

HISTORY OF KLONDIKE VISITORS ASSOCIATION

By Ken Spotswood

Morale in Dawson City was at an all-time low in 1952. The gold mining industry was in a slump and the town's population had steadily dwindled. To add insult to injury, the 'Queen City of the North' had her crown abruptly snatched off her aging head when the federal and territorial governments decided to make Whitehorse the new capital of the Yukon.

This was the final blow to a proud city that had once boasted the largest population in Canada west of Winnipeg, a city that had become famous around the world as the heart of the great Klondike Gold Rush. It signaled the end of an era.

The aura of doom and gloom that had descended on Dawson, however, was to have a short life. The first sign of change came in 1952 when Canadian Pacific Airlines recommissioned the old steamer S.S. Klondike to carry tourists from Whitehorse to Dawson. The vessel was a welcome sight as she rounded the bend above Dawson and blew her whistle.

A small but energetic group of Dawson residents decided to stage a welcome for the ship and its passengers. They got dressed up in outfits left over from the gold rush era and paraded down to the wharf--much to the delight of passengers and reporters on board who were covering the revived sternwheeler service.

The reception was such a hit that the people repeated their costumed welcome for the Casca, another riverboat that was also a frequent visitor. A new tradition was born.

Over the years this group of costumed volunteers has gradually evolved into what is known today as the Klondike Visitors Association (KVA), a non-profit society that pumps more than \$1 million into the local economy each year. The KVA is a success story that has not only funded the restoration of many local historic sites, but it has also helped restore Dawson City's dignity as a major tourist destination that attracts more than 60,000 visitors a year.

Not bad for a town of 2,000 people who call Dawson home.

With huge increases in the price of gold and improvements in technology, the gold mining industry is also thriving again. Dawson is once again a busy mining town, which complements its wealth of gold rush history.

The Klondike Tourist Bureau then bought the Nugget Hall (Palace Grand Theatre) for \$1,000. Had they not done this, the historic building was scheduled to be torn down for its lumber and fixtures.

By this time many of Dawson's oldest buildings had fallen into disrepair. Some had been neglected by absentee owners and reverted to the city for non-payment of taxes. The city started tearing them down.

Klondike Nights had become so popular that the phony casino money wore out. Much of it had also been pilfered by tourists as souvenirs after a visit to Dawson in August of 1955 by Sir Seymour Howard, the Lord Mayor of London. Howard graciously signed all the fake \$500 bills, while all the \$100 bills were signed by Dawson's then-mayor Jack Colborne. A new batch of play money was ordered. After it arrived it was put away for safekeeping by the manager of the Northern Commercial Co. store, who then left for a business meeting in Anchorage, AK. It was so safely tucked away that Tourist Bureau members couldn't find it, so they sent a telegram to Anchorage which was read aloud to the startled meeting: "Where did you put the one million dollars?"

With improved road access to Dawson, tourism was on the increase by 1957, with the result that cars, trailers and tents were parked all over town.

The Tourist Bureau took the initiative once again and established the town's first auto court and campground at the site of a former wood yard on the Klondike River. Bulldozers leveled out the ground, picnic tables and fire pits were installed along with outhouses. It was an immediate success.

By this time word of the Klondike Nights entertainment had spread. Tourist Bureau members traveled to Mayo in the summer of 1958 to put on a full show and casino at the Pioneer Hall. It donated the proceeds to the IODE. They also chartered a DC-3 aircraft and flew to Fairbanks where they participated in the city's Golden Days celebration.

For several years the bureau also hosted moose burger barbecues at Lovett Gulch on Bonanza Creek, which featured gold panning, games and family-style entertainment.

In 1960 the aging Palace Grand Theatre was turned over to National Historic Sites, which dismantled it, board by board, and reconstructed the present building at a cost of \$300,000.

The Klondike Tourist Bureau was the first tourist organization in the Yukon. When the Yukon Travel Bureau was later formed in Whitehorse, its mandate was to promote the entire Yukon Territory. That's when the bureau changed its name to the Klondike Visitors Association.

Long before it occurred to Laura to write about her personal experiences as a young teacher in the Klondike, she spent years working on a novel about an English aristocrat on an Ontario farm. "It was called 'Then Alice Came Home' and it ran to several hundred pages," Pierre recalled. "She used to read sections of it aloud to us and I can still remember the first line: 'Mrs. Barnes was making cookies.' We all thought it was wonderful and were perfectly convinced that it would become a best seller and we would all be rich. Alas, it made the rounds of all the publishers but it never saw print."

Laura later realized her dream when 'I Married the Klondike' was published in 1954, which brought her a small amount of fame. In it, she described the family home and their lifestyle: "I settled down to keeping a house that, apart from electricity, had no modern conveniences. Our water, for instance, was delivered during the winter months by two men on a cart, four times a week...The two of them would trudge in, their clothes caked with snow and ice, their moustaches iced, bearing two wire-handled petrol tins full of water, which they hoisted and slopped into a tank in the corner. "A great deal of the water spilled over on to the floor, where it almost instantly froze into a thin sheet, so that when we rose we were faced with a miniature skating rink in our kitchen."

The trap door in the kitchen floor led to the cellar which contained not only the afore-mentioned toilet, but the family's cloakroom, a cold storage room for fruit and vegetables, the furnace and as many cords of wood that could be crammed in.

In the early years the whole family slept in the one bedroom--Frank and Laura in a double bed, Pierre and Lucy in cribs on either side. Frank added a spacious new kitchen addition to the north end of the house about 1926, after which everyone spread out. The old kitchen became Lucy's new bedroom. Frank's old den became Pierre's bedroom, and Frank and Laura finally had some privacy.

During the summer the family's garden flourished with vegetables and a colorful display of flowers. "Our finest crop was spinach, which we gathered by the bushel and bottled for winter use," Laura wrote.

In the winter, keeping home and hearth together in temperatures of 50 degrees below zero was--and still is--a full-time job in Dawson City. The Berton home was no exception: "Each fall we pasted every window down with heavy paper so that no breath of air could enter. Our only ventilation was in the bedroom, where Frank had an ingenious arrangement above the bed consisting of a length of stovepipe stuck through the wall with a tight lid on a hinge which could be opened or closed by pulling on a rope to admit an icy blast of air. We needed no refrigeration, of course. Anything placed on the back porch froze solidly at once."

motion; I made dust explosions...By my second year of college, when I found I was spending all my time on the college paper, I decided to switch courses and become a journalist.”

Lucy Berton Woodward also became an author. She later wrote two children's books, one of which was co-written with her mother: “I didn't really have an ambition for writing...it was more of a copycat kind of thing,” she said in an interview in Dawson in 1996: “Pierre started writing when he was in the Scouts in Victoria. The first writing I did was in high school there. We started a newspaper and I wrote a mystery story. In college (at the University of B.C.) I worked on the Ubysey newspaper and became a senior editor. I later got a job with the now-defunct News Herald in Vancouver. “My mother and I collaborated on ‘Johnny in the Klondike’. I wrote ‘Kidnapped in the Yukon’ which came out in 1968.”

Four generations later the Berton literary tradition continues. Lucy's son Berton Woodward is World Editor of Macleans magazine. Her daughter Paisley became a lawyer, but later quit the legal profession to become a journalist and now works for CBC radio in Vancouver. Last but not least, Pierre's son Paul is a senior copy editor, columnist and sits on the editorial board of the London Free Press newspaper in Ontario.

Meanwhile, through the combined efforts of the Klondike Visitors Association and the Yukon Arts Council, Berton House will continue to be the Yukon home of Canadian authors through the writer-in-residence program.