was said to have dance halls, saloons, an opera house, breweries, a cigar factory and a population of close to 1,000 in the vicinity.

A couple of years later, in 1891, the rich diggings at Birch Creek just across the border in Alaska were discovered, thus spawning the boom town of Circle City, Alaska. Circle was soon known as "the Paris of the North" and was described as two rows of saloons, gambling houses, dance halls and general stores.

All of this new activity was a boon to steam boating. To meet the growing demand for movement of people and supplies to the new frontier towns, bigger paddle wheelers were introduced onto the river. The first was the A.C.C.'s 140-foot *Arctic* built in 1899 at the company's shipyard in Saint Michael.

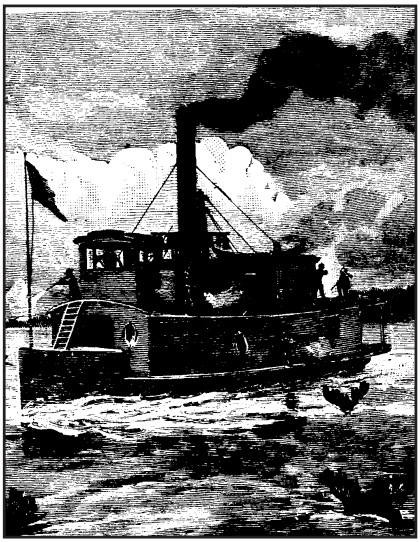
In 1892 another rival firm, the North American Trading & Transportation Company, launched the 170-foot, 400-ton *Porteus B. Weare*. In 1895 the A.C.C. added two new paddle wheelers to their fleet: the 160 foot *Alice* and the 140-foot, 370-ton *Bella*.

All of these boats would play an exciting role in an event that was about to unfold — discovery of the Klondike gold fields in August 1896. Before the winter set in that year, pioneer Joseph Ladue surveyed a town-site calling it "Dawson City" after the famed Canadian geologist and explorer.

On the 15th of October, amid a bleak snowstorm, the *Arctic* steamed into Dawson carrying the first wave of miners who had deserted their former claims in favour of the new bonanza, which was said to be rich beyond belief. When the *Arctic* attempted to head back down river it was frozen fast near Forty-Mile, only to be demolished by the ice the following spring.

On the site of the new Bonanza the winter of 1896 -'97 passed slowly, as rumours of untold riches turned out to be true. Gold in quantities never seen before was being gleaned from the frozen shafts of the Klondike.

Gold, gold, gold! The miners took to filling every available receptacle with the shiny yellow stuff. Coffee tins, tobacco cans, pails, oversize moose hide pokes and even suitcases were used to contain their new-found riches. Yes, their hunger for gold was finally being satisfied, but all the gold in the world could not appease the hungry bellies of all of these grizzled old sourdoughs.



The "Yukon," from an engraving, ca 1883.

The influx of miners, who travelled light and without sufficient provisions, caused a near famine that winter. No one starved but some were taken to scurvy, the incapacitating and potentially fatal condition caused when a body is starved of vitamins.

Given the circumstances, it was hardly a small event when in early June the following spring the little steamer *Alice* rounded the bend and puffed towards the shore of the half-starved settlement. Its cargo compartments were bursting with quantities of food, and liquor.

The whole town went on a spree. Onions were passed around and devoured like apples then chased down with fine champagne straight from

the bottle. No one cared that the onions cost a dollar a piece and the champagne fifty dollars a bottle. After the bleak winter just passed they would gladly have paid twice that amount. So it was no surprise when the *Portus B. Weare* rounded the bend a couple days later, that the town promptly went on another spree.

Meanwhile over 100 wealthy miners weighed down with their precious cargoes of gold shuffled aboard both vessels and down the river they steamed toward St. Michael. It was the *Alice* and the *Portus B. Weare* that carried the miners, over a million dollars worth of gold and news to the world of the great strike in the Klondike.

Upon her return journey up the river from St. Michael the *Weare* would fall victim to one of the only known armed "hold-ups" occurring on a Yukon River steamboat, and a rather bizarre one at that.

It seems that the miners at Circle, in dire need of supplies, were getting sick and tired of watching all the steamboats steam on past and on to Dawson without as much as paying them a single bit of notice. When the *Portus B. Weare* stopped for cordwood to fuel her boilers, a group of miners boarded the vessel and politely asked the Captain if they could purchase enough supplies to stave off hunger during the coming winter (known as the starvation winter of '97-'98).

Upon being flatly refused the miners decided to take things into their own hands. Fifty or so miners standing on shore drew their rifles and aimed them squarely at the vessel. Then as the captain and crew looked helplessly on, about a dozen or so of them boarded and off-loaded the supplies they required, about 30 tons in all. The leader of the miners' group then presented the captain with several pokes of coarse Yukon gold, ample to pay for goods received.

The Bonanza Years

News of the great gold strike in the Klondike lifted the Yukon from obscurity to world-class fame overnight. And in almost the same time period the river that shares its name went from a lonely backcountry lane to a major thoroughfare.

In 1896, just before the big strike, there were perhaps a dozen paddle wheelers on the Yukon River. Most were owned by the big trading companies A.C.C., and NAT&T. By 1897 there were over 50 paddle wheelers on the river and by the summer of 1898 there were well over 200. The majority of these were not owned by newly formed transportation and trading companies. Most were formed on the spot with little thought or planning other than the wish to capitalize on the great gold rush.

A good number of steam boats too were owned by consortiums of stampeders, each contributing their fair share towards either the construction, or the purchase of a paddle wheeler in hopes that such craft would carry them to the new Eldorado.

Shipbuilders in the West Coast cities of San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Vancouver and Victoria worked over-time pounding together riverboats to meet the demand. One shipbuilder in Seattle jokingly boasted that they built sternwheelers by the mile and then cut them into appropriate lengths. Other boats were built as far inland as Chicago and Cleveland. Surprisingly, three of the rivers largest and most stately steamers, the *Sarah*, the *Susie* and the *Hannah*, were built at the most unlikely location of Jeffersonville, Indiana. Of the Mississippi packet type with duel smoke stacks and great big promenade decks, these three sister ships all shared the same specs: 222 feet in length, 1,130 tons and 1,000 horsepower boilers systems.

Many boats were shipped north aboard an ocean going vessel, either whole or, in the case of the larger ones, in pieces to be reassembled upon arrival. St. Michael, near the rivers', mouth was a popular place for re-assembly but shipyards at Dutch Harbour and Unalaska in the Aleutian Islands were also busy building or rebuilding riverboats destined for the Klondike.

From these Alaska ports the riverboats were towed to the river's mouth to be released under their own steam. Some were even towed from the their port of construction in the south all the way across the stormy north Pacific to Alaska. Often they suffered severe damage en route, or were lost at sea.

At least one paddle wheeler journeyed all the way across the open seas under its own steam and arrived at St. Michael in one piece. The *SS Canadian* of Victoria, BC made the trip under the able command of deep-sea Captain William Martin. Capt. Martin would later become a prominent Whitehorse citizen and operated the Arctic Trading Company for years.

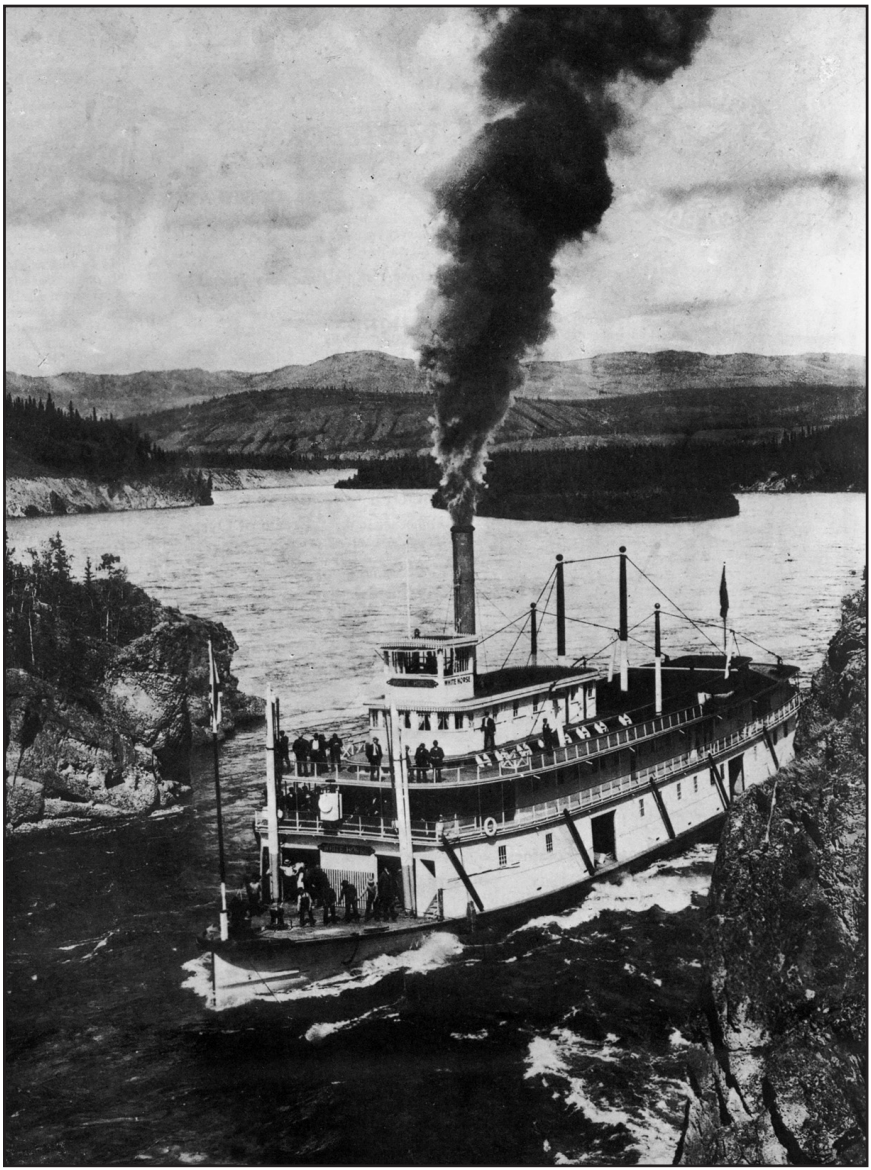
Some Yukon River steamboats were built with incredible speed by consortiums of gold seekers eager to reach the gold fields before freeze-up. The *Seattle No. 1* and the *May West* were two such vessels.

The *Seattle* was built in three weeks by disgruntled followers of former Seattle mayor WD Wood. Apparently, Wood led them to believe that a steamer was awaiting their arrival at St. Michael. However, upon their arrival not only did they discover that there was no steamboat to be found, they also discovered that Wood was a storyteller of extraordinary degree. After nearly lynching Wood, they decided to build themselves a boat. The *Seattle No. 1* would soon be dubbed the *"Mukluk"* due to its uncanny resemblance to the Eskimo piece of footwear.

During its construction there was a contest to see if it or the *May West* who would be the first to finish and set off up the river. The *May West* won by a day but it really didn't matter much. Less than half way to the goldfields both vessels were frozen fast into the river.

Soon a shanty of cabins inhabited by members of both expeditions sprang up on the river's edge. The shanty was quickly dubbed Woodsworth after Mayor Wood and Captain Worth of the *May West* but was more commonly known as "Suckerville". So at Suckerville the passengers of the *Mae West* and the *Seattle No. 1* whiled away the bleak and cold winter of '97-'98.

Finally on June 8th 1898, the victors, the members of the *May West*, emerged from their battered but seaworthy craft and staggered down the gangplank at Dawson. It had taken them 300 days to reach their goal. Two weeks later, the losers, the *"Mukluk"* and company, rounded the bend.



The "Whitehorse," navigating Five Finger Rapids in 1901. Said to have sailed over one million miles, she was affectionately called, "Old Gray Mare."

Other vessels had better luck getting to the Klondike. One of these was the 781-ton *Yukoner* under the command of the flamboyant Captain John Irving. Irving was said to be as skilled at river navigation as he was eccentric. It was said that he handled his steamer "as if it were a spirited mare and he an accomplished rider." Nothing seemed to give the daring and energetic Irving more pleasure than to charge full speed at some object in the river and then just in the nick of time, crank the wheel in an extremely accurate measure of avoidance.

During the early summer of 1898 Irving made the best time ever recorded for the St. Michael-to-Dawson run when, with constant male body-servant by his side, he performed the 1,700-mile journey in 24 days. Apparently the delivery of the cargo was of utmost urgency, consisting primarily of wines and spirits and a passenger list composed almost entirely of theatrical people, dance hall girls and gamblers.

Upon Irving's return to St. Michael, he somehow managed to miscalculate his charge towards the docks, reducing it "nearly to match sticks." Irving then immediately unloaded the crippled *Yukoner* onto an enterprising Klondiker, Pat Galvin, for $45,000. After making extensive repairs on her at St. Michael, Galvin, promptly returned her to her former duty as a floating saloon and gambling joint. The steamboat business turned out to be a bad gamble for Galvin though. Within a year his North British American Company, which also owned the elegant steamer, the *Mary Ellen Galvin*, was bankrupt.

The town of Bennett at the end of the passes and at the start of navigation on the southern lakes system, was also the scene of feverish boat building activity during the gold rush. Between 1897 and 1899, 8,000 small craft of all descriptions and several dozen paddle wheelers were built there.

The lumber for these boats in most cases was furnished by local timber that was cut using portable sawmills, but the boiler systems and other heavy machinery had to be lugged 35 miles inland over the steep mountain passes. The White Pass, rather than the Chilkoot, was the preferred route since it was the only one that was passable for beasts of burden. By 1899 the White Pass Railroad had reached Bennett and after that steamboat parts were brought in by rail.

The railroad arrived too late for determined Iowa engineer A.J. Goddard. It was said that this man and his wife packed the 40-foot, 15-ton *A.J. Goddard* and the 35-foot *Bellingham* piece by piece over the White Pass during the winter of 97-98.

As winter ended this husband and wife team re-built both steamers finishing the larger *Goddard* just in time for break-up. Setting off on June 17 from Bennett under Captain Goddard's command, the *A.J. Goddard* successfully navigated the windy southern lakes of Bennett, Tagish, Nares and Marsh. The Goddard then negotiated the ferocious Miles Canyon and Whitehorse Rapids and equally hazardous Five Finger and Rink Rapids, arriving at Dawson safe and sound on the 21st of June 1898. This 600-mile trip, the first steamboat journey from Bennett to Dawson, was completed in four days and 21 hours.

Goddard and his wife received a gala reception from the people of Dawson who, hungry for news of the Outside and provisions, quickly bought up every last item on the Goddard's well stocked cargo deck.

But not all steam boaters were as brave and enterprising as the Goddards. It is estimated that as many as 100 souls perished in the churning waters of Miles Canyon and Whitehorse Rapids before 1898.

Norman McCaulay made life easier for the stampeders when he built a horse-drawn tramway skirting the canyon and rapids. For five cents a pound he hauled their supplies on wooden rails that ran alongside the river to the end of the danger zone, a distance of about five miles.

Boats still had to be taken through the treacherous waters but they were lighter in weight and guided by a skilled pilot. For the most part, the paddle wheelers stayed on the upper lakes and river and were kept busy running freight from Bennett to the new settlement of Canyon City at the head of the canyon.

At the lower end of the tram sprang up another little settlement called White Horse City where steamboats picked up freight and passengers to be carried down river to Dawson, a distance of about 466 miles.

Both settlements thrived for a little over two years until 1900 when White Pass built the railway to the foot of the rapids but on the opposite and west side of the river. This development rendered the tram and settlements obsolete and most residents of the former settlements moved to the new town at the end of steel called simply White Horse. This town's strategic location guaranteed its survival for years to come. By the end of 1900 White Horse had 1,000 inhabitants and by 1901 it had several thousand.

That year White Pass Railway, becoming increasingly impatient with the existing steamboat service (or lack of) on the river, decided to build its own fleet of riverboats. The British Yukon Navigation Company of Canadian registry, ran riverboats between White Horse and Dawson and the the American Yukon Navigation Company of American registry, ran boats between Dawson and points on the lower river to as far as Saint Michael. Both were subsidiary corporations owned by the White Pass & Yukon Route.

Extensive wharfage and warehouse facilities were erected on the waterfront in front of the railway station at White Horse and a little further down stream a shipyard was established. At this shipyard, paddle wheelers destined to fly both the B.Y.N. and the A.Y.N. flags were built. These riverboats would be among the largest and most stately on the river.

The navigation season is short in the North, so speed was of the essence. A crew of some 200 blacksmiths, carpenters, machinists and shipwrights churned out the first three boats, the *Dawson*, the *Selkirk* and the *White Horse* in 43 days.

These boats, named after the Yukon's three largest communities, were not exactly small craft. The *Dawson* had a registered weight of 779 tons, the *Selkirk* 777 tons and the *Whitehorse*, a respectable 1,120 tons. All three were launched in the spring of 1901 and served the Whitehorse to Dawson run well into the 1900s. Unfortunately, in 1920 the *Selkirk* sank at

the mouth of the Stewart River, a total loss, and in 1926 the *Dawson* was wrecked in the Rink Rapids. The Whitehorse however, would see a long and prosperous career.

One hundred sixty-seven feet long and built with a straight head, a square stern, two decks and 400 horses of boiler power, the *Whitehorse* was as sleek and powerful as her name implied. Primarily a passenger vessel, this most photographed of all Yukon River steamers, could accommodate as many as 75 passengers in relative comfort. First class passengers enjoyed berths on the upper deck, while second class passengers slept on cots on the cargo deck.

Some other notable steamboats built at the Whitehorse B.Y.N. shipyard were the 642 ton *Aksala* (Alaska spelled backwards), the 652 ton *Yukon* and the 1,079 ton *Casca*, all built in 1913. Both the *Aksala* and the *Yukon* were A.Y.N. ships and operated for years between Dawson and Nenana, Alaska.

The *Casca* served the Whitehorse to Dawson run until 1936 when she was wrecked at Rink Rapids, a total loss with the exception of the machinery. The latter was retrieved and installed in the *Casca II*, which was built over the winter of '36 and launched the following spring. This stately steamer would be the flagship of the B.Y.N. fleet. One hundred eighty feet long, 1,300 tons, plush and commodious, she possessed a first class dining lounge, a promenade deck and accommodation for 130 passengers.

Sometime before 1909, B.Y.N. also built the large sternwheeler the *J.W. Jacobs* for the U.S. Military in Alaska and in 1912 and 1922 respectively, it built the 405-ton *Nisutlin* and the 160-ton *Keno*. Both vessels were built to serve on the Yukon River's tributaries. The *Keno* for years operated on the Stewart River, pushing barge loads of high-grade silver-lead ore from Mayo Landing to Stewart Island at the mouth.

The *Nisutlin* commonly known as the "Nasty" ran on the Teslin, the Pelly and even the White River. In 1941, in connection with the Shushana Stampede, the "Nasty" ran prospectors and supplies over 100 miles up the muddy, rapid and braided White River to the mouth of the Donjek. The feat took something like two weeks, prompting the late Yukon historian, WD MacBride, to note in his sarcastic humour, "I suppose there were a few bars on the White that Captain Gardner and Pilot Cromart failed to find."

The last, boat built by the B.Y.N. at Whitehorse was also the largest and by far the costliest: the 1,363-ton *SS Klondike*. The *Klondike* was constructed in 1929 at the unheard of cost of $105,000. The B.Y.N. had spent a mere $30,000 to build their first three sternwheelers: the *Dawson*, the *Selkirk* and the *Whitehorse*.

The *SS Klondike* was 210 feet long by 42 feet wide and was powered by two jet-condenser locomotive type boilers producing a total of 525 horsepower — enough to accommodate a crew of 23, a passenger list of 75 and a payload of 300 tons. Its capacity was twice that of any previous boat on the river, plus it could push two barges carrying double the amount of payload apiece.

The *Klondike* was built primarily to ship barge loads of high-grade Keno Hill silver-lead ore from Stewart Island to Whitehorse. The revenue generated from the rich, silver-producing district soon accounted for a substantial portion of the company's yearly income.

In 1936 due to a serious pilot error she smashed into the rocks on the 30-Mile section of the river and sank, apparently a total loss with the exception of some parts, machinery and the boiler. These were installed in a second Klondike, the *Klondike II* built the following year using the same blueprints as the first.

The B.Y.N. riverboats were patterned much after the stately steamers of the Missouri and the Columbia Rivers, built with flat, low draft hulls and stern mounted paddle wheels as opposed to side-mounted types often seen on the deep and wide Mississippi riverboats. The typical vessel was about 170 feet long by 30 feet wide and powered by wood burning locomotive type boilers that provided up to 600 horses of power to the paddlewheel.

Another feature on these riverboats was the presence of "hog-posts" on the upper decks to prevent twisting and to haul the ships over the shallow parts of the river. The procedure, sometimes called "grass-hoppering" was apparently quite a sight to watch. Should a vessel be hopelessly stuck on a sandbar these two great big beams would be lowered into the riverbed alongside the bow end first. Somewhere in the middle, these beams would be attached to a fulcrum point on deck. To the other end of the beams a winch cable would be attached. Then, as the cables were tightened and the gadget went to work, the entire front end of the steamboat would rise several feet up out of the water, the boat would be dragged several feet forward, and then suddenly the boat would slam back down onto the bar. The procedure would be repeated as necessary until the vessel was freed from the impending sandbar.

Considering the treatment that the hulls had to withstand a wood of suitable strength and endurance was required. Douglas Fir was the usual choice due to its strength, resistance to rot and lightness in weight, whereas the cheaper cedar, spruce and pine often furnished lumber for the upper decking and superstructure.

Much of the machinery that went into the boats was forged and finished on the spot at the B.Y.N.'s great big blacksmith and machine shops while many of the accessories such as garbage pails, ashtrays, lighting fixtures and kitchen and tableware were made from scratch at the company tin-smithing shop.

Most B.Y.N. boats were designed to carry both passengers and freight. The lower deck was used to carry freight as well as second- class passengers and crew. On the upper decks were the first class births, the officers' and captain's quarters, the dining hall, and often a smoking room or lounge.

A first class ticket from Whitehorse to Dawson in the 1930's cost $35 one way or $55 return while second class passage was $25 and $40 respectively. Meals, common to both classes, were lavish and always included exquisite northern cuisine such as roast moose or duck and lots of fresh lake

trout. Veggies were also often local in origin being plucked fresh from the many fertile island gardens that dotted the river in those days.

For the evening's entertainment perhaps a piano player would play a cheery tune, an aging dance hall girl would sing a solemn song, or an old sourdough would tell a tale of the days of '98.

Steamboat pilots (though one would think them too busy watching the river) have gained quite a reputation for telling tales. One in particular was a man named Kid Marrion. The Kid would always keep the tourists entertained with his "fascinating" stories of the northland. Some bordered a little too close to the unbelievable.

One of his favourites was the one about the dozens of stampeders' graves eroding into the river each year. He'd tell the story but his audience wouldn't believe him. Then, just as they rounded the next bend in the river, there for all to see was maybe about a half a dozen sets of legs complete with boots sticking out of the riverbank. The usual "Oouuu Wows and E-gads" followed and Kid Marrion would smile in victory. Of coarse Marrion didn't mention that he previously took the time to "salt" the bank with poles and boots.

One time an excursion of sophisticated ladies had the opportunity to be "entertained" by the Kid. However, someone blew the whistle telling the ladies not to believe a word the old talebearer said. The Kid got wind of this leak in security so decided to keep strictly to the truth. All day long he told true and some very fascinating stories of the north and of its characters. Of course, his in-the-know audience believed not a word.

Finally, when the river trip was over, Marrion took them for a nice stroll up to Miles Canyon. When they got there one of the ladies, stricken with awe by the scene, exclaimed "Oh my Goodness what an amazing and beautiful creation of god this canyon is!"

To this Marrion replied "Like hell this is a creation by god! Back in '98 it cost the government $20,000 to blast this canyon out to let the stampeders through!" This, they all believed assuming that no man could make up such a tale on the spot. They didn't know Kid Marrion though and Marrion as usual, walked away with a victory smile.

Another famous riverboat pilot was a fella by the name of Frank Slim, known for his uncanny sixth sense of the river. Slim, of First Nation's ancestry, was born at Lake Laberge in the year 1898 and while a teenager he began working on the riverboats as a deckhand. By the time he was in his twenties he was a full fledged pilot and for the following 30 some years skillfully guided B.Y.N. boats through the river's many rapids and constantly changing channels.

The captains of the B.Y.N ships were in most cases experienced riverboat men who had previous experience on the Columbia, Fraser, Missouri, or Mississippi rivers. These men would work for the summer season running the boats on the river and in the autumn return to their homes in the south. The officers and a good portion of the crew were in most cases from the south being hired out of Vancouver and Seattle employment agencies. Crew members included the firemen and engineer, the steward the

purser, the deckhands (as many as 18), the cooks and waiters, the dishwasher and the cabin boy.

The position of deckhand was the only one that filled locally and apparently the job was so gruelling that rarely did one return the next year for a second season of punishment. There was never a shortage of things to do for the deckhand. It might be loading or unloading cargo or wood, tying knots, swabbing the deck, assisting in cabling and winching through rapids or over bars, or carrying out any other task their subordinate officers should bark out to them.

The pay was good, though. In 1937 a deckhand on the Klondike was paid $60 per month plus overtime. Their regular shift was 12 hours on and 12 off. Compare this to the average wage in the country of $25 a month plus the fact that room and board was included a young man could earn a pretty good nest egg by fall.

The fireman, who was responsible for loading wood into the boiler, had a slightly easier shift, four hours on and eight off. But his job was certainly no picnic either. He had to constantly feed the boiler an average of one four-foot piece of wood every 30 seconds for his entire shift, in temperatures well over 100 F. For this he received $85 per month.

Captains, of course received the top wage of $350 per month while pilots and officers received about half that. The Captain and the pilot took turns in the wheelhouse, while the officers (1st and 2nd mates) barked orders to the deckhands.

A typical journey from Whitehorse to Dawson took about two days with the return trip taking five. During the long summer days, the boats ran round the clock. As autumn approached and the days got shorter, huge navigation lights mounted on the front of the vessel showed the way. However, the boats would often have to make stops of a few hours during the darkest periods, especially when there was no moonlight.

Stops would be made all along the river to pick up and drop off mail, freight, and passengers and to pick up wood. For the upriver journey between Dawson and Whitehorse the *SS Klondike* burned a healthy 250 cords. For the down river journey, maybe 50 cords were consumed. In comparison, the town of Whitehorse in 1937 burned perhaps 1,000 cords over the entire winter.

Well-established wood camps were located about 30 miles apart all along the river and for years the going rate was $7 a cord. Usually about 50 cords would be taken on at each wood stop making it necessary to "wood up" five times between Dawson and Whitehorse.

Trucks, similar to today's dollies, would be loaded with 1/4 cord of wood (about 500 lb.) each. Two sets of planks would be laid between the riverbank and the steamboat, which was usually at a lower elevation. One was for the down-going truck and the other for the up-going truck. A common cable would be attached to each truck and, in the middle, somewhere on shore was a pulley.

In theory, the down-going truck would be slowed down by the weight of

the up-going truck. It wasn't a bad idea, but due to the weight differential, compounded by the fact that some pretty precise timing was involved, some rather interesting moments were bound to occur. The speed of the down-going truck was often so great that more than one load of wood, including truck and operator (had he not extradited himself in time) was thrown clean off the far side of the bow and into the river.

Ships are wrecked

The Yukon was not an overly "friendly" river. Ever-changing channels, hairpin turns, low water levels, rapids and early freeze-ups were among the many hazards and challenges facing captain and crew of the Yukon riverboat. This was especially true for the relatively shallow upper section of the river.

For example, between Whitehorse and Dawson alone there were 12 sets of rapids. In some spots the water moved so rapidly that the sternwheelers had to be winched through by cables attached to shore. The worst rapids were the Five Fingers, the Hell's Gate and the Rink Rapids. At these locations a cable would be fished aboard by one of the crew and attached to the ship's winch or capstan. Then motive power would be applied from the boiler and the ship would literally pull itself upstream.

The upriver run through the rapids usually went smoothly; however, it was the down river one that tended to get a little exciting. For instance, there was the time the *Canadian* was shooting the Five Fingers and she strayed too close to the rock wall. The overhanging panicle of basalt tore 30 feet of her upper cabins right off! Luckily it was during the evening supper and everyone was in the dining hall!

For the most part, though, the Five Fingers was pretty tame providing the proper finger was taken (the extreme right going down stream). The Rink Rapids just slightly downstream from Five Fingers was the more challenging. Especially during periods of low water. The *Bonanza King*, the *Dawson* and the *Casca* were three steamboats that fell victim to the Rink's rocky shoals.

In 1926, the *Dawson*, while shooting the Rink, hit a rock and sank in ten feet of water. Some of the ship was salvaged but much of it including the boiler was left in the river. Ten years later the *Casca* was shooting the Rink when all of a sudden she hit the boiler of the old Dawson. The collision ripped a gaping hole in her hull and sent her to the bottom in short order.

The B.Y.N. lost both the *Casca* and the *SS Klondike* in 1936. The *SS Klondike* went down on the Thirty-Mile section of the River, a spot known for its swiftness, rocky shoals and hairpin turns. Apparently an inexperienced pilot failed to successfully make a bend in the river and smashed into the rocky cliffs putting the boat completely out of control. Jimmy Morgan, was a waiter on the vessel.

"A big shudder shook the ship, then everything went. The tables slid along, the chairs fell over and everything slid off the tray. Everybody went

out onto the afterdeck to see what had happened. They could see slivers of the boat in the water for one thing," he recalled.

Captain Coghlin, who was sitting in the dining room when the collision occurred, raced to the wheelhouse only to find that the steering gear had been knocked out of commission by the jolt. They were at the complete mercy of the river. The boat began to drift helplessly down the river bumping into shore at each bend and suffering considerable damage along the way. Soon she was buckled along her entire 220 feet and taking on water fast.

Many women and children were aboard and all were put into leaky lifeboats and sent to shore. Some had to be liberated from their cabins with an ax. Then, as the Klondike continued to cartwheel down the river crew members jumped ashore with cables which they attempted to attach to trees in an effort to stop the runaway boat. What few cables they managed to secure "snapped like violin strings."

Realizing there was no hope at saving the vessel, Captain Coghlin ordered all hands who could, to abandon ship at once. After which Coghlin quickly abandoned ship himself. . The Klondike then straightened its girth and skidded along the bottom of the river, only a portion of its upper deck and the wheelhouse exposed above water.

Deckhand Andy Kaye, got caught on the bow as she went under, but fortunately he jumped onto a gang plank that happened to be floating by and made his way to shore. The last man aboard, Walter Israel scurried up to the wheelhouse and rode her on out until she finally came to rest on a submerged gravel bar.

Luckily no one was lost in the wreck but most of the cargo was, including several cows. Actually when she went down she released a good portion of her cargo onto the river — a veritable floating grocery store. It was said that folks living for miles downstream never had to buy tobacco, flour and many other items for months afterwards.

Quite a few steamboats too were lost on Lake Laberge, the long narrow lake that the boats had to pass through on the way to Dawson. Laberge was notorious for its sudden storms that in the blink of an eyelash could change the waterway's character from a serene and placid northern lake to a rough and stormy Inland Sea. The riverboats' flat hull design was not very effective at cutting the swells, some as high as six feet

The Taylor & Drury boat the *Thistle* and the R.C.M.P. boat the *Vidette* (formerly the *Mae West*) were both lost in storms on Lake Laberge, as was the *A.J. Goddard*. Fortunately there was no loss of life in the first two sinkings but the captain (not A.J. Goddard) and two of the crew were drowned when the *Goddard* went down.

Most of the boats lost on the lake were complete write-offs. However, with the aid of salvage barges, some of the boats wrecked on the river were pumped and re-floated. This was the case with the *Bonanza King* after it smashed on the rocks at Rink Rapids in 1907 while pushing a heavy barge of coal. Mike Rourke in his book "The Yukon River" describes the salvage operation in a nutshell:

"Her afterdeck was under water, the ship badly twisted and in danger of breaking up. The "Victorian" with the barge "Pelly" arrived on June 1st and after removing the coal, she was slung between two big barges and her uninjured compartments pumped out. This being accomplished, the work of raising her was successfully carried out, and the wreck hanging between the two barges was conveyed by the *Victorian* to Yukon Crossing. Unable to have the hull patched there, the *Bonanza King* continued under her own power hanging between the two barges, to arrive in Dawson on the 13th of June. She was back in service on July 10."

The re-floating of steamboats wrecked on the Yukon River was not an uncommon occurrence. The *Casca* was sunk once and re-floated, the *Canadian* twice and re-floated and believe it or not, one vessel with the most appropriate name of the *Philip B. Low* was sunk so many times it became known as the "fill-up Below".

Considering the amount of shipwrecks on the river, the loss of lives was surprisingly small. The greatest number of fatalities was due to an explosion. The incident happened in 1906 aboard the *SS Columbian*, which was loaded with six tons of dynamite. While attempting to shoot a duck, one of the deckhands accidentally discharged his rifle into the explosive cargo with devastating results. The ship became an instant inferno causing a most horrific death to six of the crew members.

The decline of steam boating on the Yukon

By 1926, the number of steamboats on the river had declined from a high of several hundred during the gold rush, to less than twenty. Due to the 1923 completion of the Alaska Railroad, which connected Valdez to Fairbanks and Tanana , steamboat traffic on the lower river had been reduced to a trickle.

Only three steamboats handled the entire trade on the lower section of the river. St. Michael, once a thriving shipyard and port, was all but washed up as were the two big transportation and trading companies, the A.C.C. and N.A.T.&T. Co. The latter actually got out of the game quite early when all its assets were sold and the company dissolved in 1906.

In 1901 the A.C.C. merged with the Alaska Exploration Company forming the Northern Commercial Company, which, in 1914, sold out lock stock and barrel to White Pass & Yukon Route Company. The sale included 42 steamers and 54 barges. White Pass, considering the steamboats redundant, pulled the majority of them off the water and left them to rot along the shore at St. Michael or somewhere along the river. The glorious era of steam boating on the lower Yukon River was now just a memory.

Steam boating on the upper, Whitehorse to Dawson section of the river carried on strong for several more decades. Throughout the 1930s and '40s the *Casca* and the *Whitehorse* proudly carried passengers and freight between Whitehorse and Dawson and to intermediate points between. The *Klondike* and the *Keno* were also kept more than busy ferrying barges laden with high-grade ore from Stewart and Mayo to Whitehorse.

These were some of the most prosperous and memorable years of steam boating on the river. Riverside wood yards hummed with activity. The shipyards at Whitehorse were busy carrying out various modifications and repairs or maintaining the fleet. And the riverside communities of Dawson, Fort Selkirk, Stewart and others were still completely dependent on the steamboats for their supplies and survival.

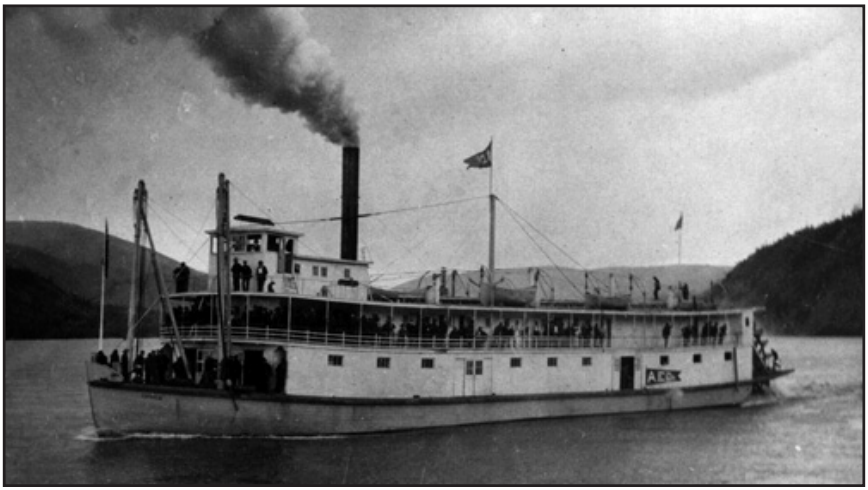
An event happening half a world away would change all that. Within a decade, the river would fall almost as silent as it was in the days of the old *Youcon*. The event was the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, which prompted construction of the Alaska Military Highway the following year.

The highway itself didn't necessarily curtail business for the steamboats. In fact, every steamer in the north was put fast to work shuttling troops, supplies and equipment to strategic, locations along the highway route that were accessible by water

During the War, the towns of Dawson, Fort Selkirk and Stewart still depended on the riverboats. Construction of the Mayo Road in 1950 and the Dawson Road in 1955 delivered the final blow to traffic along the Yukon River. Steam boating, no matter how romantic a way of life it may have been, was now obsolete.

As soon as the Mayo Road was finished, Keno Hill's lucrative ore hauling contract was taken over by trucks thereby putting the *Keno* and the *Klondike* out of a job. The *Keno* was withdrawn completely from service the following year. In 1952 the *Casca* made her last run to Dawson and back before being pulled up on the ways for good.

The *Whitehorse* continued to serve the Whitehorse to Dawson run for the next two years but in the autumn of 1954 she too fell victim to the changing times. After 53 years of continuous service, longer than that of any other steamer on the river, the "Old Grey Mare" as she had come to be known, was no longer needed.



By the summer of 1955 there was one last surviving steamboat on the river: the *SS Klondike*. For awhile it looked like her future held some hope. In 1954 at the cost of $100,000 Whitehorse businessman T.C. Richards in partnership with the White Pass Corporation refitted her in grand style and offered lazy nostalgic excursions to Dawson and back. The excursions were booked to capacity. Without the revenue from ore haul, however, the *Klondike* lost money. The 1955 season was her last one.

The B.Y.N.'s last boat, the laker, *Tutshi*, out of Carcross, was retired the same year. After over a half a century in the steam boat business White Pass was gave it up. Soon, after the company went into the trucking business.

The majestic paddle wheelers that for close to a century held complete sway over the northern economy now served only as a pretty backdrop to a town in transition. Their duty at helping shape the history of the Yukon was done and their future now was as uncertain as their past was glorious.

In 1958 the steamers the *Klondike,* the *Casca*, the *Whitehorse*, the *Keno,* the *Aksala*, the long forgotten *Yukoner* and the launches the *Neechah* and the *Loon* were all laid up at the Whitehorse shipyards. The big workshops and other buildings used by the B.Y.N. for over 50 years were now in the process of being dismantled.

By 1960 they were gone, as were the *Yukoner* and the *Aksala*. Both boats were ripped apart and used primarily for firewood. The paddle-wheel and the two upper levels of the *Aksala* however were saved and were hauled up to the top of the south access road where they served for awhile as a

The Julia B. of St. Michael, lies rotting across the river from Dawson, ca 1976. The remains of other sternwheelers can still be seen here.

rather interesting dining lounge. There the paddle wheel remains.

In 1960 the White Pass Corporation donated the *Klondike*, the *Casca*, the *Whitehorse* and the *Keno* to the Canadian Government on an as-is-where-is basis to be used for their historical value. That same year the last stern wheeler to ply the Yukon River, the *Keno* under Captain Frank Blakely and pilot Frank Slim made her last journey from Whitehorse down the long and lonely Yukon River to Dawson. There she was pulled up on the riverbank where she still serves as a monument to the steamboat era.

In 1961 the warehouses and wharves lining Whitehorse's waterfront were removed as was the giant derrick formerly used to load and unload the steamboats. In 1966 the *SS Klondike* with the aid of 5,000 pounds of Palmolive soap and three bulldozers, was skidded from the shipyard to a new home in the "Whiskey Flats" section of town.

By the early 1970s only the *Casca* and the *Whitehorse* remained at the shipyards. With the *Klondike* and the *Keno* having selected as the icons of the Yukon steamboat era, the future of these former queens of the river seemed even more uncertain. Would they be allowed to decay before our very eyes? Would they be torn apart and used for lumber or firewood? Would their paddle wheels be carted off and plopped down somewhere beside the highway? The answer to the question came on the afternoon of June 20, 1974.

On that fateful day, someone noticed that smoke was bellowing from the *Casca*. Fire trucks were summoned and by the time they got there both ships were engulfed in flames. Firemen armed with one two, three and finally four high-output firehoses dowsed the rapidly incinerating steamers. The effect was negligible. The fire was so hot that even the very ironworks began to melt into a molten mass.

Half the town gathered at the shipyards to watch the horrific spectacle. Women, children and even grown men cried unabashedly as the *Casca*, the former flagship of the B.Y.N., and the *Whitehorse*, the "Old Grey Mare" were reduced to ashes and twisted molten metal before their eyes. By late afternoon when the flames had finally subsided, what was left could be hauled off to the dump in a truckload.

Yukon artist Ted Harrison was compelled to put down the brush and pick up a pen. His poem is dedicated to Rolf Hougen who, in Harrison's words, "actually did something for the *Casca* and the *Whitehorse*.

You served the Yukon well,
And in your prime cleaved with burdened holds
Through treacherous shoals whose spruce lined shores
Embraced the skeletons of former barques.
Retirement was rich in ill neglect.
The sound of Yukon's waters mocked your impotence
Until a painted facade brought back awhile
The image of a former glory.
We passed you by

Until, with awesome power the crackling flames uplifted our eyes
And focused for a while your dying personalities.
Our tears showing anguished last respect.
Some small atonement for our past neglect.

Out of the hundreds of stern wheelers that once plied the Yukon River, only two are left: the *Klondike* and the *Keno*. Both are designated national historic sites. This designation not only verifies their great contribution to Canadian history, but it has also provided generous funding enabling both to be restored to their former glory.

Since acquiring her in the early '60s the Canadian Government has spent upwards of $1 million towards the upkeep, maintenance and refurbishing of the *Klondike* alone. This includes an extensive fire protection sprinkler system, 24- hour security cameras and guard, and a complete restoration to her 1930s splendor. Aboard her are over 7,000 artifacts including the ship's compass, the captain's log and the cook's ladle. There is even what appears to be a fully stocked pantry and enough wood to carry her down the river halfway to Dawson.

The Klondike at its resting spot in Whitehorse.

Linda's Bridge

By Doug Bell

They were married in September. It was 1946 and jobs weren't as plentiful as the politicians had promised returning veterans. Cream testing held little promise but it brought home the bacon. A letter arrived, the only reply to 37 sent. Come to Edmonton for further training, it said. The pay was a steady $110 a month. They couldn't refuse.

Training over, it was time to "Go north young man, but, (ah, those government *buts*,) "there's no married quarters – you find your own."

He went north, she went south, home to the prairies, with the promise of a spring reunion, and a home.

He had no idea what his Irish mother-in-law had meant when she said, "You're going to the back of God speed where the monkey shot the fiddler." 75 miles off the Alcan Highway, hemmed in by more trees than you could shake a stick at, the camp was a complete opposite to the prairies he'd just left. Chubby's Irish expression needed no explanation now – he was there! The north began its lessons quickly with the coldest winter on record, true isolation, lots to learn, lots of work and good men to work with, and a cloak of loneliness that covered them both.

The long lonely winter over, the Canadian Pacific DC-3 landed in Fort St. John in March '47 and they were together again.

Hours later, with a leftover '42 Chevy pick-up full of camp shopping they drove north on the Alcan. At milepost 73 they turned onto the dirt road still holding enough of March's chill to stiffen the mud.

The north threw another curve at them. The truck kicked out of gear in the first 20 miles, then caught fire. They put it out, then huddled in the cold till rescue arrived hours later.

Arrival at camp was, for her, an introduction to a two room ex timekeeper's shack, neither room large enough to swing a cat in. The north seemed bent on discouraging this cheechako lady, but the north lost that one, in spades.

Pearl and Doug Bell, 1946.

The camp was a link in the chain of airports called the Northwest Staging Route, with a sterling wartime history and purpose. It consisted of a gravel airstrip, a two-storey radio control tower, two barracks, a garage, and a power house, plus its reason for being — three buildings along range road filled with remotely controlled electronic hardware used to mark the invisible highway in the sky, airway Amber Two. This was the five-year-old international air route from Edmonton, Alberta to Fairbanks, Alaska.
And the trees. At home they joked you could watch your dog run away for two days, here it'd be about two minutes.

Married "quarters" were three leftover buildings from the construction of the camp. Theirs became the fourth.

It was too small. New friends agreed it was too small and helped them do something about it. A leftover building, a living room, was pushed into place, a door cut through (oops, not level), a big step added, and they had "bush camp split level."

The summer went well, the winter too, and then a happy Irish mother on the prairies received a letter from her daughter telling her she'd be a grandmother in May or June.

Spring '48 was spring in a hurry, and her marvelous sixth sense saved them again. It's late April, the runway's out of commission, the doc says the baby will join them 24th of May. If the road goes, it's better to be in town was her thinking. Her premonitions came to pass.

They left on the frost on a late April midnight. She checked into the room-

Someone labelled this, "contractors inspecting the job." Me on left, John on right.

ing house. The camp's shopping lists filled in the morning, night and the frost came and he left her alone in a strange place with strangers and drove 100 miles back to camp.

Pulling into camp the driver of the five-ton ration truck met him to get a road condition check. He had the monthly grocery run for the 25-man camp.

Ten miles from camp he came to an abrupt stop – the bridge over the Beaton River was gone. Spring '48 didn't just arrive in a hurry we found out. It came on a dead run.

The next morning the Army Maintenance people called and told the camp boss the other bridge on our dirt road at the Blueberry River, a dozen miles from the Alcan was also gone. Then the kicker: several bridges on the Alcan were damaged, or gone. It'd be weeks, probably months, before our two bridges could be replaced.

A week later rations and mail were being air dropped by the RCAF Lodestar – air dropped without parachutes. We often had mashed potatoes before they were cooked.

The expectant father's anxiousness skyrocketed. The doctor had set

First vehicle across. The truck on the other side is loaded with stuff to build our way to the second bridge on the Blueberry.

the expected birth date for May 24. That day came and went but the baby didn't, and there were no bridge builders in sight

Pregnant and lonely she waited patiently some days, impatiently others. He did too, and ironically, there, amidst buildings full of the latest electronic wizardry, was their only means of communication – a crank telephone.

Coffee talk one early June night went like so:

"Doug you've got to get into town for the birth of your baby."

"Sure, but how?"

"We'll build a bridge," said John.

"When?"

"Tomorrow!"

John went to bed. Expectant Dad went to work on the midnight shift. John walked the cat to the river, and, at shift's end he climbed into a truck filled with planks, timber, tools, and a-bridge building they went.

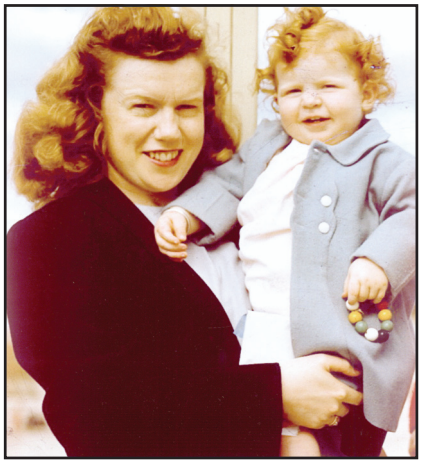
The river level had dropped to chest high on a five-and-a-half-foot man. The smooth sandy bottom made standing easy, but it was colder'n the hubs of hell as Mate said.

John went upstream and bladed some limbed logs into the river. They looked bigger than BC Douglas fir when they came around the last bend heading straight at us and we with nothing but bare hands, standing behind sand filled 45-gallon drums put into place as bridge "pillars."

The logs became the bridge deck support simply sitting on the drums. A medley of leftover planks spiked into the logs became the bridge "roadway."

It was finished the 10th of June, then it was 50 miles of building across, around, over, through wash outs, until at day's end we stood at the Blueberry River. On a one-man raft, the expectant father poled across and into a Fort St. John weatherman's waiting car, hugging his wife in late evening.

Time enough to walk; and walk some more, and then some more. The doctor, bless his heart, had said walking would help induce labour and perhaps convince this Queen's birthday baby to join us.



Pearl & Linda, 8 months after the event.

She did. The next morning, the 11th day of June 1948, curly red headed Linda, 8 pounds 4 ounces, was born.

She was spoiled by every man in camp for the next two years till they moved further north.

Linda's bridge? That's what we called it for awhile.

Well a great cheer erupted in the mess hall when the Army crew said they had to blow the bridge with dynamite to get it out. Mind you the fact it was January '49 had something to do with it.

The cheer told us something else though. We were all proud of that thing we'd built with leftovers, in three evenings, working fully clothed in icy waters, and we got him to town in time to be with her, and Linda.

The tires on this one hung over the roadway on both sides—guidance essential since driver saw nothing but water on either side.

Linda's Mom? Everyone knew, though never said it either, she was special - alone, in a strange place, waiting, always cheerful and upbeat.

The men in the north built bridges and other things; the women built families and turned shacks into homes. It was the homes, the love and the people in them that built villages and towns.

The children of these families are pioneers too. They carry the same independent philosophy. If you need something, and you don't have it, you build it with what you've got, and you're the better for it.

Oh, Linda is our daughter!

Pearl & Doug Bell

First vehicle returning from the other way—not the best entrance design!

They Grub-staked a Gold Rush

The Story of Arthur Harper, Al Mayo and Jack McQuesten

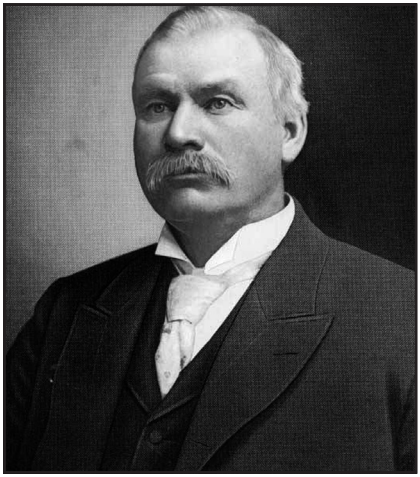
By Jane Gaffin

Until the 1870s, nomadic In-dian and Eskimo tribes mov-ing along their migration routes to fish, hunt and gather were the main inhabitants of the Yukon and Alaska. Also, there were 500 Russians scattered along the coastline harvesting furs and the Hudson's Bay Company fur traders who had arrived in the 1840s. The 1870s were marked with the significant presence of American traders Arthur Harper, Jack McQuesten and Al Mayo. All encouraged the goldseekers to come in the 1880s.

The American West had been conquered and the American and British Columbia gold and silver camps were in production as mines. The tough breed of prospectors who had opened up the frontier mining areas was composed of a motley assortment of adventurers, Civil War veterans, Indian fighters, frontiersmen, loners and misfits. These restless souls pushed on to explore the great remote northern frontier where, in summer, the midnight sun shone most of the night and the incessant swarms of buzzing, biting insects drove sane men crazy.

Winter was an endless drag of depressing dark, exacerbated by temperatures far below zero that turned whisky and Perry Davis' Painkiller to slush. This isolated hinterland was known as the Inside, and many of the first prospectors turned back in the fall months to winter "Outside," as they called the "civilized" world.

Arthur Harper, left, Al Mayo, centre.



Jack McQuesten, often called the "Father of the Yukon."

Soon, a few intrepid individuals forged deeper into the interior to battle heat, frost, famine and disease. They lived off the land with nothing more than hunting rifles, animal traps and fish nets.

The trailblazer was Arthur Harper, who is believed to be the first man to consider investigating the Yukon River basin as a mining field. Harper was bitten badly by gold bug and definitely had a nose for finding the precious yellow metal. But fortune never favoured him. He thrilled more to exploring new ground than the actual discovery so he kept giving away promising "leads" to others.

To keep rekindling his quest for untried places, he poured over a copy of a London-published *Arrowsmith* topographical map of British North America. It showed mostly features gleaned from Hudson's Bay Co., as the fur-trading company's information was primarily all that was available at the time.

Harper, who was a prolific letter-writer, kept sending glowing reports that eventually lured his prospecting friends and acquaintances north to check out the Yukon River valley, where he and his mates were headed in 1871. In this way, the Irishman was instrumental in helping populate the North Country and setting the stage for a Klondike gold rush that he would not witness.

Access into the Yukon River basin was difficult. The Yukon is hemmed in on the east by the Mackenzie Mountains and on the west by the glaciers of the Coast Mountains and St. Elias Range. These barriers deterred neither the European Hudson's Bay traders, who came 5,000 miles overland by numerous rivers and portages, nor the Americans who came in clusters of twos and threes, working up and down the Yukon River from Alaska.

In 1880, the coastal Indians opened the Chilkoot Pass to white men who spearheaded a rush to the Stewart River gravel bars in 1885 and 1886. In 1886, Howard Franklin and Henry Madison found nothing while prospecting one of the Stewart River's major tributaries, later named the McQuesten River. Under Harper's encouragement they went to check the Fortymile River which straddles the Yukon-Alaska border.

Miraculously, the Franklin-Madison team's discovery was the first coarse gold found in the Yukon. Stewart River miners, anticipating every next "strike" as the elusive Eldorado, rushed to Fortymile where an instant community of log cabins sprang up. Jack and Kate McQuesten followed the rushes, and they would immediately set to building another trading post.

Freedom was important to these men who lived according to a frontier code. Only when a man's freedom encroached on his neighbour's did frontier justice come into play, and the judgments could be brutal. Alaska was rawer and rougher than the neighbouring British/Yukon District of the Northwest Territories. Before 1900 in Alaska, there was no law enforcement or court system. Important judicial matters were decided by majority vote in miners' meetings composed of white men only. Theft, a dastardly crime that could cost the victim his life, was punishable by hanging.

In his book "Klondike," Pierre Berton recounted an incident in which

a Circle City, Alaska, thief stole from another man's cache. Nobody wanted to do the duty with the hemp, so the sentence had to be commuted to banishment. The miners took up a collection to provide the culprit with tent, stove and grub and sent him packing alone into the wilderness.

"The U.S. government obviously considered these meetings lawful," declared Berton, "for the verdict of one of them was sent to Washington (DC) and confirmed."

The murder case involved bartender Jim Chronister who killed Jim Washburn in self-defense. Washburn, reputed as a brawling bully, was infa-

DAWSON ABOUT 1897
Back L to R Frank Buteau, Pete Nelson
Front L to R Al Mayo, Bill Lloyd (Passed Away about 1907).

mous on both sides of the border for disturbing the peace. Chronister offered himself to a miners' meeting trial and was acquitted in just 20 minutes, wrote Berton.

From these miners' meetings evolved the fraternal organizations: the Miners' Association and the Alaskan Order of Yukon Pioneers, of which Jack McQuesten was the first elected president, and the Yukon Order of Pioneers, which counted Mayo was a member. For its motto, the Order adopted the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you".

The words may have sounded a bit sappy coming from a bunch of tough hombres. But many of these men held to Christian values and knew proper conduct. They definitely knew their life in the wilds depended on their fellow man. Each member took the oath to help every other member whenever need arose, and to always share news about the locations of any new gold strikes.

Nobody heeded the philosophy more than Jack McQuesten, Al Mayo and Arthur Harper who provided customers with a remarkable frontier credit system based on honour. Only a few rich folks carried cash. Traders accepted gold, fish, furs, labour—whatever would barter in exchange for merchandise—rifles, ammo, bedrolls, boots, calico fabric, canvas, cast-iron cooking utensils and staple food products such as bacon, flour, sugar, coffee, tea and dried beans and fruits.

The prospectors depended on the trading posts for gold pans, tools, ax heads, picks, shovels and saw blades. Any person who had nothing to barter could cart off all the provisions he needed without the burden of terms or contracts, other than to observe payment was due after the next gold cleanup, whenever that might be.

McQuesten recognized the ritual sprees for miners coming in from the creeks. The trader wouldn't ask for payment until the creditor had his night on the town, which usually resulted in a broke miner coming back for more credit without the wherewithal to pay his outstanding bill of $500 or so. McQuesten would outfit him again and again and again, always letting him have the spree first. Needless to say, the men adored McQuesten and never uttered a disparaging word about him or his partners.

The bush legend that McQuesten never sent out a bill and was seldom short-changed for his generosity can be interpreted in one of two ways: either his thrifty wife Katherine was looking after business and collections, or the non-billing yarn isn't true.

Here's one rendition: Arthur Harper, who had joined McQuesten and Mayo in the trading business in 1874, was in charge of Fort Reliance with Mayo in 1875. McQuesten had gone up to the trading post of Fort Yukon and on to St. Michael's at Norton Sound to replenish supplies.

Seemingly, while McQuesten was away, Harper and Mayo had a bit of trouble with the Indians whose level of agitation was measured in direct proportion to the expansion of the white invasion. Harper and Mayo decided it was wise to leave the post until the Indians readjusted to their ame-

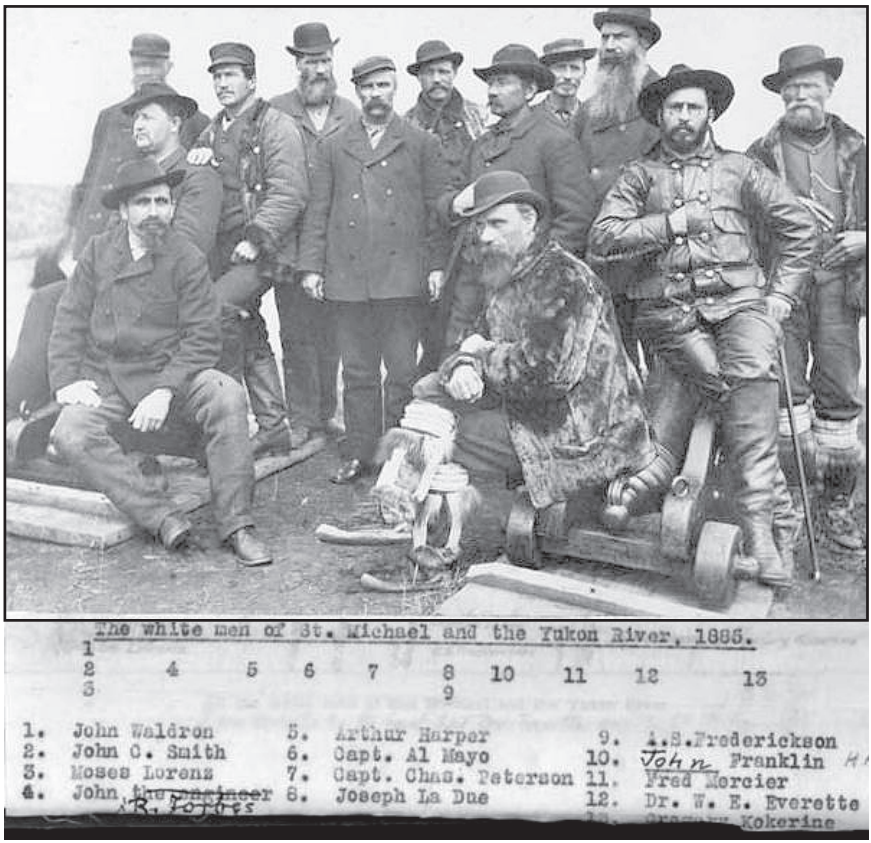
nable attitude. The merchants concealed, as best they could, all the supplies, including an arsenic-grease mixture used for poisoning mice.

The Indians, not having any place to trade for supplies, looted the store. They found the compound and mixed it with some flour to make bannock. The results were fatal for two elderly Indian women and a blind girl.

In the fall, McQuesten ferried a fresh outfit up river for the store and faced the dilemma of reaching terms with the Indians. After a pow-wow, McQuesten billed them to the hilt for the stolen goods. The Indians didn't want compensation for the women poisoned.

"(They) were not valued at all, being a nuisance, and for the young one, ten skins, the current terms of the country, about six dollars, was demanded," advised Dominion land surveyor William Ogilvie in his memoirs. "This amount was cheerfully paid, and some presents given besides, and the prompt payment and kindliness established the very best of feelings."

One of the gifts was one of McQuesten's best dogs. He wasn't eager to part with the animal and had to think the matter for a couple of days before he decided to let the tribe keep the dog.



The prospectors worked along the valley of the Yukon River which is North America's fifth largest river basin and the Yukon Territory's and Alaska's major waterway. It was first explored from one end to the other in 1883 by Lt. Frederick Schwatka, a U.S. cavalry officer, whose irritating habit of flippantly changing place names was contested by other explorers like Dr. George Dawson of the Canadian geological survey.

The river starts from the Pacific Ocean, twisting and turning about 2,000 miles across the girth of the Yukon and Alaska before emptying into the salt chuck at St. Michael's. The Indians, Eskimos and Russians had their own words for the Yukon River, each invariably translating into English as "great" or "big".

Before the Klondike stampede, goldseekers and traders had approached the country in a wide, flanking route, and travelled to the interior from the top down.

That is the route used by the famous McQuesten, Harper, Mayo trio who helped open the Yukon valley and, consequently, made life tolerable for the hordes of prospectors who followed 25 years later. More than any others, the notable trading trio was directly responsible for the mining development that occurred in the Yukon while they were commissioned traders for the Alaska Commercial Company or worked together as partners or independently.

The Harper and McQuesten parties had fortuitously met each other in 1873. Arthur Harper, an Irishman born in Antrim County in 1835, had immigrated into the United States as a young man and drifted west to the gold diggings of California, then up to British Columbia, which maybe was getting too civilized and orderly for his liking. The region was proclaimed a province in 1871 and he was moving on.

Harper had a rectangular face, piercing eyes and a severe, no-nonsense demeanour that belied his patience and personality. When his great beard, which he trimmed neatly for a formal photographic portrait, turned snow white he took on a persona of a terse "frontier patriarch". Yet it was Jack McQuesten with his luxurious flowing blond moustache who became legendary as "the father of the country".

Gold had drawn Harper north on the stampedes to the Fraser canyon and Cariboo grasslands in the 1850s and 1860s. Unsuccessful in finding gold, as would be his life's curse, he convinced four others to undertake a protracted journey into unknown northern wilderness to look for gold-bearing creeks. One of these men was his life-long pal Frederick Hart, also born in County Antrim, Ireland, in 1835. Also on the roster were George Finch of Kingston, Ontario, Andrew Kansellar from Germany, and a Brit named Samuel Wilkinson, who soon abandoned the party to carry on up the Liard River, where he hoped pickings would be easier.

The placer gold they chased was called "free gold" for more than one reason. It needed no great monetary investment to harvest it – just a shovel, a gold pan and a pick. The gold had been deposited by nature in such a loose fashion that any person with a strong back and weak head could sluice the flour and coarse gold from the creeks and carry it away in his backpack.

The five men set off on their odyssey to the Yukon River valley, paddling down the Peace River in dugout canoes in September 1872. In their outfit was a five-gallon keg of strong black rum. At every Hudson's Bay post they visited the jug was tapped and a cordial drink passed around. Every now and then, a thirsty soul would pull the cork and take a greedy swig instead of pouring out a shot. The results were hellish!

In winter they crossed the height of land that separated them from the Liard Basin. After the ice went out the next spring, 1873, they came by way of Sikanni Chief River and the Fort Nelson River. At the confluence, they encountered another party.

The leader appeared to be Leroy Napoleon "Jack" McQuesten, a Maine farm boy, born in Litchfield, New Hampshire, in 1836. Jack was only 13 years old when he spirited off to the 1849 California gold rush, either on his own or with his family, who had at some point left Maine and migrated for Illinois country.

After leaving the California gold fields, McQuesten fought Indian wars in Oregon Territory before moving north to British Columbia in 1858 and on to the Northwest Territories. He had worked as a prospector, trapper, trader and, early in his career, had entered employment at Fort Garry (Manitoba) as a Hudson's Bay Company voyageur.

McQuesten was travelling with two partners. One was James McKniff.

Photograph of the McQuesten and Company building and some of the rest of Circle City, Alaska. Many of the residents of this mining town are present for the photo. Jack McQuesten is identified as the man in the front row 2nd from left. The mining company's office is also the post office and the building at the far right of the photo is a restaurant.

The other was Alfred Henry Mayo, born in Bangor, Maine, on February 7, 1847. Despite an 11-year age difference in their ages, it is likely Mayo and McQuesten knew each other back in New England.

Mayo was a Mason, a highly-influential service brotherhood seeking to better society through ethical behaviour. He was blessed with a dry wit and prone to practical joking. He was thin as a rake and wiry as a coat hanger, his physique contrasting drastically with McQuesten—a big, stout guy, standing over six feet tall and weighing 200 pounds. Both were patient, personable, fearless and observed Christian values. McQuesten said Mayo was the best guy a man could ever want for a trail mate.

While the two parties wintered at Nelson Forks, they decided they would go back and pick up the Mackenzie River. They could drift downstream, cross the Arctic Circle and enter the Yukon River valley via the Hudson's Bay Company's portage west to the Porcupine River. Then they could intersect the Yukon River and carry on to their destination, which turned out to be Fort Yukon, Alaska, at the rivers' confluence at the Arctic Circle, and on down river to Tanana, an important trading centre on the Yukon River at the confluence of the Tanana River.

At Nelson Forks, Wilkinson, who maybe wasn't an explorer at heart, declined Harper's theory about abundant gold along the unknown Yukon. He departed up the Liard River on his own, reducing the Harper party to four men; the McQuesten party of three was still intact.

It was an arduous and circuitous journey. Yet, they seemed to have made good time, despite splitting company at Fort Simpson, N.W.T., where McQuesten had to take care of some trading business.

In 1873, Harper and his companions continued prospecting and paddling their way to the mid-point of the Yukon River. Harper reported that on the Peace River everywhere were colours (specs of gold); on the Liard were colours; on the Mackenzie nothing; on the Peel fair prospects; on the Porcupine some colours; and on the Yukon prospects everywhere - just as he had imagined.

They had left Fort Yukon to go upriver about 400 miles to White River before McQuesten and Mayo showed up at the post with 1,400 pounds of goods and four skookum dogs.

Moses Mercier, a French Canadian from Montreal, Quebec, was the Fort Yukon agent for the Alaska Commercial Company. The San Francisco-based enterprise descended from the old Russian American Trading Company after the United States clandestinely negotiated to purchase Alaska for $7.2 million, or two cents an acre, in 1867.

The public was outraged with the purchase of good-for-nothing real estate. But mercantile companies, smarter than the average polar bear, didn't view the huge chunk of frozen real estate as a worthless icebox for storing glaciers. They saw Alaska, the Aleut word for Great Land, as a lucrative business opportunity.

Two San Francisco businessmen, the mutton-chopped Lewis Gerstle and his partner Louis Sloss, formed Hutchinson Kohl & Company to buy the Russian trading company's physical assets and commercial interests.

The Russian American Company's roots traced back to 1776 when Russian Empress Catherine the Great granted it fur harvesting and trading rights. The new American firm paid $350,000 to the Russian owners and immediately re-opened the string of trading posts under the banner of Alaska Commercial Company.

In 1869, the Jewish owners exercised their influence through political connections in Washington, DC, and convinced the government to conduct a survey of the lower Yukon River valley to set boundaries. Although this spat was considered resolved between Great Britain and Russia in 1825, the U.S. Corps of Engineers was assigned the surveying task. The calculations of Captain Charles Raymond determined that Fort Yukon indeed was on the American side of the border.

The representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company, whose Fort Yukon post was established in 1847, were notified of the illegality of foreigners trading goods with the natives in American territory. As soon as practicable, Hudson's Bay relocated up the Porcupine River to build another post called Rampart House because of the river's steep banks.

As soon as Hudson's Bay vacated Fort Yukon in 1869 an American flag was raised and Alaska Commercial Company assumed ownership of Hudson Bay's expropriated property. Some described these assets as "rickety and dilapidated," while others spoke of the buildings as "neat, tidy and sturdy."

McQuesten, Mayo and the other men who hadn't gone with Harper's party to White River, moved upriver for the winter. Wild game and fish were plentiful but trading was poor. They came back to Fort Yukon on May 10, 1874, then moved down to Alaska Commercial's Tanana post where Harper and his party soon showed up. They reported food plentiful but prospecting lousy at White River.

There are five Alaskan rivers blessed with the name "White." The White River where Harper and his party went prospecting was the 200-mile-long stream that heads in Alaska and flows northeast into Canada until it finds the Yukon River. The Chilkat Indians referred to this large stream as Sand River due to its countless sandbars. In 1850, Hudson's Bay Company factor and explorer Robert Campbell named it "White" because the silty water looked like liquid mud.

"There are immense deposits of volcanic ash up it which is in the form of an impalpable white powder, which is simply pulverized pumicestone," explained William Ogilvie. "In rainy weather this washes into the river in such quantities that the water is actually thick with it and has a creamy white colour."

When Mercier announced he was making the run down to St. Michael's to deliver furs and replenish supplies for Fort Yukon and Tanana, the whole party went along. Moses Mercier's 36-year-old brother Francois (Franc) was based at St. Michael's. He was manager of the Yukon valley district that encompassed a goodly portion of interior Alaska and was helping Alaska Commercial monopolize the fur trade through good trading relations with the natives.

The French Canadian fur trader had come to St. Michael's originally with the Pioneer Company in 1868. The short-lived Pioneer fur business dissolved the next year and Franc Mercier finally signed on in 1872 with Hutchinson Kohl and Company, the precursor to the Alaska Commercial Company.

At St. Michael's, McQuesten, Mayo and Frederick Hart signed on as agents. Harper and three others simply bought supplies on this round. With five boats in tow, the whole lot started back up river on July 7, 1874, as passengers on Alaska Commercial's tiny steamer "Yukon," the first vessel ever to operate on the Yukon River.

In 1833, the Russians established a stockade post on the Bering Sea coast at Norton Sound. It was named after Captain Michael Dmitrievich Tebenkov, who, afterwards, governed the Russian-American colony of Alaska. Quite early, the post's name was changed to Michaelovski and was sometimes referred to as Redoubt St. Michael. When the Harper and McQuesten parties accompanied Moses Mercier to St. Michael's, the village population of 109 was predominantly Eskimo.

The expedition headed upriver after taking care of business in St. Michael's in the summer of 1874. The little Alaska Commercial Company steamer was dropping in for cordial and trading calls at various villages along the waterway.

One anchorage was at Koyukuk Station, a small Indian village at the confluence of the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers, where the Koyukons were suffering a famine. Among a fishing party camped on the Yukon River bank was 14-year-old Jennie Bosco. The 39-year-old Harper asked to marry her and the parents eagerly arranged a hasty marriage and pushed Jennie into Harper's care. She was not formally educated and had no familiarity with Western culture.

Another 80 miles farther upriver, they anchored in Kokrines, located on the left bank. The little trading post, near a hotsprings and backed by the lovely Kokrines Hills, is roughly 80 miles west of Tanana and 300 miles west of Fort Yukon.

Only a handful of people lived in the tiny interior Alaskan village where life revolved around Old Man Kokrine, one of very few Russian traders who had remained on the river after the United States purchased Alaska in 1867. The trading village was named for the Russian trader whose own name has been spelled and misspelled a variety of phonetic ways over the years. In 1887, it was "Cochrein". Earlier, in 1871, the village was called "Newikargut", a name adopted from the stream across the Yukon River.

Fourteen-year-old Katherine (Kate) James was born in Kokrines in 1860. Evidently, she had come home for summer break from Russian Mission, the home of the first Russian Orthodox Church, located farther down the Yukon River at Ikogmiut. She could speak the Russian language of her father, the Koyukon Athabaskan of her mother and could converse in English. She met McQuesten, her 38-year-old husband to be when he first stopped at the trading post.

McQuesten and the young schoolgirl were equally smitten but she had reached the respectable age of 18 before they married in 1878. Jack London, a friend of McQuesten's, later crafted a work of fiction based on their love story.

Kokrines was also the setting for a romance between 27-year-old Al Mayo and Jennie Harper's 14-year-old cousin, Margaret. She was the daughter of the chief at Nuklukayet, a little Indian trading village located upriver near Tanana. Margaret's parents arranged an Athabaskan-style coupling and the pair became life-long companions and business partners of 50 years.

From 1874 onward, wherever Mayo or Harper are credited with building and running trading posts or taking on any other endeavour, their hard-working wives, Margaret and Jennie, and their children must also be credited. The same holds true for Kate James and Jack McQuesten who married in 1878.

McQuesten had selected a spot up river to set up shop six miles down from the mouth of the Trundeck, a variation of the word "Tronduick," meaning "full of fish." Eventually the Indian name evolved into the word "Klondike."

In August, 1874, the steamer Yukon left McQuesten and F. Barnfield to build their winter quarters.

"I employed some Indians to carry logs and some went to hunt," wrote McQuesten. "The hunters returned in a few days with plenty of meat before it froze up. We had our house and the store completed and the Indians brought in plenty of dried meat to last us all winter. I sold all the goods we had for furs during the winter."

Fort Reliance, like most trading posts of the day, was not a real "fort" in the true sense of the early day fortresses built by the Russian American and Hudson's Bay companies. Rather, the structures were simply general stores hewn from logs.

Reliance was a focal point for trappers and travellers between 1874 and 1876 at Mile 0 on the Yukon River. From the post, distances were measured to other places along the river. For instance, the settlement of Fortymile was 40 miles downstream from Fort Reliance while Sixtymile was 60 miles upstream.

About a year after opening Fort Reliance, the partners went to St. Michael's to deliver furs and take on new supplies. They learned that Alaska Commercial Company had reorganized. Its new policy was to put their fur traders on commissions.

At this time, McQuesten went to work at the Fort Yukon post while Harper and Mayo returned to Fort Reliance. For three years, the pair came down to winter at Fort Yukon with McQuesten. The company's little steamer took them back up river in summers to Reliance.

After a few years, McQuesten abandoned Fort Yukon and moved down to the post at the mouth of the Tanana River. In 1877, he re-opened Reliance on a year-round basis.

An interloper had moved into the Tanana scene and was paying high

prices for furs, thus preventing other free agents from earning a living on commissions. Franc Mercier had joined the rival company in 1877. By 1878, the company was operating a second steamer on the lower Yukon River in competition with Alaska Commercial's little steamer, *Yukon.*

The Western Fur and Trading Company, also based in San Francisco, didn't last long. So, Franc Mercier returned in 1882 to Alaska Commercial, which had bought out Western. Alaska Commercial's representatives, McQuesten & Co., ended up with the little steamer, *St. Michael.* Now they could improve customer service to whites and natives on both sides of the border.

A settlement at the junction of the Yukon and Tanana rivers had supported a well-established Indian trading locality long before the Europeans came on the scene. It was near what was later called "Tanana Station" and where, in 1880, Arthur and Jennie Harper established an Alaska Commercial trading post.

Between the years 1875 and 1877, the three trading partners had found time to fan out as they were prospecting the Yukon valley. McQuesten struck good pay in places but found nothing sustainable.

Sometime between 1872 and 1878, George Holt came into the Yukon River valley from the Alaskan coast at Dyea on the Panhandle. He had somehow crossed the Chilkoot Pass without being stopped by the Indians who guarded it. He hoofed along an Indian trail to the Tes-lin-too River, then retraced his steps to tidewater and reported gold to miners at Sitka.

Another rendition of the mysterious Holt story came from Dominion land surveyor William Ogilvie. He said that Holt, an employee of the Alaska Commercial Company, sent the first gold known to have come from any part of the Yukon basin to the Outside world in 1880. It consisted of two small nuggets that Hold claimed to have obtained from a Tanana River Indian.

"But just where they were found does not appear," wrote Mr. Ogilvie.

Holt's daring junket inspired other bold prospectors to go investigate, which they did, returning to the coast before they were trapped on the wrong side of the mountains in a winter deep freeze.

A change in habit came in 1882, however. Instead of prospectors returning to overwinter at their point of origin in Sitka, a dozen curious men ventured deeper into the interior. McQuesten was glad to see the newcomers at Fort Reliance, the first trading post built in the Yukon since Hudson's Bay Co. withdrew in 1852 after the Chilkats burned and looted the Fort Selkirk post.

McQuesten supplied the prospectors as best he could. Although some provisions were low, starvation was not a threat to resourceful men. "They all built cabins and went into winter quarters," he wrote in his memoirs. "It was the first time, with the exception of one year, that anyone was living near that I could converse with. Most of the men would meet at the Station in the evening and we would play cards, tell stories, and the winter evenings passed away very pleasantly."

It was these particular gatherings that spawned a fraternity that grew as the number of miners grew. Twelve years later, in 1894, the organization was formally incorporated as the Yukon Order of Pioneers.

During the tediously cold months at Fort Reliance, the innovative McQuesten devised a life-limb-lung saving method of gauging the Yukon's cold so people knew when to stay close to a crackling hot stove and not chance freezing vital organs.

Outside the window, he placed an "official sourdough thermometer". It was simply a set of four bottles containing substances that all froze at various and dangerously low temperatures. On a Fahrenheit scale, mercury freezes at nearly 40 below zero; coal oil at minus 50 degrees; Jamaica ginger extract at minus 60 degrees; and the popular, potent, patent medicine — Perry Davis' Painkiller — crystallized at minus 70 degrees and froze solid when temperatures dipped to 75 below zero.

The prospectors who wintered at Fort Reliance worked the Fortymile and Sixtymile rivers in the summer of 1883. At the end of the second season most were forced to finally return over the Chilkoot Pass. This time they headed for Juneau, which had since replaced Sitka as the prospectors' Outside retreat.

Juneau was originally called Harrisburg for Richard Harris, who, with partner Joseph Juneau, discovered gold and staked their claim in 1880. Soon, a mining camp was booming.

Two men from the original party stayed behind in the Yukon valley. William Moore of Victoria, British Columbia, would become prominent as a steamboat captain and dog driver. Joseph Ladue, a French Canadian of New York State heritage, was known for heralding every strike as the next Eldorado.

Ladue would become a trading partner with McQuesten and Harper, as well as a sawmill operator, a saloon keeper, and the father of the townsite he staked at the mouth of the Klondike River where he sold postage-sized building lots for atrocious prices. He and Harper named the place "Dawson" for the eminent government geologist Dr. George M. Dawson who never saw his namesake city. Despite his commercial successes, Ladue didn't live long enough to enjoy his wealth. A few years after the Klondike madness struck, he died of consumption, an old-fashioned term for tuberculosis.

McQuesten and his partners were completely forthright in their dealings and earned the respect of everybody in the country. The trio was described as having a childlike faith in human nature. They were trustworthy, therefore and expected their fellow pioneers to be of the same, which was incongruous to the many crooks and cheats who contaminated the country during the Klondike gold rush madness of 1896-1899.

One story goes that a long-awaited shipment of goods finally arrived by boat at Fort Reliance. Impatient customers, needing provisions fast, were told to help themselves, keep a tally of goods taken, and pay when they could. One historical account claims that only six cans of condensed milk were missing.

Another time, Captain Mayo tacked a note to the door of the Stewart City trading post. "Gone to St. Michael for load of grub. Will be back about the middle of September with the (steamer) New Racket. Nothing but beans and flour in the grub line. If you are short, you'll find the key in the moss between the door casing and the fourth log from the bottom. Leave a memorandum of what you take."

By 1886, 12 years or so after the traders had set up shop at Fort Reliance, some 200 prospectors had trekked in over the Chilkoot Trail. They sifted 300 miles along the Yukon River down to the Stewart River's mouth where fine placer material captured the attention of gold miners.

Besides the trading posts doubling as a social drop-in centre for idle chit-chat and cards, the first miners' meetings in Canada's Yukon District were staged at the McQuesten post at the mouth of the Stewart River, Al Mayo presiding.

It happened in the fall of 1886 when events were occurring in rapid-fire succession and food supplies were skimpy. McQuesten and partners, wanting to strike while the iron was hot, had taken advantage of yet another opportunity and quickly erected a log trading post at the mouth of the Stewart River in early 1886 to supply the increasing number of miners gathering on the creeks.

McQuesten had spirited off for Alaska Commercial's head office to order more supplies to avert a famine. He had taken one of the company's little shallow-draft steamers designed for river travel down to St. Michael's, then boarded one of the company's southbound ocean-going freighters that carried furs and gold from St. Michael's and back-hauled foodstuffs and other cargo north from San Francisco.

While he was away, two men were sentenced to banishment from the Stewart camp. One "bushed" guy had attempted poisoning his two partners with an arsenic-laced supper. While they tried sleeping off agonizing stomach cramps, one poisonee caught the would-be poisoner in the act of pulling a gun on the other poisonee who was dozing in his bed.

The second man to be banished was found guilty of the graver crime of thieving. He had stolen butter from McQuesten's store when the coveted commodity was in critically short supply.

In McQuesten's absence, Harper and Mayo were looking after business on the homefront. The merchants took the census and reserved a share of what was in stock for every man. Many prospectors were still out on the creeks and might not reach the Stewart River post until well into winter, probably dead broke, which didn't matter an iota when the sterling traders calculated how the scant provisions would be equally and fairly distributed, gold dust or not.

The merchants looked upon butter as luxury fare reserved for holidays. Still, all their customers loved the tasty grease and thought the two-pound tins or big tubs should be imported in goodly portions, which simply wasn't always possible. As each man came in from the creeks, he received his allotment of the coveted butter and whatever other stores were reserved in his name to supplement an existence on a fish and wild game diet.

One evening, in grand storytelling style, Bill Love, the camp's witty wag from Nova Scotia, provided the details of "the butter trial" to William Ogilvie.

A man known only as Missouri Frank bluffed his reputation as a tough, gun-notched hombre and he wanted everybody to respect him as a bad guy whose patience shouldn't be tested.

Frank was camped about 15 miles up the Stewart River with another miner. Early in the winter months they ran short of some food articles, mainly butter. Frank hitched himself to his sleigh and hurried to the Stewart trading post primarily interested in replenishing their butter stores over anything else.

But no amount of gold dust was sufficient to bribe Harper. Four men were delayed on the creeks and hadn't come in yet to collect their share of the remaining butter, which was not for sale at any price.

Frank upped the ante several times but Harper wouldn't budge except to offer to sell him such items as were plentiful, which wasn't much.

"Now this Missouri Frank had a reputation to live up to," reflected Love. But instead of confronting Harper with a gun, which wouldn't have been wise, he chose the route of a sneaky thief, which wasn't wise either. Stealing was punishable with a noose.

Frank waited until Harper locked the store for the evening then broke in and stole all the butter reserved for the four delayed miners. It was a few days later before one of the fellows came in for his share and the theft became apparent.

Harper called one of those rare and infamous miners' meetings. He laid out the facts the best he could, telling the audience about the tampering with the door fasteners, and three deputies were appointed to call on the southern gentleman from the "show me State" and set about "showing him" some northern protocol.

Storyteller Bill Love headed the deputation. "We reached Frank's cabin after the evening meal was over," he began. Immediately upon entering, two of the deputies covered that gentleman with their 45s, and the other deputy covered the partner with his gun.

The two complied with the "Hands up!" order, for it was bad manners not to, Love suggested. "I then told Frank that we were a little short of butter in the camp, and thinking maybe he had some, we came to borrow a little till next churning time."

Missouri Frank denied all knowledge of any butter. Love gave him time to re-think but warned him to be quick about it. "Lest my hand gets shaky or my finger cramps, or something like that happens, which might prove unfortunate for someone," he told Frank.

The nameless partner advised Frank to confess, otherwise he threatened to tell everything he knew that just might incriminate the man with the imaginary notched gun. What made the partner exceptionally angry was Frank defrauding him. He had come back to the cabin with supplies and a good deal of butter, which Frank said he had bought from Harper at

a high price. Now the innocent, lied-to partner was liable for half the amount of the stolen butter.

The butter was dug from a snow-bank cache and tied to Frank's sleigh as was Frank himself who was driven to camp like a harnessed dog hauling the stolen butter, bedding and some extra food. In camp, Mayo presided over the miners' meeting when Frank was arraigned before an assembly of miners and the butter identified. Frank said nothing in his own defense, so the men unanimously voted to exile him from camp at least 150 miles. If the criminals showed up within that distance from camp, it would mean their death.

When the verdict was rendered, both the man who tried poisoning his two partners and the butter thief were furnished free-of-charge with sled, tent, ammunition and other essentials and escorted out of the camp up the Yukon River half a day's journey and watched until they disappeared from sight.

The story goes that both exiles survived and successfully reached the Alaskan coast. But their off-season arrival raised eyebrows in Haines Mission on the Lynn Canal. The would-be murderer caused additional alarm covering up the truth with his wild rantings of restless Indians gone berserk and the two men barely escaping with their scalps.

Travellers, like William Ogilvie, who were venturing Inside on business did so with nervous apprehension until they reached Stewart where they heard the other side to the tale and sighed with relief.

Meanwhile, two Stewart River prospectors, Howard Franklin and Henry Madison, had heeded Arthur Harper's suggestion to prospect the Fortymile River that flowed into the Yukon River 100 miles farther downriver where Harper sensed gold would be found. Previously, he and his party had neglected prospecting the appealing stream where the first coarse gold in the Yukon was destined to be found.

When the word "strike" rent the air, the fickle prospectors abandoned the Stewart bars, drawing down the mining population there to go concentrate on the new zone. As soon as word reached the Outside, more men poured into the country.

By now, Harper's hopes of finding the gold, which was beneath his feet on the Stewart, Fortymile, Tanana and Klondike rivers, were fairly well dashed. Harper gave up the search and became more attentive to bartering hardtack and hardware for furs.

Harper chose Tom Williams take the discovery news Outside and get word to McQuesten to double the order to thwart any possibility of a winter famine. Frozen stiff, he had to be carried by his Indian guide into Healy's Store at Dyea on the coast where Williams succumbed to exhaustion and exposure after trying to negotiate the formidable Chilkoot Trail in January 1887.

McQuesten & Company quickly established a trading post at the mouth of Fortymile Creek in the spring of 1887. The supplies did not come over the Chilkoot portage but were brought to this point by small stern-

wheel steamers that ascended the length of the Yukon River from St. Michael's. Goods did not arrive until late summer and any accident or detention could prevent their arrival altogether.

Geologist George Dawson reported that winters in the country were long and severe, and the season of low-water suitable for working on river bars was short.

"It is also found that beneath its mossy covering, the ground is often frozen, presenting difficulties of another character to the miner, which have prevented the working of many promising flats and benches. This, however, is likely to be remedied before long by the general burning off of the woods and moss in the mining camps," Dawson wrote.

Nonetheless, Dr. Dawson was forever optimistic in his predictions that the country would someday support a considerable mining population.

But without McQuesten, Harper and Mayo, whose associate Joseph Ladue joined them 10 years later, the series of events that culminated as the Klondike discovery would never have been possible, contended Pierre Berton.

"Without the string of posts they set up along the Yukon, the systematic exploration of the river country could not have taken place. They guided the hands of the prospectors, extending almost unlimited credit, sending them off to promising sections of the country, and following up each discovery by laying out a townsite and erecting a general store."

Their little steamboat, the New Racket, had been purchased from Ed Schieffelin, the gaunt, gray-eyed, scarecrow of a millionaire hard-rock miner with long black hair. He came into the north country in 1882 from Arizona where he got rich off a mountain of silver and was responsible for the Tombstone Silver Mines and founding of the town of Tombstone.

He theorized that a mineral belt encircled the earth and was looking for lode deposits, not placer. His party had a small paddlewheel steamer for the trip upriver from St. Michael's. But the vast emptiness of the land and its cold, stark winters didn't impress him, evidently. He cut his exploration program short and sold his riverboat to McQuesten & Co. Al Mayo became captain of the *"New Racket,"* a curious name that Schieffelin had bestowed on the little craft, although the Koyukon Athabaskans jested that Captain Mayo's little steamboat was named for the racket it generated.

"Their arrangement with the great Alaska Commercial Company in San Francisco was a casual one," noted Berton. "In the early years they were on its payroll, but remained free to prospect if they wished. Later they operated as independent contractors, buying their goods from the company but trading on their own."

Following a gold strike on Birch Creek, a tributary of the Alaska Yukon River about 60 miles below Fort Yukon on the Arctic Circle, Jack and Kate McQuestens' two-storey trading post became the centre of the Circle City universe in 1894. The store doubled as a post office and meeting place in the instant town that soon housed a thousand bodies.

Two Russian Koyukoners, Pitka Pavaloff and Sergai Cherosky, who

was married to Pavaloff's sister, Erinia, made the original Birch Creek discovery. Pitka's and Erinia's mother, Malanka, an Athabaskan, and their father, Ivan, a Russian-Tlingit, managed the Alaska Commercial Company trading post at Nulato, just below the junction of the Yukon with the Koyukuk.

Like many people of mixed blood who lived along the Yukon River basin, Sergai and Erinia Cherosky spoke their native tongue and other dialects, plus Russian and English, which made the couple invaluable to the white traders as translators.

The Cheroskys worked for the famous trading trio of Harper, Mayo and McQuesten, whose wives Jennie, Margaret and Kate, were descendants of the Russian and Athabaskan bloodline and grew up in the Yukon River basin. They each befriended the other and their children played together at Fort Reliance, Stewart City, Fortymile, and, later, Circle City.

It was natural that Jack McQuesten grubstaked Pavaloff and Cherosky to prospect Birch Creek where they made fantastically-rich discoveries in 1893. Over a hundred white prospectors poured into the creeks and found more fantastic discoveries on Mammoth and Mastodon creeks.

Unfortunately, some prospectors who weren't doing so well on their own ground, seized the gold claims belonging to Cherosky and his brother-in-law Pavaloff who were not recognized as American citizens, although they were Alaskan-born natives and life-long residents.

McQuesten tried to convince the claim-jumpers to allow the two native fellows to hold onto their property in view of the fact that their Birch Creek discovery gave Circle City its reason for being. In the end, the claims were taken from Pavaloff and Cherosky, who were unwelcome in the very settlement they were responsible for creating. How McQuesten finally managed to untangle this wrong-doing has been lost in antiquity but it is likely he helped change attitudes.

Tribute was paid to Jack McQuesten as "the father of the country" in prospector William Haskell's book *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Goldfields*. McQuesten also was known at various times as "Father of Alaska" and "Father of the Yukon" and by other choice names like "Yukon Jack", "Cap'n Jack" and "Old Jack". The old pioneer's name, Haskell stressed, was synonymous with honesty and integrity. McQuesten had come in contact with nearly all the men who had risked their lives in the search for gold in its frozen soil and had ever been their friend.

"It has been said that he has outfitted, supported and grubstaked more men, and kept them through the long winters when they were down on their luck, than any other person on the Yukon. Hundreds of men now on the river owe all the success they have to his help, and they know it and appreciate it," Haskell wrote.

Haskell reminisced about the great night at Circle City when McQuesten was presented with a gold watch and chain, bearing the insignia of the Order of Yukon Pioneers. Because the fraternity abided by the Biblical motto "Do unto others as you would be done by", its first elected president was dubbed "Golden Rule McQuesten".

"It was said the watch cost five hundred dollars," wrote Haskell, "but McQuesten's bill for entertainment was probably much more than that, for there was no half-way business about his generosity, and the boys needed no gold dust when they stepped up to the bar."

There is an old adage about the mining business that still rings true. It takes enthusiasm to sustain a miner in such country, and happy is he who is ultimately rewarded by having his visions realized. McQuesten was the rarity who both achieved wealth from the Klondike and had the pleasure that came from it. He did not squander the gold he earned from trading.

As soon as the news came about the Klondike goldfields, prospectors vacated Alaska's Circle City for Canada's Dawson City. McQuesten, of all people, knew how hard it was to keep an adequate food supply in the cupboards. He accurately predicted that the sudden onslaught of thousands of stampeders would create a dangerous shortage of food for the district during the winter of 1897-98. He therefore moved his wife and four children to safety in California.

The San Francisco-bound Alaska Commercial Company's *Excelsior* steamed out of St. Michael's in early July 1897. Besides furs, the ship was carrying Klondike gold, mainly belonging to the company and to McQuesten. It was worth roughly $600,000 to $700,000. When the ship docked at the foot of Market Street on July 14, the rumoured value had increased to $2.5 million.

However, the *Excelsior's* arrival didn't receive as much press as did a Pacific Whaling Company rust-bucket that docked in Seattle three days later. A "ton of gold" off-loaded from the Portland under protection of Wells-Fargo guards is what lit people's imagination and ignited the Klondike gold rush in earnest.

Among the 25 *Excelsior* passengers was the six-member McQuesten family, Arthur Harper, the Ottawa-bound William Ogilvie and one of the owners of Alaska Commercial.

Gerstle and Sloss were philanthropists who helped civilize the North, founding schools, churches, care facilities, trading posts and providing work to thousands of northerners. Their benevolence could be counted on to give sympathy and aid to every worthy cause.

One of those causes was the tubercular Arthur Harper who had bequeathed his modest assets to his family before going Outside to die. As a final salute to a loyal and dedicated agent of over 20 years, Alaska Commercial covered passage for the 62-year-old Harper, who, while gaining little from his independent prospecting, left a legacy as a highly-regarded individual and company representative.

Of the three visionaries, Harper was the only one with gold fever. His pointing goldseekers to the most promising prospects, coupled with the company's nearly unlimited credit, set in motion a series of events that culminated in the Klondike gold rush, which ironically Harper did not get to witness.

Harper may or may not have spent time in the company-sponsored Commercial Hotel. This San Francisco-based rest and medical facility was known as the "Yukoners' Home", where worn-out old-timers could while away their twilight years in easy chairs. At some point, perhaps to be near friends or relatives, Harper had gravitated toward the therapeutic heat of Yuma, Arizona, where he died in November 1897, only four months after departing Alaska.

William Ogilvie, who surveyed the International Boundary between Alaska and the Yukon in 1887-88, attached the name Mount Harper to a high peak in the Ogilvie Mountains. As previously mentioned, McQuesten's name is attached to a major river tributary flowing into the Stewart River.

Jack McQuesten either built or bought a Victorian mansion across San Francisco Bay in the beautiful setting of Berkeley. He settled Kate and the kids, who could rely on Alaska Commercial if need be while adjusting to this strange place in his absence. Then he returned north for one last fling before re-joining his family permanently and siring four more children.

McQuesten was too late to stake open Klondike ground—not that he was particularly interested in mining the creeks himself. As usual, he participated as a grubstaker who would receive a share of the profits if the owner struck paying dirt. He purchased interest in gold claims on Eldorado and Bonanza in 1898, around the time an exodus was favouring Nome and other Alaskan gold diggings. McQuesten, however, did receive modest dividends from Klondike investments on two of the richest creeks in the 800-square-mile area.

One of his last hoorahs performed for Alaska Commercial was supervising construction of another one of its ugly sheet-iron storage warehouses. It was the last and by far the largest of the warehouses he built at strategic places along the Yukon River.

When McQuesten quit the north in late 1898, he was a multimillionaire. His wife managed their business affairs as well as the estate after her 72-year-old husband died while tending to ambassador duties for the Alaska Yukon Exposition staged in Seattle in 1909. Kate, 61, died in 1921. The eldest McQuesten child, Crystal, lived out her life in the family's Berkeley home.

McQuesten, Harper and Mayo had all married intelligent, resourceful Indian women, who seemingly curbed their husbands' restlessness—or maybe as they aged the men wanted to settle down. The families lived in neat, sturdy log homes and most of the handsome, dark-skinned, dark-eyed children were educated in Lower 48 private schools.

Of the three partners, Al Mayo was the only one to spend the rest of his life in the north. He and his wife, Margaret, moved to a village about 50 miles up river from Tanana called Rampart, where the venerable Mayo was the de facto "Mayor".

Rampart became a supply point when the 1896 Minook Creek gold strike created action. The Rampart population swelled to 1,500 during its best days in 1898-99. The settlement was graced with a mission, post office, agricultural experiment station and a newspaper. One of the town's earliest

residents was author Rex Beach, who made more money writing stories about gold rushes than he did finding gold.

Many of the Mayo offspring joined their parents who were running the Florence Hotel, saloon, and blacksmith shop out back, and Captain Mayo was servicing the Rampart trading post with the steamer *New Racket*.

Margaret, an expert on babies, mid-wifery and care-giving, died at age 65 during the flu epidemic of 1925. Her 77-year-old husband predeceased her on July 17, 1924.

The name Mayo is attached to a Yukon lake, river and village, thanks to early explorer and prospector Big Alex MacDonald. He named Mayo Lake after Al Mayo for his unwavering faith in the prospecting potential of the upper Yukon River valley.

In 1887, on MacDonald's suggestion, Dominion land surveyor William Ogilvie officially named a tributary flowing into the Stewart as Mayo River. When a village was founded at the mouth of Mayo River in 1902-03, it naturally was called Mayo Landing.

****

A street in Mayo, 2004 (SH photo).