

HISTORY OF JACK LONDON'S CABIN

By Ken Spotswood

The log cabin at Jack London Museum in Dawson City is a misnomer. While it was the home of the celebrated author during the Klondike Gold Rush, it is only a half-truth. That's because it's only half of the original log cabin.

The other half is the centre of a similar tourist attraction at Jack London Square in Oakland, California, where London was born and spent his childhood.

The story of how the original cabin was discovered in the bush 120 kilometers from Dawson City--and how it was authenticated--is a masterful piece of detective work by Yukon author Dick North.

It is because of North--and his relentless and dedicated search for proof over a period of five years--that the cabin was found at all. It was a daunting and often frustrating task that many would have abandoned as a lost cause. But North prevailed, and even Sherlock Holmes would have been proud of the man's exhaustive investigation.

The tale begins in September 1964, when North was visiting Rudy and Yvonne Burian at their homestead on the Stewart River. They were discussing London's story "To Build a Fire" in which a prospector froze to death on the left fork of Henderson Creek.

The Burians maintained that London's story was based on a real life tragedy that had occurred on the Stewart River before London set foot in the Klondike in 1897. It was their opinion that London simply changed the location to an area that he was familiar with. When North quizzed them further, the couple said they had heard that London, in fact, had lived and worked on the left fork.

This first clue sent North to the mining recorder's office in Dawson where he scanned the record books. And there it was--long since forgotten. London's claim read 'Number 54 above discovery ascending the left fork of Henderson Creek'.

North was forced to return to his newspaper job in Juneau, but he kept in touch with the Burians. In December of 1964 they wrote to him that a trapper named Ivor Norback had once used London's cabin on his trap line in 1936--and that London had written his name on a log on the back wall of the cabin.

This news was too exciting to pass up. North contacted his friend Roy Minter who then worked for the White Pass & Yukon Route Railway. He asked if the company would help finance a search to try and locate the cabin. Minter agreed at once.

North returned to the Yukon in March 1965, to begin the hunt. At Stewart Crossing he met Norback's trap-line partner Jack MacKenzie who described the cabin--and the legendary

author's signature. In his book 'Jack London's Cabin', North quotes MacKenzie: "I was busy chinking the inside of the cabin when I came upon a signature, written about five feet off the ground, on a log in the centre of the rear wall of the cabin. It said 'Jack London, miner author, Jan. 27, 1898'."

MacKenzie said he didn't think much of it at the time, but years later he began to realize its historic significance. He went back to the cabin on his own and, with his axe, carefully sliced it off the log. MacKenzie later went to Mayo where he gave the artifact to mining recorder Sam Wood for safekeeping. He hadn't seen it since and had no idea where it was, or if it still existed.

Back in Dawson, North hired native guide Joe Henry and his son Victor who agreed to take him by dog team and search the left fork of Henderson Creek for the elusive cabin—a cabin that had a slab of wood carved out of a log in its back wall.

Henry was a veteran woodsman and knew the country well. In his younger days he had led the first survey crews by dog team over part of a trail that is now the Dempster Highway.

For four days the three men and their five sled dogs mushed through miles of silent, snowblanketed wilderness. Often the only sounds they heard were North's cussing at having to walk and pull his own weight on snowshoes when the dogs had to break trail.

They crossed dozens of frozen creeks and streams and camped along the way. They slept on spruce boughs in a canvas tent. The journey gave North a better appreciation of what the early gold-seekers had endured. "Shuffling along on my snowshoes, I thought of what it must have been like with thousands of people stampeding down the Yukon," North wrote. "Even now, on this stretch of the Yukon River, there were perhaps two families in 200 miles. Yet, once there were thriving little towns and trading posts all along the route I was traversing--Stewart River, Sixty Mile, Indian Creek, Swede Creek, Caribou Creek, Henderson Creek--all had clusters of hopeful prospectors. After the gold rush the whole shebang had regressed to the wolf and the moose and the caribou."

The group reached the Burians' home on the Stewart River and enjoyed a day of rest-and speculation about whether or not they would find the cabin. The next day they made for the left fork of Henderson Creek--accompanied by Robin Burian and his fourdog team. Robin was raised in the area and knew it well. At age 22 "he could live six months in the bush with nothing but matches and snare wire," North wrote.

The dogs grew tired from having to break trail through the deep snow, and the men's spirits were low after the many disappointments they found along the way. There were remnants of ancient log cabins scattered here and there, and they all had to be inspected. But none had the telltale slash on the back wall.

North grew tired as well. He gradually fell behind as the more experienced woodsmen forged ahead. When he finally caught up with them, they had started to make camp for the night outside another dilapidated relic of a cabin. The middle of the sod roof had caved

in. "Is that it?" North asked. "Come look for yourself," Robin answered. "I took off my snowshoes and walked up to the door and looked inside. Sure enough, the first thing I saw was a slash on the back wall. The slash was the principal clue I had been looking for and we had found it," North wrote.

It was on the fourth log from the top at the back of the cabin. It measured four inches wide and 12 inches long. They camped overnight and savored their reward.

The next question loomed large: Where was the slab and its signature?

North went looking for Sam Wood in Mayo and learned that he had died. His widow had later remarried. She was now Mrs. Rose Zeniuk and had moved to Merritt, B.C. North tracked her down and was reassured to learn that the slab was safely stored in Mayo. Mrs. Zeniuk sent him a photograph of the signature and North then busied himself trying to authenticate it.

He had the photo enlarged and sent to the RCMP in Ottawa. He sent another copy to Donald Doud, Examiner of Questioned Documents in Chicago

The RCMP response identified differences between the slab signature and authentic samples of London's handwriting. They speculated that this was probably because London was standing up when he wrote it. They asked for more material.

Doud's response was similar. In order to be proved authentic, he stated, the signature must have no "unexplainable differences."

North also contacted the Huntington Library in Los Angeles. While they found similarities, they weren't proof positive. Further queries led North to retired lieutenant Ludlow Baynard, formerly of the Louisiana State Police and touted to be one of the foremost handwriting experts in the U.S. Baynard was no slouch. He even asked for a sample of trapper Jack MacKenzie's handwriting to eliminate the possibility of a hoax. Finally, after careful study, Baynard gave his professional opinion. "He said the writing was authentic, and explained the differences as resulting from Jack holding the pencil as one would a paintbrush, this necessitated by the rough surface of the wood. That was good enough for me."

But North didn't stop there. He insisted that the log cabin be tree-ring dated. He and Robin Burian returned to the site in August 1968. They sawed the ends off two of the cabin's logs, then cut down a mature tree and took a cross-section of it for comparison. The samples were sent to the Forest Products Laboratory of the U.S. Forest Service in Madison, Wisconsin. Their findings were inconclusive. "I think, however, I am safe in saying that because of the marked increase in growth rings around 1900 in samples A and B, the cabin logs were cut prior to 1900. This means the cabin logs could have been cut any time between 1875 and 1900. There is not sufficient evidence, Mr. North, to pinpoint the time any closer than that period," wrote the lab analyst.

He still wasn't satisfied with his scientific evidence. But by this time 'detective' North had another brainstorm--historical evidence.

London frequently populated his stories with people he knew in the Klondike--the men and women who staked claims and lived on the two forks of Henderson Creek. In many instances London used their real names. North believed he would have spent a lot of time with them to describe them in such detail. He went back to the Dawson City mining recorder's office and pored through the records for 1897-98. To his delight, the names in London's stories began to match those with registered claims in the same area.

The final proof came when Sgt. Ralph Godfrey, of the Oakland Police Dept., held the slab over the blaze that had been cut more than 30 years before. "Ralph put the slab over the little knot in the wood and it fit perfectly," North wrote. "The last step in that long journey which had started so many years before, was completed."

The decision to make two smaller cabins from the original was devised by North and Russ Kingman of San Francisco. Kingman handled advertising for the Jack London Square Assn., and he convinced the Port Authority of Oakland of the tourism potential of shipping one of the cabins to Oakland. The other would be moved to Dawson City as a similar attraction.

London's cabin was carefully dismantled and moved by the Burians to their home on the Stewart River. Here they crafted two identical small cabins from the original logs. They were later shipped to Dawson City.

One was reassembled at its new, permanent home on a lot at Eighth Avenue and Firth Street--at what is now Jack London Centre. It's one short block from the cabin of famed rhyme-rustler Robert Service. The childhood home of celebrated author Pierre Berton is directly across the street from Service's cabin. This stretch of Eighth Avenue has become known as 'Writer's Row'.

The interpretive centre in Dawson was developed by the Klondike Visitors Association (KVA) and the Yukon government. On display is a collection of more than 60 photos, documents, newspaper articles and other London memorabilia from North's personal collection, which has since been acquired by the KVA. It includes the only photo ever taken of London during his one year in the Yukon--on the Chilkoot Trail with his mining partners and their native Indian guide.

The California-bound replica was trucked to Whitehorse, then to Skagway where it sailed to Seattle aboard an Alaska state ferry. From Seattle it was driven all the way to Oakland where it was installed in Jack London Square. It was a fitting finale that the cabin was delivered by Robin Burian, Joe Henry and 'detective' Dick North.

The centre is maintained by the Klondike Visitors Association and is open to the public seasonally from May to September