

Ezra Meeker's Quest For

KLONDIKE GOLD

THE YEAR WAS 1897. The Pacific Northwest was still in the throes of a major nationwide financial depression that had begun with the Panic of 1893. Unemployment was at a record high, bank failures were an everyday occurrence, manufacturing plants were closing down at a rapid rate, and major corporations were facing bankruptcy. Even farmers were going broke and losing their property holdings—all due in part to the lack of gold to finance the government.

One particular Puget Sound farmer who suffered a double setback was Ezra Meeker, the nation's "hop king," who had made a fortune with this fruitful crop in the lush Puyallup Valley. Meeker's financial reverses resulted from two very different causes: lending most of his funds to financially strapped neighbor farmers who were unable to repay their loans, and a voracious infestation of hop lice, which destroyed this valuable crop throughout the Pacific Northwest. The combination of the devastation caused by the lice and vivid memories of hungry miners during the Fraser River gold rush motivated the luckless Meeker to journey to the Klondike goldfields in 1898.

Nearly half a century earlier, on March 21, 1858, some six years after the Meekers first arrived in the Pacific Northwest, the schooner *Wild Pigeon* brought word to the struggling community of Steilacoom that the Indians in Canada had discovered gold on the Fraser River and traded several pounds of gold dust to the Hudson's Bay Company. News of the discovery resulted in more than 300 people leaving Victoria for the gold streams.

The next day word arrived that the Bellingham Bay Company was compelled to stop work inasmuch as all but three of the coal miners had left for the Fraser goldfields. The same applied to logging camps in the area, resulting in mills being shut down. As more ships arrived from the north, the excitement ran through every town on the Pacific Coast and continued around the world, sending dithers through adventurous spirits everywhere.

The next week brought news of the arrival in Victoria of more than 100 pounds of gold; hundreds more men, and women too, had contracted gold fever and were outfitting and heading out. At that time, the Meekers were still in the blockhouse they had built in Steilacoom for protection from the Indians, their cattle peacefully grazing on the plains a few miles distant. Despite the fact that there had not been any Indian trouble for more than two years, there was still a spirit of unrest, due mainly to some atrocious murders committed by a few renegade white men. The army presence at Fort Steilacoom, and the gamblers and blacklegs it attracted to the area, didn't help the situation either.

Meeker operated a small business in the blockhouse and made the mistake of letting a few of the bluecoats, as the soldiers were known, have articles on credit. When Meeker later refused credit to some drunken soldiers, they returned 30 strong that evening, fired a shot through the door, and tried to break it down.

BY HOWARD CLIFFORD

Steilacoom businessmen became alarmed. One of them, who had headed for the Fraser River, returned with 50 ounces of gold dust; the fever struck again, bringing on a reenactment of the California gold rush of a decade earlier, only in the opposite direction. Ships by the dozen, loaded with hundreds of prospectors—some with and others without cargo to feed the mob—headed north. Their destination was Whatcom (now Bellingham), the closest American port to the Fraser River area. Meeker, knowing that the influx of people must be fed, decided that if the multitude would not come to him, he would join the mob to provide milk and butter from his cows. People were paying a dollar a gallon for milk and any price asked for fresh butter.

How to get there was the difficulty. All space on the northbound steamers was taken from week to week for freight and passengers, with no room left for cattle. But the need for supplies was growing desperate, and finally the cattle, mainly cows, were loaded in an open scow and taken in tow alongside the steamer *Sea Bird*. All went smoothly until they arrived at the head of Whidbey Island where a choppy sea from a light wind began slopping over into the scow, which would eventually have sunk the vessel despite efforts at bailing. When the captain cut the vessel's speed, all was well, but the moment greater power was applied, over the gunwales came the water. The dialogue between Meeker and the captain became more emphatic than elegant, according to passengers. The captain did not dare let Meeker's barge loose or run it under without incurring the risk of heavy damages and, probably, loss of life. Meeker refused to be cut loose or land en route. Eventually he was cut loose in Bellingham Bay.

Utterly exhausted, he landed at the mouth of Squalecum Creek, on which he later purchased property. The cows needed to be fed and milked, and as more than 3,000 passengers had just arrived at Whatcom, Meeker was too busy to sleep for the next 36 hours.

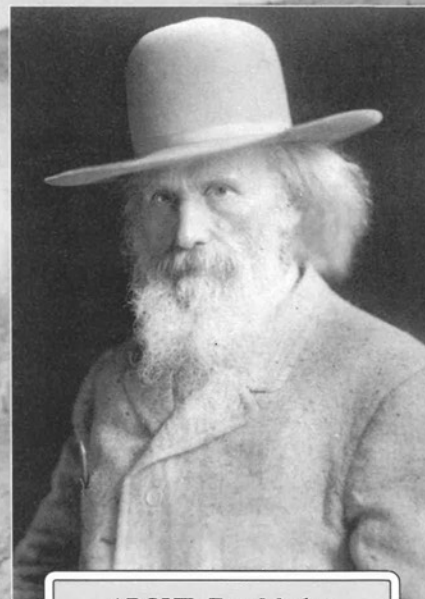
Whatcom became a boom town of several thousand residents, with hundreds more arriving each day. By this time, getting to the Fraser River had become a major problem. The early voyagers had slipped up the river before the freshets came from the melting snows to swell the torrents of the river. Those coming later either failed altogether, gave up the unequal contest, or lost an average of one out of three canoes or boats in the attempt. How many lives were lost will never be known.

CANADIAN OFFICIALS later required miner's permits before allowing anyone to attempt the Fraser, and those permits could only be obtained in Victoria. This put an end to Whatcom as a jumping-off point for prospectors. Meeker had done well financially and returned with his cattle to Steilacoom.

It is doubtful, Meeker stated, that a stampede of such dimensions ever occurred where the loss of life was greater, proportionately, than that to the Fraser in 1858. Probably not one in ten who made the effort reached the mines, and of those who did, the usual percentage of blanks was drawn. Yet the successful miners were immensely rich, and many millions of dollars worth of gold came from the find over time.

Meeker also noted that, while the losses to some Puget Sound people were great, much good nevertheless came out of the stampede. Many among the flood of newcomers stayed after the return tide was over and went to work in the region, helping develop the Pacific Northwest into a major factor in the nation's economy. Some became respected businessmen and honored citizens.

Years later, in 1897, when news of the gold discovery in the Klondike reached the Puget Sound area, thousands of residents once again became stricken with gold fever. Meeker was immune—for a while. He got to reasoning, however, that with hundreds stampeding north and with plenty of gold being taken, there ought to be a chance to recoup his financial status in the mining district. He decided to head north. Despite his nearly 70 years, Meeker felt well able to make the journey to the



Howard Clifford collection

ABOVE: Ezra Meeker at about the time of the Klondike gold rush. He played an active roll in the stampede, making four trips over the trail and down the Yukon River, hauling foodstuffs to Dawson City over a two-year span.

BACKGROUND: Dawson City at the time that Meeker was operating his small store, supplying the gold seekers with much-needed and greatly appreciated foodstuffs.

Yukon goldfields. He later described the trip as being similar to his westward journey over the Oregon Trail.

Meeker had many tons of vegetables dried and placed in cans. His wife helped in the drying process, and the building formerly occupied by his light plant was utilized as a cannery.

IN THE SPRING of 1898, accompanied by son-in-law Roderick McDonald, son Fred, and several others, Meeker started for the Yukon loaded down with tons of dried vegetables. The cargo included 500 live chickens, who made it necessary for the ship to stop en route so that they could be made more comfortable.

In delineating his reasons for going

It was a hectic time on the trail as packers with horses and dogs made their way through the wooded areas of the lowlands en route to the summit. The narrow trail below the snow line caused problems as those hauling loads to the summit tried to pass the oncoming down-trail traffic.

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to the Klondike and his experiences there, Meeker wrote:

After the failure of the hop business, I undertook a venture to the mines of the North. This resulted in a real live adventure of exciting experience.

I had lived in the old Oregon country (as the Pacific Northwest was described) forty-four years and had never seen a mine. Mining had no attraction for me, any more than corner lots in new embryo cities. I did not understand the value of either and left both severely alone.

But when my accumulations had all been swallowed up, the land that I had

previously owned gone into other hands and, in fact, my occupation gone, I concluded to take a chance in the mining country. Matters could not be much worse, and probably could be made better, that in the spring of 1898 I made my first trip over the [Chilkoot] Pass, and then down the Yukon river to Dawson in a flat-boat and ran the famous White Horse Rapids with my load of vegetables for the Klondike miners.

One may read of the [Chilkoot] Pass the most graphic descriptions written, yet when he is up against the experience of crossing, he will find the difficulties more formidable than his wildest fancy or expectations had pictured.

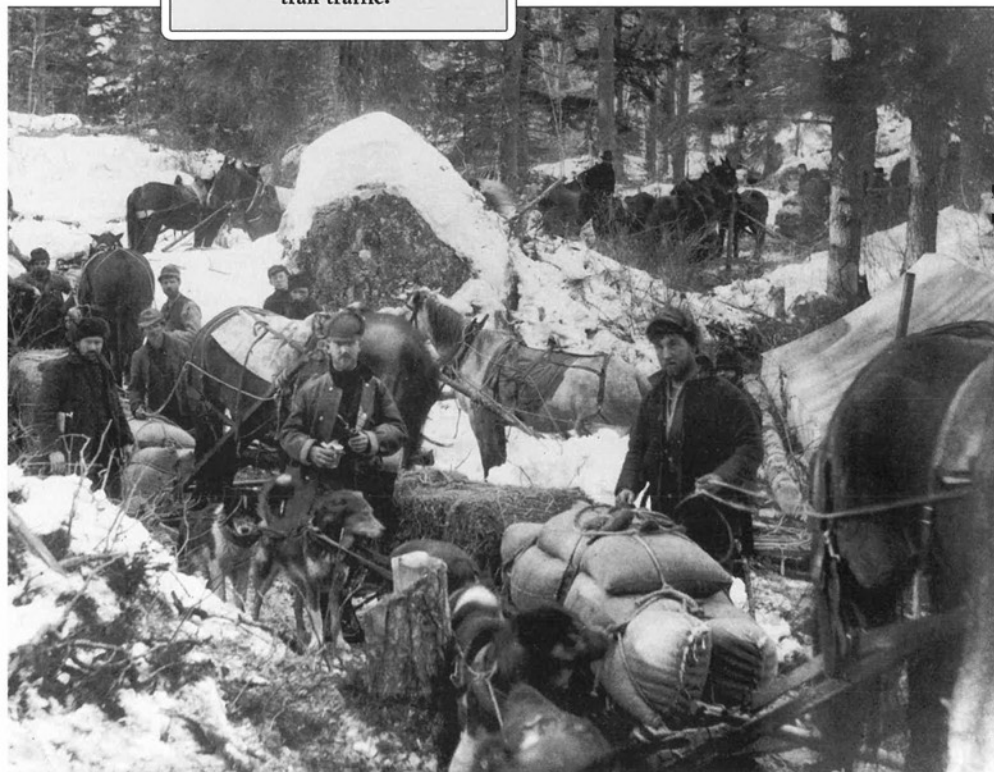
I started in with 15 tons of freight and got through with nine. On one stretch of 2,000 feet I paid \$40 a ton freight and I knew of others paying more. The trip for a part of the way reminded me of the scenes on the plains in 1852—such crowds that they jostled each other on the several parallel trails where there was room for more than one track. At the pass most of the travel came upon one track, and so steep that the ascent could only be made by cutting steps in the ice and snow—1,500 in all.

Frequently every step would be full while crowds jostled each other at the foot of the ascent to get into the single file, each man carrying from a one hundred to two hundred pound pack on his back. Nevertheless, after all sorts of experiences, I arrived in Dawson with nine tons of my outfit.

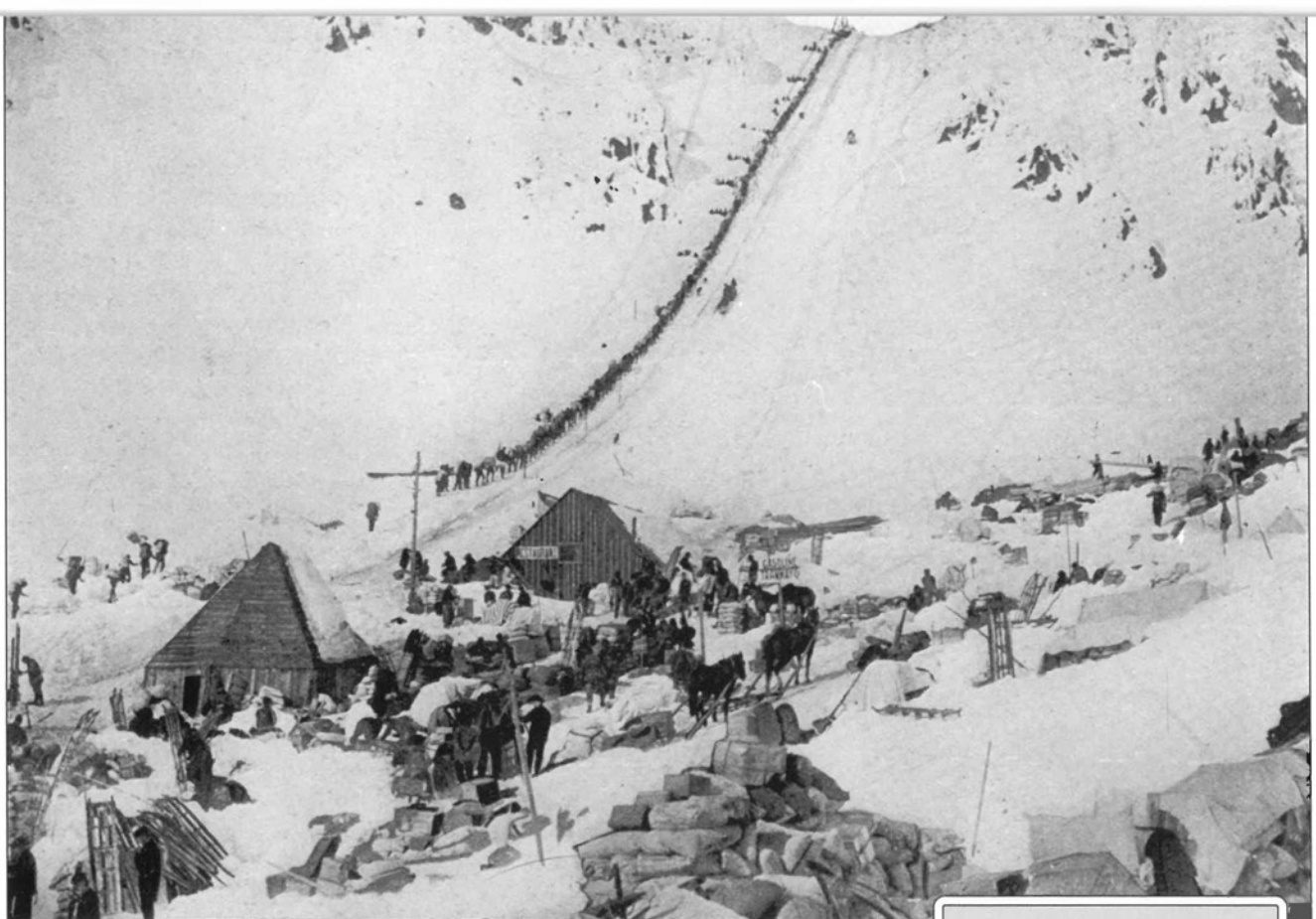
Meeker rented a combination store and cabin for \$200 a month and sold his potatoes for 75 cents a pound, onions at the same price; condensed milk went for \$1 a can and sugar for \$75 a sack. Eggs probably were the most profitable, going for \$1.50 apiece, while chickens brought \$5 each.

Subsequently, Meeker had some fresh vegetables sent to the Klondike, individually wrapped. They were kept in Dawson in a room where the temperature was elevated to a comparatively propitious degree by means of a stove.

The first stampeders, hundreds of them, some traveling on foot over the



Howard Clifford collection



mountain passes, others coming up the Yukon River by steamer, reached Dawson City before the fall freeze-up cut off their advance. That winter, five supply-laden steamers, including one chartered by the mayor of Seattle and his group, were locked in the ice between St. Michael's and Dawson City.

The first arrivals over the passes brought no food or supplies. They counted on being able to purchase necessities in Dawson. By the same token, the few trading posts there were not prepared for the onslaught that was to come.

As early as August 11, 1897, Commissioner Charles Constantine of the Yukon Territory had written the government in Ottawa: "The outlook for grub is not assured for the number of people here—about four thousand crazy or lazy men, chiefly American miners and toughs from coast towns."

Trading companies were equally concerned. In order to give everyone a fair share of what little food was available, they adopted a dole system of food distribution. They locked their warehouse doors and allowed but one customer to enter at a time. A clerk was stationed at the door. Once a customer was served, the clerk unlocked the door,

let him out, and allowed one more to enter the store. Purchases were limited to only a few days' supplies.

Regarding the reported famine during the winter of 1897-98, the *Klondike News* of April 1, 1898, stated,

For the past ten years the famine cry has agitated the Yukoners every winter, just as regular as the old moose cows have calves in the spring. And just as regular as the famine and high prices come, the managers of the old trading companies have that plausible way of "peddling the bull" to the miners, as to how the last boat got stuck in the ice or grounded on a sand-bar and thus brought about a shortage of provisions. Take an Alaskan miner with a Yukon appetite in the winter with a famine on and several thousand miles from supplies and he is as meek and flexible as a hazed freshman and is ready to concede to any terms or pay any price and becomes an easy prey to the advance agent of famine. These companies realize this and that they can get more money for a few provisions at famine prices than at ten times the amount at regular prices and as a natural consequence, the last boat usually gets stuck somewhere in the

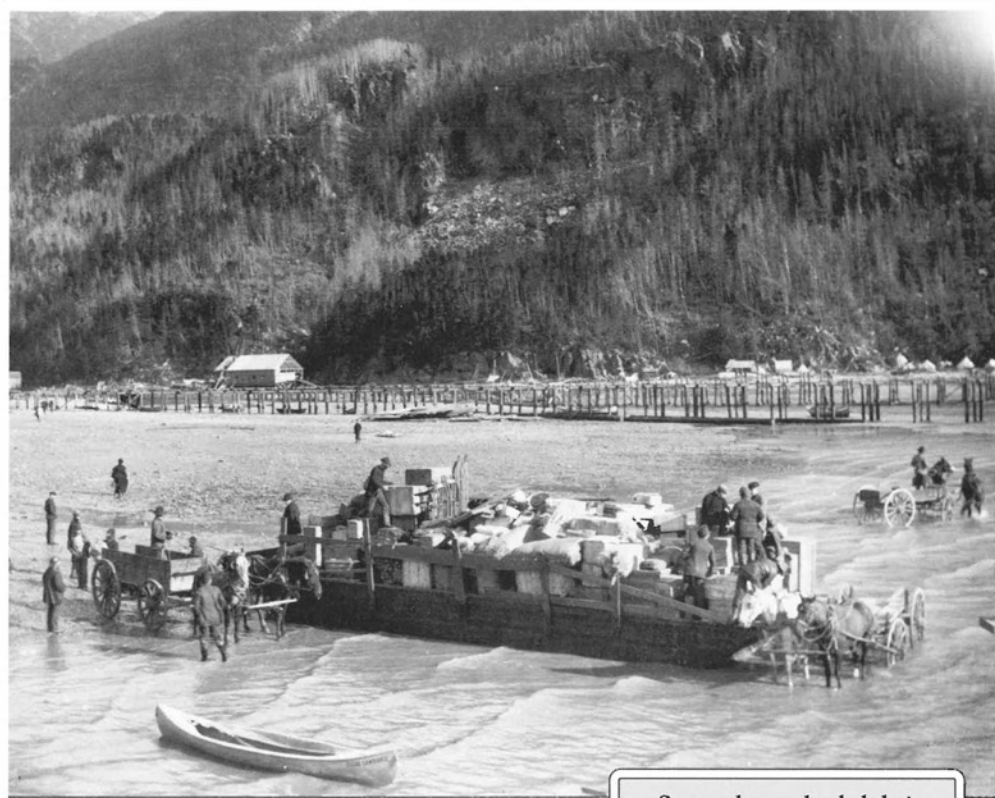
The "scales" just below the summit of Chilkoot Pass where Meeker paid professional packers \$40 a ton to carry his supplies to the top. The ascent was so steep here that it was only possible to make the climb by cutting steps in the ice and snow.

river outside the reach of the miners. This makes the process of holding them up comparatively easy.

As a result the old Yukoner will shout with joy when he sees the barges laden with supplies coming up or down the river.

AFTER SELLING out his first shipment, Ezra Meeker started up the river with 200 ounces of Klondike gold in his belt. It had been a successful endeavor, but four trips in two years convinced him that he did not want any more such experiences.

"There was when my mind would run on this last venture, the monument expedition," he stated while writing his book, *Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound*.



Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

Had it not been for the loss of my business it is doubtful if I ever would have settled down to this work, and so, maybe, the loss was a blessing in disguise. Anyway, no happier years of my life were passed [than] while engaged in writing it.

Stamperders unloaded their goods from the steamers onto barges and then teamsters hauled them to shore at Dyea and Skagway during the early days of the Klondike stampede. Tents and a dock under construction can be seen in the background.

MECKER WROTE that the trip to the Klondike became a real adventure. To begin with, he was fortunately detained for a couple of days and escaped the avalanche that buried 52 people in the snow on the trail out of Dyea. He passed by their morgue the second day after the catastrophe on the way to the summit and doubtless stepped over the bodies of many unknown dead embedded so deeply in the snow that it was utterly impossible to recover them.

He had received a good dunking during his first passage through White Horse Rapids. Though he vowed that he would not go through there again, he did so the very next trip that same year and managed to come out of it dry. While going down the Thirty Mile River, it did seem as though they could not escape being bashed upon the rocks; but somehow or another they got through safely, though the riverbank was strewn with wrecks and the waters had claimed many victims.

It was here in this deep and dangerous gorge, with its perpendicular cliffs of granite and a current that ran like a millrace, that 150 boats had been smashed in one day, seven prospectors had died and hundreds had lost all their possessions.

When Meeker reached the Yukon River proper, the current was not so very swift, but the shoals were numerous. More than once they were “hung up” on a bar and always with an uncertainty as to how they would get off. In all of this experience of the trips by scow, they only took damage once. In that instance, a hole was jammed into the boat and they thought they were “goners” for certain, but they managed to effect a landing so quickly as to unload the cargo dry. Meeker blamed himself for taking such risks, but curiously enough he admitted that he enjoyed it, sustained, no doubt, by high hopes of coming out with “my pile.”

Meeker asserted that his experiences during the Klondike gold rush com-

prised the most memorable period of his life. He was determined to garner his share of gold dust. In a way, he did and he didn’t. After realizing a profit of \$19,000, he bought a mining claim—his first and last look at a mine. While it entranced him, he never was able to exploit it. A deep freeze came a month earlier than usual. He couldn’t keep the ground thawed and couldn’t obtain enough water for sluicing. Losing his \$19,000 and grieving over the death of his son Fred, who died of a lung ailment, Meeker gave up and left the Yukon for the last time in April 1901. He came out over the rotting ice with little more than another adventure chalked up on the credit side of a life ledger largely filled with more than falls to the lot of the average man—but then, Ezra Meeker was no average man.

He felt that fate—or something else—was against him. After the mining experience all his accumulation was gone, “slick as a mitten,” as the old saying goes. He never wanted to see another mine or visit another mining country. A Puyallup man who was in the Klondike at the same time stated later that Meeker’s claim proved to be of great value.

Two weeks after arriving home, Meeker celebrated his golden wedding anniversary and experienced the joy of a welcome home, commenting:

Even if I did not have my poke filled with gold, I had then passed my seventy year mark and my “pet project,” as some people called it, of marking the old Oregon Trail, was hung up indefinitely, but the sequel is shown in what follows and is the answer to my forebodings.

In his autobiography, written some 60 years after his initial cross-country migration, Meeker recalled of his Oregon Trail trek, “I was the youngest of the menfolks in the party, and the only married man of the lot, and if I do have to say, the strongest and the ablest to bear the brunt of the work.”

Meeker pointed out that in both experiences he recalled many examples of cruelty, brutality and selfishness on the

trail, but he also saw others of compassion and magnanimity. He said that he could describe instances that would convert the most skeptical listener into belief in the depravity of mankind, so heartless and selfish were the actions of some men—to other men, women, animals and themselves. Yet he felt that, “For myself I can truly say I do not remember the experience as a personal hardship.”

Meeker’s account of his experiences is as hair-raising a story as ever came out of the Klondike. Added to the gamut of terrors that beset his travels on the Oregon Trail were frostbite, spinal meningitis and the awful scourge of scurvy. The banks of the Yukon were strewn with the wrecks of unfortunate craft that had met doom in the swirling rapids and on the treacherous rocks. It was a sight that did not add to the comfort of cowering travelers making the same trip and shivering with terror as their own rickety boats bumped and scraped over the same jagged rocks that had wrecked the others. Meeker narrowly escaped death on a number of occasions, and he counted it little short of a miracle each time he disembarked in Dawson with his salable merchandise.

Just as had been the case with the Fraser River stampede, the Pacific Northwest—especially the Puget Sound area—benefited from the influx

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of people and money. As a result, Meeker returned from the Klondike to a more prosperous Puyallup. Seattle’s population more than doubled from 80,000 prior to the start of the rush to 195,000, bank clearing increased from \$36 million to \$92 million, property sales from \$300,000 to \$10,000,000, and the gold assay office handled \$414,737,274 during the next three decades, most of which remained in the Seattle area.

This small combination store and cabin, known as Meeker’s Place, was home for Ezra Meeker during his two years in Dawson City. He paid \$200 a month to rent the facility. The building is no longer standing.



Howard Clifford photo

FOREMOST, MEEKER remains the pioneer who came west over the Oregon Trail in 1852. He became a storekeeper, farmer, businessman, logger, longshoreman, founder and first mayor of Puyallup, “hop king” of the world, bank president, one of the founders and a president of the Washington State Historical Society, inventor, promoter of roads and railroads, author of some 20 books, lecturer, philanthropist, the richest man in the state at one time and flat broke at another, and a flamboyant personality always. He was probably best known, though, for his successful 20-year struggle to mark the Oregon Trail, which culminated in his retracing the route in 1906 in an ox-drawn covered wagon accompanied only by his dog.

He later flew over the same route in an open-cockpit biplane and traveled over it by auto and train. In so doing, he met with and enjoyed the friendship of United States presidents, Wall Street tycoons and corporate officers.

Ezra Meeker passed away at the Frye Hotel in Seattle on December 3, 1928, a few days before his 98th birthday. He was buried beside Eliza Jane, “lady of the cabin,” in Puyallup’s Woodbine Cemetery on a hill overlooking the valley he loved so much. In 1939 the Oregon Trail Memorial Association erected a monument over his grave.

In Puyallup’s Pioneer Park there is a life-size statue of Meeker, by Victor A. Lewis, marking the site of his first home in Puyallup—a small log cabin. The Meeker Mansion, on the National Register of Historic Sites, located at 312 Spring Street, is now a museum. The Washington State History Museum, in Tacoma, houses a considerable collection of Meeker memorabilia and photographs, plus the covered wagon and oxen, Dave and Dandy (stuffed), that completed the 1906-07 journey with him over the Oregon Trail.

A Seattle author and photographer, Howard Clifford, has researched, photographed and written about Alaska and the Yukon for over 40 years. His sixth book, *Alaska and Yukon Railroads: A Pictorial History*, is in press.

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FRONT COVER: As professional rodeo evolved in the 1930s Pacific Northwest, town boosters used popular culture venues to showcase and capitalize on the rodeo cowboy's mystique. Here the classic bucking bronc motif is the centerpiece of an illustrated sheet music promotion—"Ride 'em Cowboy"—sponsored by the Ellensburg Rodeo Board in 1935. See related story beginning on page 38. (Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society) BACK COVER: This drawing of Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, appeared in the January 1887 issue of *The West Shore* magazine. See related story beginning on page 6. (Courtesy Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries)