

A PEEP AT LIFE IN DAWSON CITY VIEWED BY A GOVERNMENT OFFICER

Constable Owen, of the N. W. M. P., Writes an Interesting Letter to His Father in Ottawa

DESCRIBES THE AWFUL JOURNEY TO KLONDIKE

Many of the Inhabitants of Dawson City are of the Very Worst Class the United States Can Produce—Men Who are Making Money Fast.

Mr. A. W. Owen, accountant of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, at Ottawa, lately received a letter from his son Wallace, who is a member of the N. W. M. P. at Dawson City. The letter which is full of matter of universal interest, was begun December 3, 1897, but it took weeks to write it. Mr. Owen writes: "I have been in Dawson now two months, and I must say it is a very strange place, entirely different from what I expected it to be. It is my first experience in a mining camp, and for a time everything was new and strange to me, but now the novelty of the thing is wearing off. Still there is lots of excitement to be had at all times. We experienced lots of hardships on the trip in, and I don't

A HEART-BREAKING TRIP.
think I would go over the same trip in the fall of the year again for all the money on the Klondike. I will not say much about the trail from Skagway to Lake Bennett, because I dare say you have read all about the White Pass and it terrifies in the newspapers times innumerable, but the very worst account you may have read does not touch the stern reality. I think it is just as well for the government that the men in our party did not know what they had to go through. If they had, I doubt whether they could have secured as many volunteers as they did to come up to this blessed country.

I don't suppose that anyone would think much of the pass if they only had to go over it once, provided they had nothing to carry over with them, but when it comes to packing as much as one could carry every day for five weeks, back and forth every day, it was heart-breaking as well as back breaking. Eight miles a day was about the average distance we made over the Pass, and to do that we had to be up and at it at four o'clock in the morning and keep at it until six and seven at night, Sunday included. We had a train of 34 horses and besides carrying a pack ourselves, generally weighing from 50 to 75 pounds, we had to herd these horses along as well. Once a horse got on the White Pass it was as good as its death warrant, as might be seen by the thousands of dead horses lying along the trail. Out of the 34 horses we started from Skagway with, only eight of them reached Bennett alive.

They were the best horses we had and they were in such an awful state when we reached Bennett that they had to be shot. At first it used to turn me sick to see the way these animals would dip in the mud or roll over a precipice from pure exhaustion, or have their throats cut or a bullet put into them. But I must say I got used to it before long. I saw such a lot of it, I used often to think of how they punished us in Calgary for bringing our horses in with sore backs, probably something that could be cured in a day or two, and then wonder what they would say if the backs of the horses we used on the trails, see the great holes in their backs that anybody could put both fists into. Our horses were not the only ones in this state. I don't suppose there was a sound horse on the trail.

A TERRIBLE SIGN.

Another thing I saw, which I hope never to witness to my dying day, is a man drowning. We were crossing over a treacherous ford where a small river emptied into Shallow Lake and one of the men ahead of us lost his footing on the stones, was taken off his feet and carried out into the Lake. The sight of that man fighting for his life was something awful to see. He sank before an attempt could be made to save him. In fact, it would have been impossible to do anything to save him, because he was carried so far out into the lake and the water was so icy cold. As you can imagine, it cast a gloom over all the party for some time, for although the man was not of our party we all knew him and liked him. He was one of the men that came up with us on the S S Islander from Victoria.

ON LAKE BENNETT.

It was shortly after this that we caught our first sight of Lake Bennett, the end of our journey by land. We stayed at Bennett for three days while our boats were being finished and then started our 550 miles' trip down the rivers. We were very glad to leave Bennett because winter was setting in very quickly and we were afraid of being frozen in before we reached Dawson. After the first day out on the water we were unfortunate enough to get a head wind all through the lakes, which made our small sails perfectly useless. Going through the lakes before we struck the Yukon river there were days when we did not make more than a mile an hour and sometimes not half a mile. We reached Tagish Lake after being out five days, and picked up a murderer at the Tagish Custom House, who was to honor us with his company for the rest of our trip. He was a miner named Henderson, an American

you can guess, who shot his partner while he slept, over some trifling quarrel they had.

COLD TRIP, COLD GRUB.

Our trip down the rivers was bitterly cold and we had to row hard all day to keep ourselves warm. It snowed very hard without stopping all the way down the river. We got up every morning at four o'clock, and put in from five o'clock in the morning until six at night on the river without making a landing. We had a sort of lunch at twelve o'clock on frozen corned beef and hard tack, which I think did us a great deal more harm than good. Every evening we had to cut our way through the ice along the bank of the river to make a landing, and then dig through three feet of snow to clear a place to pitch our tents. The thing I disliked more than anything else on this part of our trip was getting up at four o'clock in the morning. We would all be so very tired at night, that it seemed as though we had only just gone to bed when we would have to get up again. We had all to take our turn at keeping guard over the prisoner at night, and had no way of making up for it next day.

THE PARTY SLICED.

When we arrived at Skagway our party numbered forty-two, but only twenty of us were picked to go through to Dawson. The rest of the party remained at Lake Bennett and are going to put in the winter at Lake Tagish. They will be the ones to run the mails through the winter. The most exciting part of our trip was running the White Horse and Five Finger Rapids, and the White Horse Canyon, especially the canyon. We swept around a bend in the river and into the canyon almost before we knew it. It is only 100 feet across, and the sides are of solid rock and perfectly perpendicular for 100 feet. It is very nearly a mile long, and we went through it in three minutes. The boat I was in went down stern first, our steersmen lost his head, but fortunately we got through without any accident. Three miles further down we struck the White Horse Rapids. It was very exciting going through this, but not as much so as the canyon. I don't think there was anything else happened worthy of note on the rest of the trip, excepting as I said before, we were so bitterly cold. However, we pulled through everything all right and arrived at our Eldorado two months ago to-day. I would have started this letter two or three weeks ago, but Saturday afternoons and Sundays are the only days I can sit down for any length of time without being interrupted, and for the last two Sundays I have taken advantage of its being a holiday and gone up the creeks looking out for any chance of staking.

IN COMFORTABLE QUARTERS.

We have very comfortable quarters here. They were nearly all ready for us when we arrived and built in the form of a sort. Our quarters is a log building about 100 feet long and divided into two barrack rooms large enough for 15 men each, and a mess room and kitchen. Each barrack room is only allowed one lamp, and that is the reason that Sunday is the only day we can sit down to write. There are no tables in the barrack room on account of there being so many beds, so it is impossible to write there. Of course, it is possible to sit on your bed to write, but to do that it is necessary to have a candle and until candles come down in price they are a luxury I cannot afford. At present they are worth \$1.50 each, and very hard to get at that. I don't know what we are going to do when the dark days come. I am afraid we will have to sit and talk to each other in the dark. At the present time it is not light until nearly ten o'clock in the morning and pitch dark at 4.30 p. m. In a few weeks' time we only will have two or three hours' light all through the day and this sort of thing lasts for six weeks. Oil is frightfully scarce here, and I don't know how we are going to pull through the winter. We have quite a lot, but unless we are very careful with it we will be in complete darkness before the winter is out. There are two large company stores in Dawson, and they have promised us enough food to pull through the winter, but even as it is our rations were cut down considerably a few days ago. There is going to be a famine in Dawson before the winter is out, and when it comes it will mean work for us.

ROBBERIES FREQUENT

Every day cases of robbery are reported to the chief, and a man caught in the act of robbing a grub cache is running a big chance of being shot. Grub stealing is almost a hanging offence in this part of the world. When I came here flour was selling at the rate of \$150 for a 100-pound sack, and today it can't be bought for any price. While the river was open a great number of people went down to Fort Yukon and Circle City; where food was more

plentiful, but there are hundreds of men stayed here, and they knew that they had not food enough to last them half the winter, and certain starvation staring them in the face. These are the men that trouble is expected from because there is no telling what they will do when their grub runs out and they begin to get hungry.

IN FEAR OF A RAID.

The day we arrived here all the old gang, with the exception of a few to guard the barracks, were mounted guard over the company's stores with loaded carbines and revolvers, in answer to a report that the stores were going to be raided. The stores have a little grub in their storehouses, but not enough to supply the town, and the only ones that can get it are the lucky ones that had their orders in last spring. About three weeks ago a party of 15 of our men went down to the stores with dogs and sleighs to bring our winter supply of rations to the barracks. Among other things we brought up three tons of flour. It seemed an unusual sight for Dawson, because half the town turned out if it was only to get a sight of so much grub. We were all armed; in fact we never go down town without our sidearms. The only things that are plentiful in Dawson are whiskey and cigars, and there is an abundance of that. Along the main street of the town nine shanties out of every ten are saloons and gambling dens. Some of these have dance halls attached and these are the places that do the rushing business. The town is full of women, and they make more money than is good for them out of the miners that are fools enough, or shall I say, drunk enough, to spend it on them. The business is to get a man to dance with them and the price of the dance is to spend \$1 at the bar for two drinks. The girl gets 25 cents out of the dollar, and the rest goes to the saloon-keeper. This sort of thing keeps up all night long, and as the dances are very short the women manage to make a big thing nightly. They dance all night long and sleep during the day.

SALOONS NEVER CLOSE.

The saloons never close, open day and night, and will remain doing so as long as the whiskey and oil hang out. Two of our fellows are on duty day and night, and do nothing but go from one saloon to another to keep order, while two more men guard the stores. We have some very exciting times in the saloons, and the nights pass very quickly on that account. I should say that nine out of every ten men in Dawson are Americans, and a large number of the very worst type. Men that have spent most of their lives in mining camps. For all that, I notice that they have a very great respect for the police. I think it is the quiet way we go about our work. One man told me the other day that the police were a great puzzle to him. In the States they used to be being clubbed over the head whenever they came in contact with the police, but here they don't seem to understand the quiet way we go about, and we never have the slightest trouble in making an arrest.

A \$20,000 ROBBERY.

A few days ago one of the saloons was robbed of \$20,000 in gold dust. It was traced to one of the bartenders of the saloon, and when the man was arrested by the night patrol he broke down and confessed everything. He was as meek as a child, and came to the guard room like a lamb to the slaughter. I think, taking it all around, we are rather favorites in Dawson than otherwise. Although I started this letter on the 3rd of the month, you must not think I wrote it all at one sitting.

At different times I have settled down comfortably for an evening's writing, and have had some one march off with the lamp before I had been at it fifteen minutes. It is the 18th now and I am afraid I am some way from the end yet. I believe our doctor is going out in a day or so, and when he goes he will very likely take the barracks mail with him.

MEN WHO MADE MONEY.

Dr. Wills, has made quite a large fortune, but not nearly as much as some of our old gang has. Ex-Constable Jenkins sold out his claim on Eldorado the other day for \$125,000, and while he worked it himself he washed out between \$80,000 and \$100,000, so when the man goes out in the spring he takes somewhere around \$200,000 with him. There was a report went around Calgary before I left that he had sold out a half share for \$40,000, but there was no truth in it. He owned the whole claim himself. All of the others have good claims and will go out of this country very rich men. Ex-Constables Ward and Brothers will do just as well as Jenkins if not better. Their claims are on each side of Jenkins, and turning out quite as good. So far I can't say what my chances are. I have got two or three things in sight but I will give you full particulars in my next letter. We have had two large fires in town since I started this letter and it has burnt quite a large hole in the town. The first was a large building used as a church, and three nights afterwards the opera house and three of the largest saloons in town. There was nothing in the world to save them, which was a very good thing.

GAMBLING EVERYWHERE.

They were three of the largest gambling dens in the town, and tables and all were burnt, and a large quantity of grub. This place is a regular Monte Carlo on a small scale. There must be fully 100 saloons in town and every saloon runs gambling tables. It is very interesting to watch the games when the betting is heavy, and at different times I have seen small fortunes won and lost. Faro and roulette are the principal games; faro seems to be the favorite. Gold dust and nuggets are the only money used in this country, and there is any amount of that flying around. Everybody has a gold

sack, even the poor bobbies are paid in gold dust. It is a very good thing for the bartender, because when a man goes up to the bar and calls for a drink, he throws his sack over the bar and allows the bartender to weigh out the amount whatever it is. If the miner is anyway drunk and has two or three hundred dollars in his gold sack, it is the simplest thing in the world to weigh out as much as \$10 without the miner being any the wiser. Although I am still without a claim I consider myself much better off than a great number who have. I could have staked a dozen since I arrived here but by so doing I would lose my rights in the Klondike district, and I would much sooner have my rights than a claim on any of the gulches running into the big creeks. A great number of them are all staked, but so far no gold has been found on them. There is pretty sure to be a new strike made on the Klondike yet, and I am not going to throw away my chance on any gulch. The whole country is spotted, that is, gold may be found in large quantities on some particular place, and the claims on either side of it may not be worth the working.

IT IS A HUGE GAMBLE.

It is a huge gamble, where the lucky ones win, and I think if a man keeps his ears and eyes open he is bound to strike something. Now that I am here I intend to stay until I make a stake if it takes me ten years to do it. I know that this is the only country I will ever have a chance to make any money in, and I might just as well put in my time here, where there is a chance, as knock around the Northwest, where there is no chance. So here I am liable to stay for some time to come. There is no doubt about it being a fearful country to live in. For the last ten days it has been frightfully cold, the warmest day we had was 40 below, and to-day we were not able to go out at all. The only work we have had to do, outside of guards and patrol, is sawing and splitting wood, and we burn up all we can cut in a day. There are any number of prize fighters in Dawson, and I have seen more prize fights since I came here than I ever dreamed of seeing. Fights to a finish are not actually allowed, but still they come as near to it as possible. We are always at them to keep order, and stop them if necessary, but so far we never had occasion to step in. A policeman's pay in this country will not go very far and the only thing to spend it on is whiskey; so in that way the most of us are able to save every cent. Whiskey is 20 cents a drink and cigarettes 50 cents a package. I have had to do away with cigarette smoking and have come down to a pipe, or as I imagine you saying, come up to a pipe. Taking everything into consideration, I am very well satisfied with my change. Everything is new and different from anything else I have ever seen. I must say it beats my last station all to pieces. With the exception of a few they are all very good fellows. I am about the youngest. I don't think there is the least doubt that if a man keeps his eyes and ears open and is any way steady there is anything to prevent him going out of here with a few thousand. I never saw money thrown around the way it is up here.

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WANTED.

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