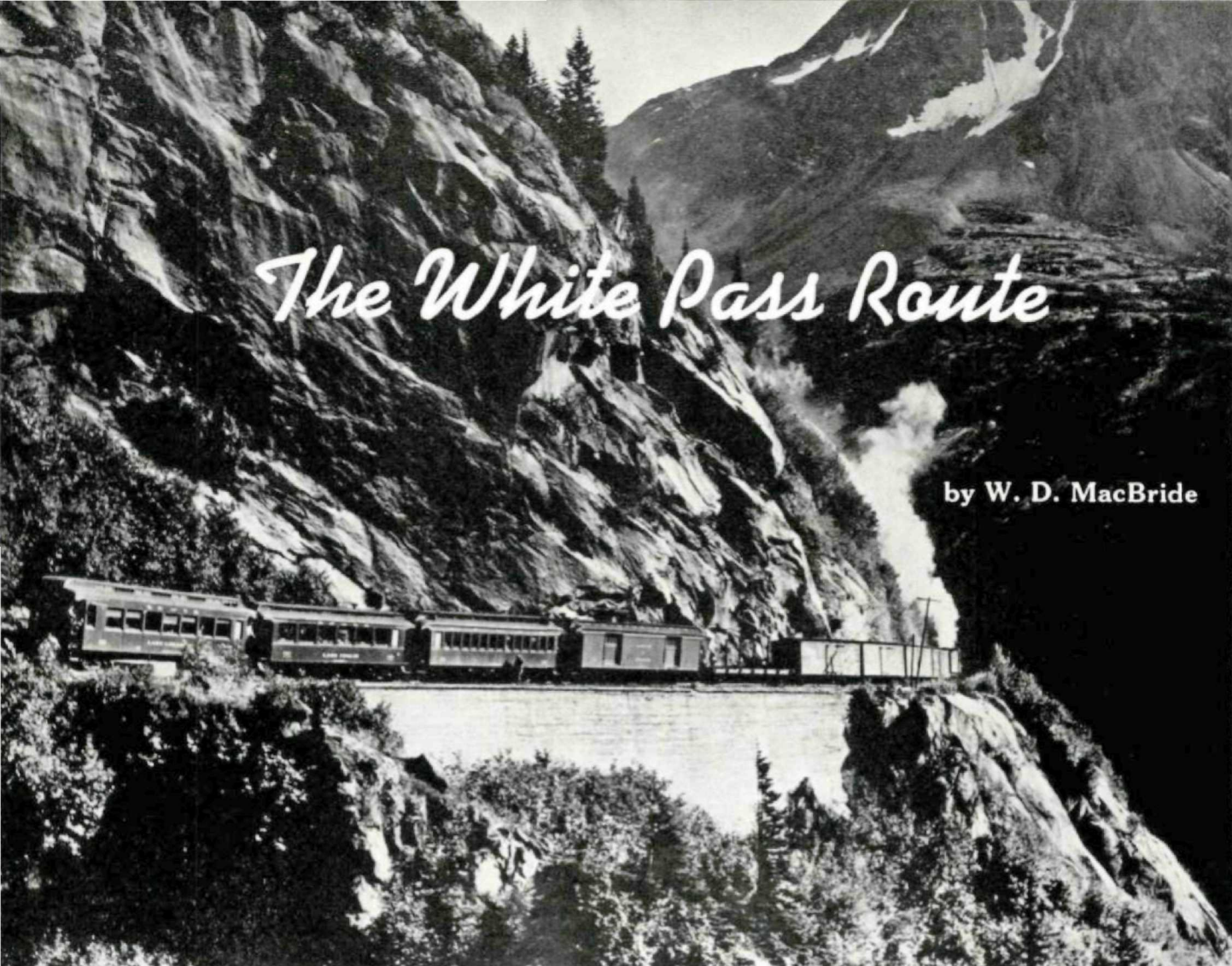


The White Pass Route

by W. D. MacBride



A mixed passenger and freight train winds through the White Pass on its way from Alaska to the Yukon.

The White Pass Railway from Skagway to Whitehorse has a picturesque past and present.

THERE is only one man living in the Yukon today who witnessed the discovery of gold in the Klondike. He is a Tagish Indian named Patsy Henderson. For over twenty years this grand old man has told the tourists, who take the Ben-My-Chree excursion from Carcross, his Yukon story. Patsy, with failing eyes and the strain of his years, won't be with us much longer, so in brief here is Patsy's story, which has been recorded by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation:

"This is Klondike story. Dawson Charlie he find gold in '96, 17th August. He is my brother and his pardner Skookum Jim my Uncle. Another pardner George Carmack, he is a white man—four of us—now all these people die except me. The time we find gold in the Klondike I'm just a kid—old man now. George Carmack come from outside Chilkoot Pass. He marry Skookum Jim's sister, Kate, my aunt. George get tired around here, so he go

down river with his wife. They take small boat. He don't come back two years so we go down river look for George. We find him on Trondiuck River, that's Indian name for 'Hammer Creek.' Those days Indian hammer stakes across creek, hold nets, catch big King Salmon come up Yukon river. Pretty soon white man call this creek 'Klondike River.' George Carmack camp on creek run into this river. That creek, no name—pretty soon be 'Bonanza Creek.' Skookum Jim go down creek for drink of water. He see gold. He call, 'George, come down here, bring shovel and gold pan, we try here.' In twenty minutes George pan \$5 coarse gold. George say 'I think we have good place. I am staking claims.' Staked claims for three people, George Carmack, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie. They give name to creek, 'Bonanza,' first good creek in Klondike. Me, I'm too young to stake. When I see gold first time I no savvy; I never see gold before. They go down to Forty Mile and record claims."

Time passed and the word of the gold strike eventually reached the great "Outside." In June, 1897, the S.S. *Excelsior* arrived in San Francisco and the S.S. *Humboldt* reached San Diego, each with about \$750,000 in gold aboard. The S.S. *Portland* docked at Seattle on July 17,

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Route of the White Pass and Yukon Railway from tidewater to Whitehorse.

of clearing right of way and building corduroy roads on the Teslin trail. Many of the employees of MacKenzie & Mann found their way to Skagway and worked on the construction of the White Pass Railroad.

In the early spring of 1898, Michael J. Heney, a young Irish Canadian of much experience in railroad construction had perceived the necessity of a railroad from the Pacific Ocean to the headwaters of the Yukon River. Alone and unaided he had made a cursory survey of the terrain from Skagway, Alaska to Lake Bennett in British Columbia. In the St. James Hotel in Skagway, Heney attracted the attention of three men who were in Skagway on a similar mission, on which they had practically decided to make an adverse report. These men were Sir Thomas Tancrede, an engineer representing Close Brothers of London, England; Samuel H. Graves, their U.S. representative, and E. C. Hawkins, an American engineer. Heney had the vision, the faith and the enthusiasm. The other men could and did produce the money, so the White Pass and Yukon Route was created, with Graves the first president of the new company, Heney the contractor, and Hawkins chief construction engineer.

On May 27, 1898, men, horses and material were landed at Skagway and the following morning the ribbons of steel were pointing north through the White Pass. On July 21, 1898, the first train was operated for a distance of four miles out of Skagway. This was quite an historic event as it was the first railroad train carrying passengers ever operated in Alaska or so far north anywhere on the American continent.

The railroad reached the summit of White Pass on February 18, and the head of Lake Bennett on July 6, 1899.

carrying miners whose combined fortunes equalled one ton of gold.

Then the wild stories about gold at the grass roots spread all over the world. Farmers sold their ranches; clerks and teachers left their jobs; members of the underworld rushed for a new Eldorado. The Klondike gold rush was in full swing.

In 1897 an order-in-council of the Canadian Government authorized MacKenzie & Mann of Toronto to build a railroad from Telegraph Creek, head of navigation on the Stikine River of British Columbia, to the head of Teslin Lake, about 150 miles. Teslin Lake, about 85 miles in length, stretches through British Columbia into the Yukon. Four hundred men were conveyed to Telegraph Creek to start this project; but the life of this route was a short and merry one, ending abruptly when the Canadian Parliament refused to ratify the agreement. A certain amount of work was done by the contractors in the way

Portable blacksmith shop used in building the railway.

H. C. Barley





Ceremony of driving the last spike at Whitehorse, June 8, 1900. Bill Robinson is the man with the white forehead, facing the camera. On his left is an engineer named Hislop, and next to him, M. J. Heney. H. C. Barley

The construction of the railroad between Caribou Crossing (now known as Carcross) and Whitehorse was completed on June 8, 1900, and the Bennett to Carcross section received the golden spike on July 29, 1900, thus opening the road for through traffic.

The building of the White Pass Railway was attended by more than ordinary difficulties. It was a thousand miles from supply bases and there were no telegraph or telephone lines connecting this area with the States. Steamer sailings were irregular. On August 8, 1899, 1500 employees during that day and the ensuing few days, grabbed their picks and shovels and started off pellmell on a gold stampede to Atlin, B.C. Thus only a few hundred men were left on the job and it was necessary at once to begin filling their places. It was also necessary to break in the men who did fill the vacancies and to wait for a new supply of picks and shovels.

Nearly all the work between Skagway and Summit was in solid rock. Immense quantities of dynamite and blasting powder were used. In one case a rock cliff 120 feet high, 70 feet wide, and 20 feet thick was blasted away. Sometimes the mountain sides were so steep that men had to be suspended by ropes to prevent their falling off while cutting the grade. A short distance from the Summit a deep V-shaped canyon is spanned by a steel cantilever bridge 215 feet in height, the most northerly bridge of its type and height in the world.

Sixteen miles from Skagway is found the first and only tunnel on the line. This tunnel is only 250 feet in length, but probably no tunnel in history was ever built under greater difficulties. Supplies and machinery had to be hoisted up the steepest trail imaginable.

At Lewes Lake, 81 miles from Skagway, a location had been made along the east shore, but the shore line was so indented with coves that in order to obtain a better line it was decided to lower the surface of the water about fourteen feet. This was done by excavating an outlet

channel. However, the unforeseen happened. The water, after remaining stationary for some time, cut its way through the sandy outlet, forming an enormous canyon through the lake bed. This reduced the lake level over seventy feet, and left a dozen small lakes separated from the main body. In many of these potholes lake trout still exist.

All told there were 35,000 men at work on the line, from say, June 1st, 1898, to October 1st, 1900, and of this number there were only thirty-five deaths from all causes including sickness as well as accidents. A very intelligent class of workmen was employed. Many of them were men anxious to reach the gold fields but awaiting the opening of water transport. Others who worked through the summer months had exhausted their funds and wished to replenish them, so they could continue prospecting. No Asiatic labour was employed on the railroad.

The White Pass Railway is narrow-gauge, 36 inches between rails. From sea level it ascends to a height of 2,885 feet in twenty miles, but its highest elevation is reached at Log Cabin, a station at milepost 33, altitude 2,916 feet. The average grade from the docks to the

An old sleigh and wagon are kept on view in the station yard at Whitehorse. R. Gilliat



summit is 2.6 percent and the steepest grade about 4 percent. The maximum curvature is 16 degrees.

The cost of the road from Skagway to the summit of White Pass was over \$100,000 per mile. From that point to Whitehorse, while the cost per mile was less, it was still much in excess of similar construction in the United States. The line is 110.7 miles long; 20.4 miles in Alaska; 32.2 miles in British Columbia, and 58.1 miles in the Yukon Territory.

All big projects have their heroes or romantic characters, and the White Pass were fortunate in securing the services of William C. Robinson, who became their "Master of Transportation."

Bill came from the state of Maine and went up the Stikine River with the MacKenzie & Mann outfit in 1897. When they faded out, Bill landed in Skagway and joined the forces of the White Pass & Yukon Route. He was popularly known as "Stikine" Bill. He was a very tall and hefty man, and he could be rough and tough or gentle and kind as the occasion demanded. Bill became the trouble-shooter for the railway and tackled any problems that came his way, solved them in his own inimitable manner, came up smiling and asked for more.

At milepost 89 on the railway there is a faded sign post bearing the name *Robinson*. This little flag stop is the gateway to the Yukon mining areas of the Wheaton and Watson rivers, which any day may become prominent in mining circles. From all the names of famous personalities of construction days, his is the only one thus perpetuated. (One of Bill's big construction camps was at Robinson.)

In the spring of 1899 Heney organized a horse-drawn freight service between the summit of the White Pass and the head of Lake Bennett, and this service was extended during the winter months to Carcross at the foot of Lake Bennett. Bill Robinson was the general manager of the

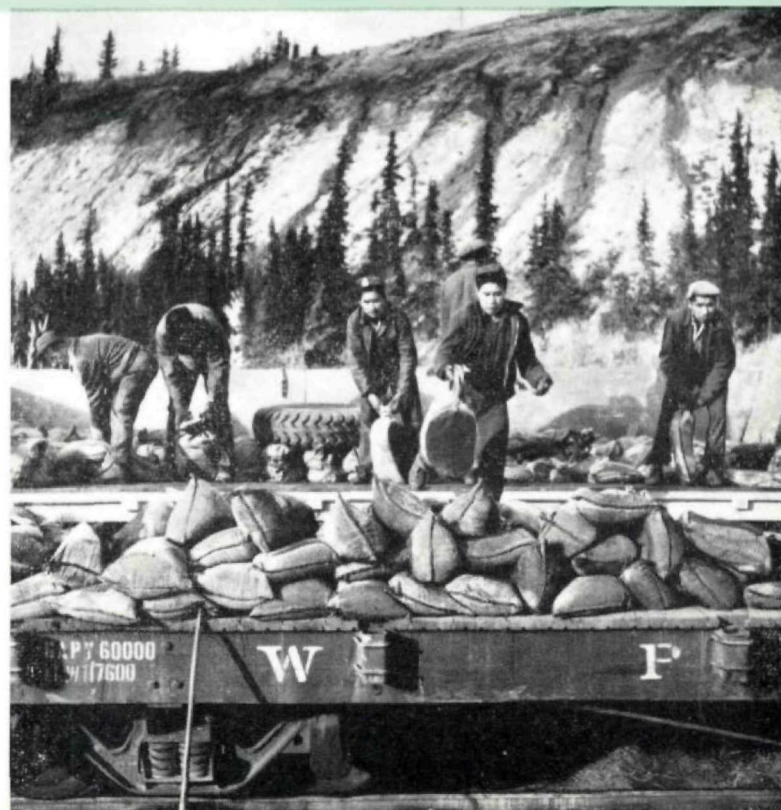
"Red Line" and it forwarded a large number of passengers and hundreds of tons of freight, including material, engines and boilers, etc. for a number of steamers built at the head of Lake Bennett that spring.

When the rails reached the head of Lake Bennett some method had to be devised to carry an immense quantity of rails, ties, stores, construction plants and rolling stock down Lake Bennett to Carcross. For this purpose the "Torpedo Catcher" was designed and built at Lake Bennett. It was a big barge with a capacity of about 150 tons of freight. All cargo was carried on its deck for con-



Rolling stock on the White Pass Railway. Lower left, an observation car. Lower right, loading bags of silver lead concentrate from a truck onto a flat car for Skagway, from where it is shipped south to Trail, B.C.

R. Gilliat



venience in loading and unloading. In shape it was a flat oblong box with sloping ends, which, projecting over the shore landings, facilitated freight handling. Bill Robinson was in charge of the building and operation of this vessel.

When it was finished Bill walked around it and inspected both ends carefully. Finally he said "I think we'll make this end the stern." Whereupon the word *Stern* was chalked in large letters on one end.

The next move was to install upright boilers with engines attached to three propellers. On a short trial trip this craft travelled so fast, it was named the *Torpedo Catcher*. Finally Bill's flagship was ready and loaded for its maiden voyage down Lake Bennett. In the pilot house was Stikine Bill. He blew his starboard whistle, jingled the engine room bells, and backed out from the Bennett wharf. With all three propellers working, Bill wanted to show the crowd assembled on the bank, how he could turn the "TC" in its own length. He did, but it kept on turning and turning until the watchers on the bank struck up a popular tune of the day, "Waltz me around again, Willie."

Bill finally got his steamship straightened out and chugged down the lake to Carcross.

Stikine Bill joined Heney and Hawkins and many of the old White Pass staff, to build the 131-mile Copper River and Northwestern Railroad from Cordova to Chitina, Alaska, and a 65-mile branch from Chitina to the famous Kennicott copper mine. Eventually he returned to North Anson, Maine, where he purchased an apple orchard, and where he lived until his death on September 29th, 1926.

Michael J. Heney, again the contractor for the Copper River and Northwestern, was in the wreck of the *Ohio* on the Alaska Coast in 1910, and was rescued from the icy waters of the North Pacific, from which hardship he never recovered. He passed away in San Francisco, in 1910.

Heney was known by his loyal host of workers as the "Irish Prince." He was one of those old time contractors who hitched his wagon to a star—the fulfilment of his contract. Come Hell or high water he pushed his railway's tortuous path through the wilderness by every adroit means. He was fair and just to his men, like Stikine Bill, tough but kind, and the men broke their backs for him, on the pick and shovel jobs.

Space permits a mere mention of the famous character known as Soapy Smith insofar as he affected the operations of railway construction. In brief, Jefferson Randolph Smith was the leader of an organized gang of 300 men in Skagway, Alaska, which included most of the crooks of the west. This infamous organization was known as "The Law and Order Society" and it lived out its short term because its leader was in cahoots with an official at Skagway and did not molest the permanent residents. They preyed upon the miners returning from the Klondike and upon the newcomers arriving from the ocean steamers. When Samuel H. Graves, first president of the White Pass, arrived in Skagway on his second trip, July 2nd, 1898, he declined a courteous invitation from "Soapy" to head the Fourth of July parade with him. On July 6th "Soapy's" men robbed a young miner of \$3,000 in gold. Citizens called a meeting

and organized a "Merchant's Committee" (vigilante) making Mr. Graves the chairman.

They gave "Soapy" 24 hours to return the gold and he did not comply. On July 8th "Soapy" Smith was dead and the local jails were jammed with his men. On that day Smith attempted to crash a meeting of the "Committee" on the Skagway dock, but ran afoul of their guard, Frank H. Reid. Both men shot at the same moment. Smith fell dead and Reid was mortally wounded.

The interference of the Soapy Smith gang with railroad construction was mostly of the nuisance type, such as starting shell games along the trail, and attempts to operate liquor and gambling dives near the camps. M. J. Heney had one strict and simple rule, "No Liquor Allowed in Camp." One of "Soapy's" men set up such a tent "dive" near Camp 3, Rocky Point. Heney ordered him off. He refused, stating he had as good a right as Heney to be there, which perhaps he did. However, Heney was never a man to split straws over technical rights. He sent for Foy, the camp foreman, and pointing to a big overhanging cliff just above the drinking den, told Foy in the hearing of the owner, "That rock has got to be out of there by five tomorrow morning—not a minute later, mind."

Early next morning Foy sent a rock gang to place a few sticks of dynamite in the rock cliff. They reported all ready at ten minutes to five. At five minutes to five Foy sent a man to the tent to rouse its occupant. He refused, with picturesque language, to get up so early. Then Foy went himself and said: "In one minute by this watch I will give the order to touch off the time fuse. It will burn for one minute and then that rock will arrive here or hereabouts." The man in bed told Foy where to go. Foy replied, "I'm too busy to go this morning but *you* will unless you jump lively—FIRE!" Foy used the remaining sixty seconds to retire behind a projecting cliff, where he was joined in ten seconds by the tent owner in his underwear, and together they witnessed the blast and the demolition of tent and liquor stock. Foy then reported to Heney, "That rock is down, sir."

"Where is the man?" asked Heney.

"The last I saw of him he was high-tailing down the trail in his underwear, cursing."

The North West Mounted Police were sufficiently alerted by the lack of law and order in Skagway to post a Maxim Nordenfeldt machine gun at the heads of both Chilcoot and White Passes, but they were never used. One of these guns reposes in the museum of the Yukon Historical Society at Whitehorse.

Statistics are seldom interesting so they will be confined to a few essentials. The railway has passed through years of heavy traffic and years of depression. Movement of freight has always been the main source of revenue, augmented by heavy tourist travel in the summer months. In the peak passenger year of 1927, the railroad carried 22,667 passengers. Daily trains are operated during the summer and most days in the winter.

In the early months of 1942 plans for the building of the Alaska Highway were under way. An agreement was



All that is left of the Skagway wharf where so many thousands of gold seekers landed in the hope of making their fortunes, and later left for the south.
Rosemary Gilliat

entered into between the Railway Company and the U.S. Army, whereby the Army would take over the operation of the railway from Oct. 1, 1942 to April 30th, 1946, using the railway's existing personnel and equipment but augmenting them with U.S. troops and additional equipment gathered from all the narrow gauge railways in America. At one time during this period 1600 U.S. Army personnel were working on the railroad.

From January 1st, 1942 to April 30, 1946, a total of 564,446 tons was handled, which included commercial freight and Army supplies and equipment. The peak month was August, 1943, when a total of 47,506 tons was moved. In one day a record movement of 2,085 tons was attained.

Through the years, from the passenger standpoint, this railway has enjoyed a wonderful reputation. The 67 miles

between Skagway and Carcross has been acclaimed the most scenic in America.

The White Pass & Yukon Route is now a Canadian company, known as The White Pass and Yukon Corporation, Limited. Its directors are prominent and successful business men of Canada, and they are working on a definite progressive plan of modernization of the railroad. New diesel engines are under construction; new ties and rails are being installed; buildings, and equipment are being renewed and modernized.

Immense bodies of ore in the Yukon and northern British Columbia are being investigated; gold, lead, zinc, nickel, cobalt, asbestos, copper, tungsten and antimony, to mention a few. Tremendous hydro developments are in the offing. The future of the Yukon is a bright one and the railroad will assist this march of progress in every way.*