WORDS OF GOLD

Reporters Bring the World News of the Klondike Stampede

IF NOTHING ELSE, the onion incident should have alerted Joaquin Miller to troubles ahead. This occurred in mid September 1897 as the initial wave of frenzied prospectors was descending on Dawson City, situated at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers—the heart of northwestern Canada's newly renowned Klondike gold country. Miller, the famed 60-year-old "Poet of the Sierras," had been commissioned to write about the gold rush for William Randolph Hearst's newspaper chain. He had just arrived at Dawson on a river barge when he chanced to pull from his coat pocket a single dry onion. To his amazement, an onlooker immediately offered him a dollar for the pungent bulb. Because the onion was all that remained of Miller's meager food stores, he refused, only to have the stranger bump his bid up to *five dollars*.

Not until much later did the bard realize the significance of this exchange. In his eagerness to investigate the gold fields for Hearst, it seems he had dropped in on Dawson at the worst possible time—the town stood on the brink of a starvation winter.

Born Cincinnatus Hiner Miller, his pen name inspired by the legendary California bandit Joaquin Murieta, the poet had a gusty ego and a fondness for Byronic verse. He also claimed a reputation (though partly inflated) as a wilderness adventurer. So nobody was terribly surprised when, shortly after the first two ships bearing Klondike gold dust and nuggets reached San Francisco and Seattle in July 1897, Miller announced that he was headed for the diggings himself. Nor were they concerned that he was taking with him little more than a backpack full of bacon, tea, hardtack, and, of course, onions. (Not until 1898 would the North-West Mounted Police insist that every Klondike-bound gold seeker carry a year's worth of food and supplies—a burden that could weigh up to a ton.) As Miller explained: "I am going up to get the information for the poor men who mean to go to the mines next summer. If I find the mines limited either in area or thickness, my first duty will be to let the world know. I will not need the usual provisions because, having got right down to the bedrock of the frozen facts, I shall take the next steamer leaving Dawson and return straight to San Francisco."

But there was no next steamer. The water level of the Yukon River fell so low that season that ships chugging upstream from the Bering Sea were marooned in mud near Fort Yukon, an old Hudson's Bay outpost in Alaska Territory, about 350 miles northwest of the gold country. It looked as if everyone who had sped to Dawson City right after news of the subarctic mother lode reached the outside world was now trapped there for the next eight months of winter. Some were at risk of freezing without adequate clothing. All were at risk of going hungry, for food was the chief cargo aboard those marooned steamboats.

Miller wrote bravely that "there will be no starvation. The men who doubt supplies will get here, where gold is waiting by the ton, miscalculate American energy." However, as the nights lengthened and chill winds grew stronger, even he finally joined one of many overland parties bound for Fort Yukon. Famished and desperate, those groups trudged down the frozen Yukon River, chopping their way through mountainous ice obstructions. Some folks made it, others died in the trying; but most, like Miller, were forced to give up midway.

By the time the poet returned to Dawson City in early December 1897, he was a sorry sight. His cheeks had frozen, his left ear and one finger were missing, part of a toe had to be removed, and he was in agony from snow blindness. In *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899*, Canadian historian Pierre Berton explains that Miller "remained in Dawson for the rest of the winter, dependent on the charity of others, a curious

By J. Kingston Pierce

gaunt figure in his reindeer parka, his gray beard, stained with food, flowing from his thin, ascetic face." He didn't reach home again until the summer of 1898.

Thankfully, Miller's fate wasn't typical of what happened to the many journalists who covered the Klondike gold rush. Most at least made it through the experience with all of their fingers and toes intact. However, their notions about the goodness and greed of the common man, as well as their faith in their own ability to survive harsh conditions, may have been changed forever as they were plunged into North America's last great frontier adventure.

From August 1899 *Oregon Native Son*, Special Collections, WSHS

Renowned California poet Joaquin Miller expected his 1897 survey of the Dawson-area diggings to be quick and ennobling. Instead, it was a drawn-out nightmare involving starvation and snow blindness.

NOT SINCE THE Civil War had the American press thrown as many resources at a single event as they did at the rush for riches in Canada's inhospitable Yukon region (part of the Northwest Territories until June 1898). And no wonder: This was a spectacle rampant with human optimism and daring, pathos and death—exactly the mix of material on which many newspapers then thrived.

The 1890s marked the heyday of so-called yellow journalism—or, as its supporters preferred to call it, "the journalism that acts." Some newspapers in that era did nearly anything they could (at any price necessary) to get juicy stories of crime or scandal or other societal miseries, then splashed those scoops across their front pages under large, lurid headlines. Advances in typography and photo reproduction, faster printing presses, and a new commitment to employing well-educated writers (after many years during which reporting was considered a dead-end job suitable only for the self-educated and ne'er-do-well) all served to increase public interest in the press. Newspapers launched crusades for social reform and ran extensive contests to hook readers. They even tried to one-up each other in "stunt reporting," hiring clever wordsmiths who disguised themselves and sometimes put themselves at risk to investigate injustices or public malfeasance.

The reasoned goal of all this was to deliver tales that appealed to the human interests of readers and that, not incidentally, helped boost newspaper sales. And no one understood this better than the two men then cutting the broadest wakes through Manhattan press circles: Joseph Pulitzer, the Hungarian former St. Louis publisher who had practically invented yellow journalism in the pages of his immigrant-friendly *New York World*; and William Randolph Hearst, a deep-pocketed young Californian and Harvard drop-out who had turned his family's ailing *San Francisco Examiner* into a money machine and then in 1895 purchased the moribund *New York Journal* to become Pulitzer's principal—and least principled—rival. "The modern editor of the popular journal does not care for facts," Hearst once contended. "The editor wants novelty. The editor has no objections to facts if they are also novel. But he would prefer novelty that is not fact, to a fact that is not a novelty."

Few scenes could have been more novel than sunburned Klondike miners wobbling down a gangplank, their arms unsteady around bags and fruit jars stuffed with gold. It is therefore ironic that Hearst's *Examiner* should have missed the seminal story of the steamship *Excelsior*'s landing at San Francisco on July 15, 1897. Two of that city's other dailies, the *Call* and the *Chronicle*, printed lengthy accounts about the vessel's passengers and unexpected burden—almost a million dollars in nuggets and dust, according to early estimates—while the *Examiner* dismissed the whole episode with a few obligatory lines. Back in Manhattan, Hearst was incensed the next day to discover the *Call* piece reprinted in the rival *New York Herald*. And there were no new contributions to the story from his own *Journal*. He promptly ordered maximum attention to the gold findings and sent two expeditions off to the Yukon. "With that imperial dictum," writes Berton, "the Klondike fever began."

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* had no intention of overlooking the story when a second treasure ship, the *Portland*, approached Puget Sound on the morning of July 17. Its editors went so far as to charter a tugboat, the *Sea Lion*, and send it out from Port Townsend to intercept the *Portland* off Washington's Cape Flattery. Aboard were three gents representing the San Francisco press along with the *P-I*'s Beriah Brown, Jr. Forty years old, a husky fellow with flawlessly parted blond hair, Brown was a former sailor and the scion of a onetime mayor of Seattle. He had joined the *P-I* only two years before and was now embarking on what would be the best-remembered story of his career.

As history records it, Brown and his ink-stained comrades boarded the *Portland* at approximately two in the morning, interviewed as many of the 68 newly prosperous prospectors as they could, then jumped back into the tugboat and hurried to the telegraph office at Port Townsend. One of the San Franciscans reached the operator there first—probably the *Examiner* man, whose head would roll if he didn't send his piece ahead of the competition this time. Worried about missing his own deadline, Brown didn't wait around, but

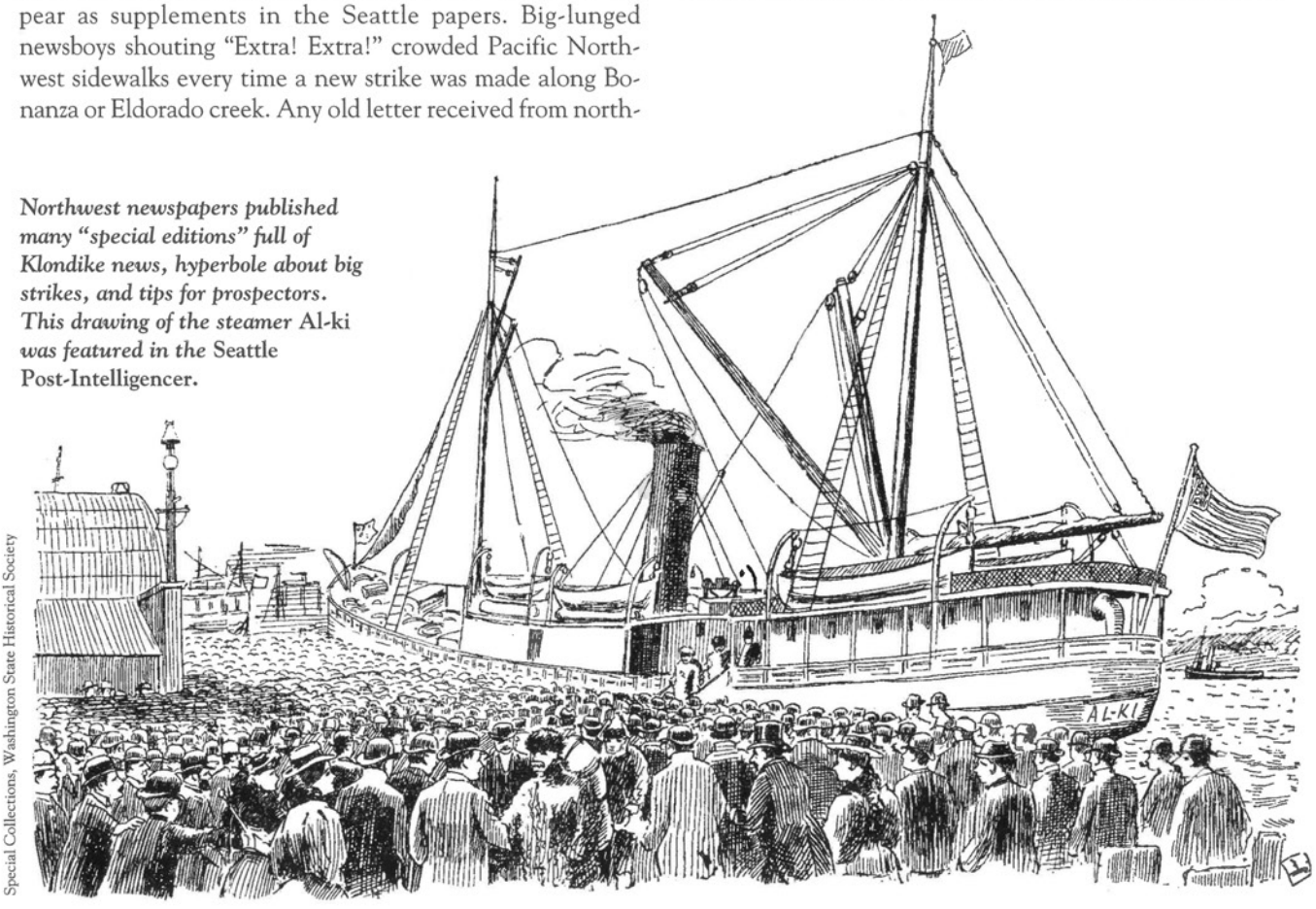
instead got back on the *Sea Lion* and ordered its captain to head full-steam for Seattle while he frantically penned his story. The tug, Brown later told his readers, "made the trip down in record-breaking time, arriving at 6 o'clock, at least two hours ahead of the *Portland*." Brown submitted his copy, it was set in type, and the presses started to roll. By the time the *Portland* nosed into the Seattle waterfront, the *P-I* was already on the streets with the first of three extra editions, proclaiming that the ship's passengers carried "more than a ton of solid gold" among them.

THE PHRASE "ton of gold," circulated by rapidly expanding telegraphic news services, caught the world's attention. Within two weeks after word got out that there was "easy money" to be found along tributaries of the Klondike River, American broadsheets began to choke on gold rush copy. Unfortunately, since the Yukon and Dawson City were about as familiar to most people—reporters included—as the rings of Saturn, initial news items often contained egregious errors. The *Commercial-Appeal* of Memphis, for instance, informed its subscribers that the Klondike was located not far past Chicago.

In another month, numerous guides to the goldfields—telling how to reach the Yukon, how to stake out a respectable claim, and what supplies to haul along—started to appear as supplements in the Seattle papers. Big-lunged newsboys shouting "Extra! Extra!" crowded Pacific Northwest sidewalks every time a new strike was made along Bonanza or Eldorado creek. Any old letter received from northwestern Canada or adjacent Alaska was deemed fair game for publication. "We have struck it pretty good and are taking out good money now . . . ," ran one missive from a young Seattle prospector. "This is the richest thing ever known. Everybody is crazy."

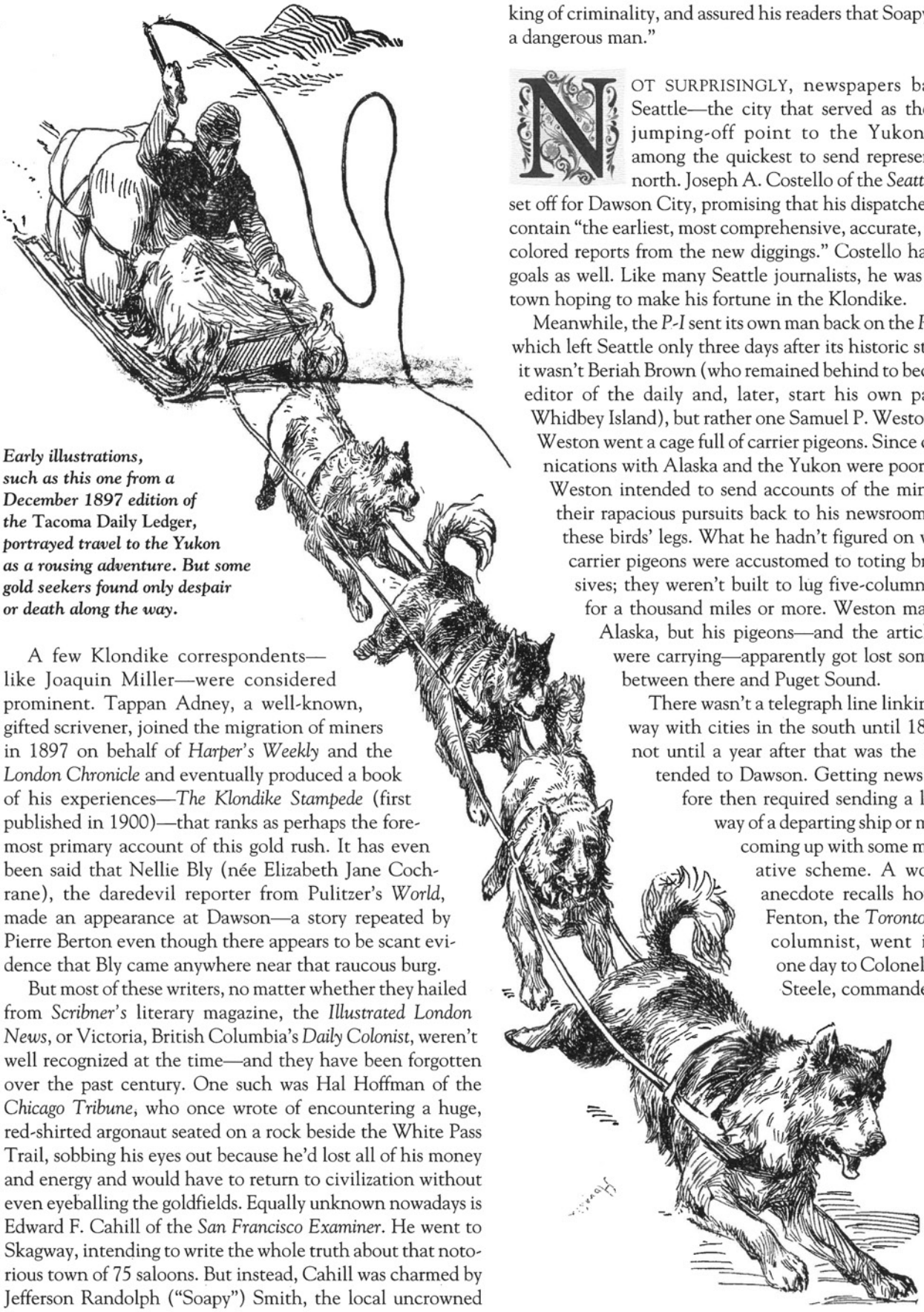
Endeavoring to improve their coverage, some larger periodicals assigned special correspondents to follow the Klondikers, record their dreams and disasters, and generally take the measure of those people who had abandoned their settled lives and homes and hastened like damn fools to the Yukon in search of mineral wealth. This could be a daunting task, especially in the rush's early days. It meant, of course, that the reporters had to buy, beg or bully their way onto northbound ships with every other avaricious soul.

Most unloaded at the southeast Alaskan towns of Skagway or Dyea, from which two parallel trails—respectively, the treacherous White Pass route and the more popular climb over Chilkoot Pass—led across the Coast Mountains separating Alaska from the Yukon and the Klondike Valley. Berton tells a terrific tale about Flora Shaw, the highbred colonial expert for *The Times* of London "who crossed the White Pass dressed as a perfect Englishwoman, her skirts of ladylike length, her hair neatly coifed, and her neckpiece carefully fastened." Others followed the more expensive all-water route leading from St. Michael, on Alaska's west coast, up the often ice-clogged Yukon River for 1,700 miles to Dawson.



Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

***Northwest newspapers published many "special editions" full of Klondike news, hyperbole about big strikes, and tips for prospectors. This drawing of the steamer* Al-ki *was featured in the* Seattle Post-Intelligencer.**



Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

Early illustrations, such as this one from a December 1897 edition of the* Tacoma Daily Ledger, *portrayed travel to the Yukon as a rousing adventure. But some gold seekers found only despair or death along the way.

A few Klondike correspondents—like Joaquin Miller—were considered prominent. Tappan Adney, a well-known, gifted scrivener, joined the migration of miners in 1897 on behalf of *Harper's Weekly* and the *London Chronicle* and eventually produced a book of his experiences—*The Klondike Stampede* (first published in 1900)—that ranks as perhaps the foremost primary account of this gold rush. It has even been said that Nellie Bly (née Elizabeth Jane Cochrane), the daredevil reporter from Pulitzer's *World*, made an appearance at Dawson—a story repeated by Pierre Berton even though there appears to be scant evidence that Bly came anywhere near that raucous burg.

But most of these writers, no matter whether they hailed from *Scribner's* literary magazine, the *Illustrated London News*, or Victoria, British Columbia's *Daily Colonist*, weren't well recognized at the time—and they have been forgotten over the past century. One such was Hal Hoffman of the *Chicago Tribune*, who once wrote of encountering a huge, red-shirted argonaut seated on a rock beside the White Pass Trail, sobbing his eyes out because he'd lost all of his money and energy and would have to return to civilization without even eyeballing the goldfields. Equally unknown nowadays is Edward F. Cahill of the *San Francisco Examiner*. He went to Skagway, intending to write the whole truth about that notorious town of 75 saloons. But instead, Cahill was charmed by Jefferson Randolph ("Soapy") Smith, the local uncrowned king of criminality, and assured his readers that Soapy "is not a dangerous man."

NOT SURPRISINGLY, newspapers based in Seattle—the city that served as the major jumping-off point to the Yukon—were among the quickest to send representatives north. Joseph A. Costello of the *Seattle Times* set off for Dawson City, promising that his dispatches would contain "the earliest, most comprehensive, accurate, and uncolored reports from the new diggings." Costello had other goals as well. Like many Seattle journalists, he was leaving town hoping to make his fortune in the Klondike.

Meanwhile, the *P-I* sent its own man back on the *Portland*, which left Seattle only three days after its historic stop. No, it wasn't Beriah Brown (who remained behind to become an editor of the daily and, later, start his own paper on Whidbey Island), but rather one Samuel P. Weston. With Weston went a cage full of carrier pigeons. Since communications with Alaska and the Yukon were poor at best, Weston intended to send accounts of the miners and their rapacious pursuits back to his newsroom tied to these birds' legs. What he hadn't figured on was that carrier pigeons were accustomed to toting brief missives; they weren't built to lug five-column reports for a thousand miles or more. Weston made it to Alaska, but his pigeons—and the articles they were carrying—apparently got lost somewhere between there and Puget Sound.

There wasn't a telegraph line linking Skagway with cities in the south until 1898, and not until a year after that was the line extended to Dawson. Getting news out before then required sending a letter by way of a departing ship or miner, or coming up with some more creative scheme. A wonderful anecdote recalls how Faith Fenton, the *Toronto Globe*'s columnist, went in tears one day to Colonel Samuel Steele, commander of the

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In Dawson City 10,000 Americans hear the story of the Spanish-American War sea fight at Santiago as read at ten o'clock at night from the only newspaper in town. This paper first sold for $200. The purchaser rented a hall, charged $1 admission and cleared $500. He then sold the paper for $50, and the story was read to the public.

North-West Mounted Police for the Yukon and British Columbia. It seems that Fenton had tried to get a scoop by writing the details of a hanging *before it had even occurred*, then sending her article out by fast dog-team. Everything went according to plan—until, at the 11th hour, someone noticed that the hanging had been scheduled for All Saint's Day, a religious holiday, and it was postponed. Steele, not only smart enough to apprehend Fenton's dilemma but gallant enough to try overcoming it, instantly ordered another dog-team to run 50 miles in order to retrieve and destroy the untimely dispatch.

ON TOP OF being plucky and somewhat reckless, the most celebrated chroniclers of the Klondike madness were downright resourceful. Good examples are John D. McGilvray of the *New York Herald* and his staff artist Max Newberry. They were two of the lucky ones to find berths on the *Excelsior* for its return trip from San Francisco to St. Michael in the summer of 1897. By the time they reached Alaska, though, winter was closing its fist hard over the land. Only by hopping four different steamers along the Yukon River and then convincing some Indians to pole them upstream for 60 miles did they reach Dawson City.

An equally fine tale of tenacity concerns Sylvester Henry ("Harry") Scovel of the *New York World*. His name isn't familiar today, even to students of media history; yet during the mid 1890s Scovel was famous, a yellow journalist of outstanding daring and determination. When the Klondike stampede erupted, the *World* ordered Scovel to Dawson without delay. The fact that he had recently wed a fellow writer, Frances Cabanné, and still hadn't had time to revel in conjugal bliss didn't matter a whit to his editors; the gold rush was news, and it was Scovel's moral duty to go where news happened, when it happened. Besides, the *World* knew that Joaquin Miller was headed for the diggings on the *New York Journal*'s payroll, and it sure wasn't going to let Hearst have an exclusive on the story.

Rather than stay behind and worry, Frances Scovel accompanied her husband on his travels. The pair reached Skagway in a rainstorm and set up temporary camp in a mud trough. They tried to raise a tent, but the winds were howling and kept tearing the canvas from their hands. Harry managed to buy some dry firewood, but it didn't help much since Frances had never cooked before in her life and almost set the tent on fire trying.

The *World* had instructed Scovel to "follow the crowds" up north. However, the crowds were going nowhere—the heavy rains and glut of travelers on the White Pass Trail had made that 45-mile route impassable, leaving thousands of anxious gold seekers as prey to the thieves, con artists and assorted profiteering slackers who called Skagway home. A reconnaissance of the path showed that the biggest

On Exhibit at WSHM

GOLDEN DREAMS

The Quest for the Klondike, Featuring Photography by Asahel Curtis

This exhibit recreates the journey to the goldfields of the Yukon undertaken by so many a century ago. See the Klondike through the camera lens of photographer Asahel Curtis and hear the stories of stampeders who survived the journey. Dramatic dioramas and stage sets help transport visitors back to this historically compelling place and time. On view at the Washington State History Museum now through June 2.

bottleneck was in a narrow mountain gap just a few miles outside of Skagway. Rain had loosened boulders from the surrounding hillsides, and their falling had left the trail wide enough only for the transit of one pack horse at a time. Efforts to raise funds for the dynamite necessary to clear this route had been unsuccessful since most of the people in Skagway were transients with little money and little care for a permanent solution to the crisis.

Scovel saw a tremendous opportunity for a "*World* stroke," remarks Joyce Milton in her book *The Yellow Kids: Foreign Correspondents in the Heyday of Yellow Journalism*. "On his own initiative, since there was no telegraph in Skagway, he decided to commit several hundred dollars of the *World*'s money to purchase dynamite and have the trail through the cut widened." This was an extremely favored move, earning both Scovel and his paper plaudits—even in the pages of competing publications. To the Associated Press he was the "savior of the stampeders."

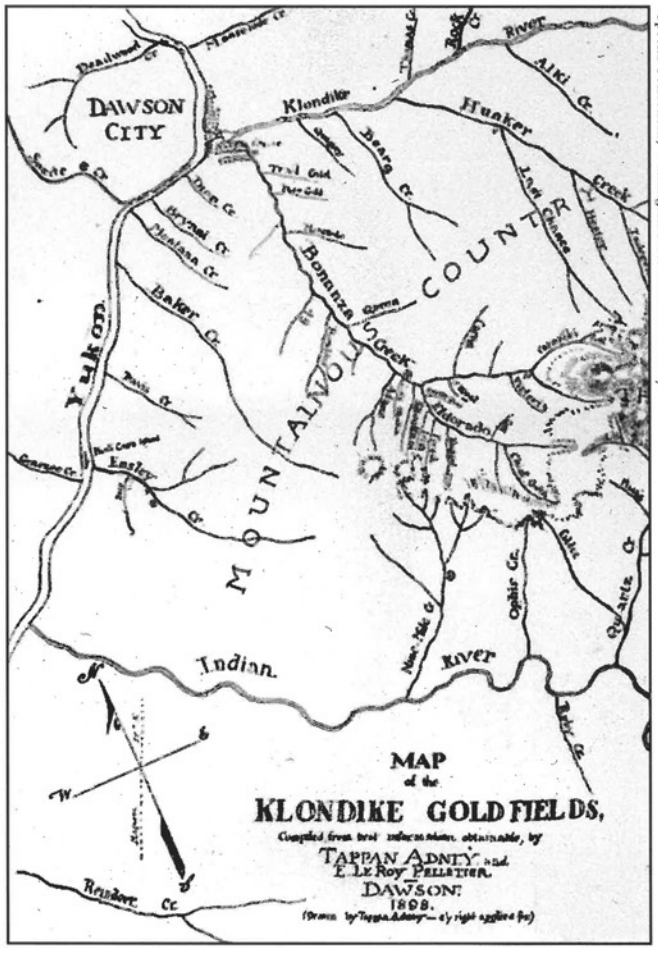
Traffic resumed its progress up the trail, everyone headed toward Lake Bennett and the headwaters of the Yukon River, which would take stampeders all the way to Dawson. And with the crowd went the Scovels. It was every bit as challenging a trek as they had heard. A pair of their horses lost their footing and almost careened into a chasm, but Frances grabbed instinctively at their bridles and calmed them enough to regain their footing. One night they camped in such a narrow passage that Frances had to stand on the trail to cook dinner, moving out of the way every time a pack train wanted to pass. Another time, the couple made camp on ground so precipitous and slippery with mud that they kept sliding out of their tent. They were overjoyed to reach Lake Bennett in just six days.

As it happens, they never made it any closer to Dawson. Needing to check in with the *World*, Harry left his wife on the shores of the lake and went back to Skagway, expecting to find a message or two awaiting him. When he found nothing, and with no way to telegraph his editors from Skagway, he took a steamer down to Seattle. There he received instructions to return to New York for reassigning, which he did obediently—leaving the lovely Frances alone at Lake Bennett for more than a month before word reached her of Harry's fate. Amazingly, she forgave her hubby his truancy. After all, she was a journalist, too.

WHEN THE KLONDIKE gold rush was still in its infancy, newspapers were rare in the Far North. So rare, in fact, that one newcomer to Skagway charged miners a dollar a head just to sit in a dance hall and listen to readings from a recent copy of the Seattle *P-I*. It's said that he made $350 that night.

With more and more people venturing into the area, though, it was inevitable that local papers would rise to satisfy their news needs. Dyea had its *Trail* and *Press*, both of which did their best to plump up their struggling town's reputation while simultaneously trashing rival Skagway as a "fever-stricken hole of Hell." In the meantime, Skagway welcomed the first of several news organs—the *Skaguay News*—in mid October 1897. M. L. Sherpy was editor of that four-page weekly, but most folks knew it for the musings of Elmer J. ("Stroller") White. Born in Ohio, trained at papers in the Southeast, White had labored for several years with Puget

Detail from a* Harper's Weekly *map of the Klondike gold fields, drawn by Tappan Adney and published in 1898.



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By 1900, when this sketch appeared in the* Alaskan Magazine and Canadian Yukoner*, nobody was fooled any longer into thinking that the northward trek would be anything but hard and often unrewarding work.

Sound periodicals before striking off for Alaska at the height of Soapy Smith's reign. He was a humorist in the Art Buchwald sense, focusing on small, odd tales that revealed more about the pride and prejudices of his new home than could any stack of straightforward news copy.

Berton's *Klondike* recounts the Stroller waltzing into a saloon one night to discover the bartender buying a round for the house, in celebration of his recent nuptials. "What was the name of your bride?" White inquired, thinking there might be a news item here. The barman pondered the question for a few minutes while polishing his counter, then turned back to White. "Here," he said. "You tend bar and I'll run over and ask her. I heard it but I forgot what it was. You'll find rye and Scotch on ice under the bar." White stayed in Alaska long past the gold rush, and was elected in 1918 to its territorial legislature.

The peak of the stampede found nine newspapers operating in Dawson City, but most of them lasted no more than a season or two. More successful was the *Klondike Nugget*, which debuted on May 27, 1898. Editor Gene Allen had been in Seattle when news of the Yukon strikes reached there. He was so anxious to found the first paper in Dawson that he didn't even wait for his printing press to reach the town. Instead, he left it with his brother George on a raft heading down the Yukon River while he shot overland to Dawson in a dogsled and, after borrowing a typewriter from a *New York Times* correspondent, produced a single-page bulletin that he tacked to a pole. Thus, while the rival *Midnight Sun* actually got its presses to town and its printing going before Allen could, the *Nugget* was always able to boast that it had had the earlier launch.

It was tough going for the Allen brothers. *The Klondike's "Dear Little Nugget,"* by Ian Macdonald and Betty O'Keefe, remembers that, "Once, when the supply of newsprint ran out, the *Nugget* was printed on brown paper originally earmarked for bags and wrapping." After two years in Dawson, Gene Allen lost his shirt in a freight-hauling scheme and had to transfer full ownership of the paper to his sibling/partner. George Allen kept the *Nugget* alive until 1903. By 1904 only one gold rush-born broadsheet survived: *The Dawson Daily News*, which finally ceased publication in 1954.

AS SUDDENLY AS correspondents for the great newspapers of the day had appeared at Skagway and Dawson and all the rugged points in between, they disappeared. The February 15, 1898, sinking of the battleship *Maine* in the harbor at Havana, Cuba, had led publisher Hearst to exclaim, "This means war!" And he was right about that. By spring 1898 the Spanish-American War was cooking, and every reporter with a passion for action caught the next ship away from the Klondike. Others left on word that gold had been discovered in Nome, way out on the western extremes of Alaska. The Klondike bonanza, it seemed, was no longer big news.

Yet it has hardly been forgotten, thanks to the efforts of people such as Gene Allen, Tappan Adney and Beriah Brown. Their on-the-scene reports of the gold rush form what journalism school professors like to term "the first rough draft of history." Myriad books have been written about the Yukon rush, but they have all depended on the hasty scribblings of those men and women who went north not primarily for gold but for inspiration—truly a writer's greatest reward.

J. Kingston Pierce, a Seattle writer, is author of San Francisco, You're History! *(Sasquatch Books) and* America's Historic Trails with Tom Bodett *(KQED Books), the companion volume to the popular* PBS-TV *series. Pierce's Klondike gold rush history, "River of Gold," appeared in the Summer 1997 issue of* COLUMBIA.

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FRONT COVER: *Harold Cundy found and documented this rock carving along the Columbia River near the town of Beverly and the site of the Wanapum Dam. Cundy's careful examination of the rock convinced him that there were at least three different petroglyphs carved on its surface. (Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society)* BACK COVER: *A Good Roads Association gathering at Picture Rocks Bay in 1914. This site was widely regarded as having the best examples of petroglyphs found along the mid Columbia River. (Courtesy William D. Layman)* *See related story beginning on page 23.*