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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Klondike Days' Tales Are Most Interesting

By NEIL A. MATHESON
Provincial - Farm Editor

I HAD a most interesting chat a few weeks ago with Major Sobey, 86 a Searletown-born man who grew to young manhood in Albany, went west on the harvest excursion in 1895 - he paid five dollars from Albany to Winnipeg - and spent six years in the Arctic at the time of the Klondike gold rush, before settling down to the life of a contractor which was more rewarding financially than the hunt for gold.

I have to thank George Laird, Souris for tipping me off to this story and I found Major Sobey - that's his given name - at the home of Mr. And Mrs. Ellis Profitt, Kensington.

He worked for \$40 per month in the harvest field and "slept in a straw stack, or anywhere else one could find," and later went to Vancouver where he worked with a hardware firm in 1896.

THAT WAS the springboard to the Klondike, for the firm moved an operation there - the material had to be sewn into 100-pound sacks as it would be transported by human pack horses - and Sobey went along to check the material at the various transfer points. For that he was paid with six months' supplies, and he was on his own,

Sobey stood five feet, six inches and weighed 130 pounds, and the healthy, spry and active gentleman weighs exactly the same today. He has always been healthy, with the exception of a period about six years ago when he had a bad heart attack. "Doctors told me I was dead," he told me, but he's still going strong. He lives most of the time with his daughter in Scappoose, Oregon though he travels a great deal. A brother, Ed Sobey, lives in Wilmot Valley.

Rough, Perilous Travel Described

DESCRIBING HIS first trip into the Klondike area he recalls there were no docks and everything had to be lightered ashore. For this the company hired packers. Material was transported on scows which "were perhaps 10 feet wide, and up to 18 feet long." Pilots were needed to take them through the most dangerous waters, "like Miles Canyon and Whitehorse Rapids" to name a few. There was plenty of rough, perilous going, "but I was 20 at the time and enjoyed every minute of it", he told me.

There were more than 30,000 people in Dawson when he landed in August 1896, and he made "better than [average?] wages, although not much better". Wages ran to \$1.00 an hour or \$10.00 a day in the spring of 1899, but living costs ran \$4.00 to \$6.00 a day.

In 1900 Major Sobey and two roadhouse owners joined forces and decided to build a roadhouse in Northern Alaska where a gold find was reported at Coyukuk River. They

went in a small flat-bottom boat - so it could be towed in shallow water - and it was light so it could be portaged across a chain of lakes. They portaged perhaps 15 miles in all.

Coldfoot Said 'Damn Well Named'

THE TRIO had only a compass to go by, as there was no established trail. But they finally reached Coldfoot village. "And it was damn well named", Mr. Sobey recalled.

But the boat that was taking their supplies in had failed by 100 miles to reach its destination. So the supplies had been beached, and Sobey spent most of the winter with a dog team freighting them in. Most food supplies were dried and packed in tins, so the frost wouldn't hurt it much.

The road house was built of logs and "all three of us at it were green as grass in road house administration." He prospected for the summer and found nothing. The gold strike proved a flop.

FINALLY MAJOR Sobey sold his interest in the road house and snowshoed to Fort Yukon. They made 20 miles a day. They had to for their rations were weighed carefully and would sustain them no longer. They always ate twice a day on the trail.

Two musts for the trail were listed for me. A man must be careful not to start too rapidly in the morning. If he starts to perspire in the intense cold, he's in serious trouble. "And you quit at the end of the day", he told me, "when you start to feel chills running down your back. It's a sign that the body energy is no longer high enough to sustain the needed bodily warmth," he explained.

Having heard many stories about the cold in the North, I asked Major Sobey "Just how cold does it get up there?" Here's his answer:

Ice Crystals In Hudson Bay Rum

"THE ORDINARY Mercury thermometer used to freeze at 30 below, so it wasn't much good. Kerosene froze at 40 below, and was also inadequate. They sold a pain killer that was sort of a 'cure-all', and it froze at 70 below. The Hudson Bay Rum would start to show ice crystals at 80 below."

Major Sobey told me "I've seen those ice crystals form."

Then he added, "in case someone thinks you are lying, or that I was exaggerating, you tell them that the official government thermometers registered 85 below zero at Skagway when they were building the Alaskan highway." And that's not so long ago.

"At 80 below, he continued, the air congeals into sort of blue fog and everything is quiet and still. A man wears his watch close to his body on the trail, otherwise it would stop because of the intense cold."

MR. SOBEY and two companions carried a fur robe each, for example, when they were on the trail. They would put the robe beneath them on top of spruce boughs, the others went over them as they huddled close together for warmth. They carried a collapsible stove that weighed only about 20 pounds. And they could develop a warmth inside a tent soon after they had unhitched their sled dogs, and a tasty meal soon was in the making.

Bacon, beans and flap jack provided a favorite breakfast on the trail, though sowbelly was another standby.

Major Sobey hiked 165 miles later when a new gold strike was reported at Tannana, Alaska where he staked a claim. But the man was a veteran of the North by this time, though still a youngster in years, and he "let the fellow alongside me do the digging. If he struck it rich, I could sell my claim at a big price. If his was a flop, it was likely mine would also not be worth the effort of digging," he explained.

Indian Spurned White Man's Gold

GOLD WAS the currency of the Arctic in those colorful days, but it was no good in trade with the Indian. He wanted something his family could eat or tobacco to chew. He spurned the white man's gold.

The Island born traveller got back to Vancouver in September 1904 after enough excitement and adventure to last a lifetime. Soon after his arrival he married Fanny Leard, daughter of Elijah Leard who was born at Tryon, and was accountant in Souris for J. G. Sterns before he went west with his family. Mrs. Sobey was a first cousin of George Leard who tipped me off to this story, and of Russel Leard of Charlottetown. Mrs. Sobey died several years ago.

A word about his trip from the Northland to Vancouver. The traffic southward apparently was fairly heavy at the time, and Sobey was told at first by the shipping company there was no accommodation for him on the next trip out. But he made a bargain to sleep on the table - he was to travel with two companions - and the company would provide blankets to keep them warm. "I often awakened to find the blankets pulled off me, and I'd be freezing. But I'd simply grab a blanket from some other person and try for some more shuteye."

"THE BOATS the shipping line used were shells and they were draughty and cold. Their steam power was generated from cordwood, and that meant frequent stops along the shore to refuel.

Major Sobey - he was christened Major Wright Sobey, after a Central Bedeque merchant of that time - will visit a grandson in New York on the way back to Scappoose. Stops are also scheduled in Quebec, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver along the way.

Jill Birtwistle Stars As "Anne"

JACK MACANDREW and a team of CBC camera people were in the province earlier this summer shooting scenes for an Anne of Green Gables production. The star of the show, which will be produced later this summer on 20-20, is Jill Birtwistle who "fits the part so perfectly she could have stepped out of the book" to quote an enthusiastic reference during a chat I had with Mr. MacAndrew a few weeks ago. Jack has promised to let me know exactly when the program will be seen and I'll pass along the information to you as soon as it is received.

Jill is the daughter of Commander Ken Birtwistle and Mrs. Birtwistle, Charlottetown.