

# YUKON MAIL SERVICE IN THE EARLY DAYS

When Pioneers Were Fortunate In Receiving Letters Once a Year—Many Failures of Contractors to Deliver—Terrible Experiences of Indian Jimmy Jackson in '95-'96—"Casey" Moran Brings First Mail to Dawson—Hardships of T. C. Healy and Others Who Attempted to Deliver Mail to Eagle and Circle City—Effective Service, all Things Considered, by Police In '98—C. D. Co. on Upper and Ben Downing on Lower Yukon—Past and Present.

She was a pretty girl with cheeks of the rosiest hue made so by the continual kissing of the keel, nipping air, her eyes danced and sparkled, about her hair that escaped from beneath a becoming sealskin cap there was a silver tinge of frost, and as she stood in front of one of the general delivery wickets at the postoffice she tapped her foot impatiently at being kept waiting by the clerk for even a fraction of a minute. Presently he arrived and from the part he took in the colloquy which ensued it was easy to see he had played the same character in the same scene probably a hundred times the same day.

"When did the last mail arrive?" she asked.

"Wednesday evening."

"When will the next one be in?"

"Not before tomorrow."

And she turned away to a companion with a sublime look of resignation, murmuring about the awfulness of being compelled to live in a community that afforded but two mails a week. One who has been a resident of Alaska and the Yukon for the past eight years and who knows what it is to wait six months for a letter from the outside and then be only too happy to pay a dollar for it, overheard the conversation and witnessed the byplay incidental thereto, and never before was the contrast in the mail service of years ago and that of the present day brought so forcibly to his mind. There is not one, but many now resident in the Klondike who will remember the eagerness with which the arrival of mail was looked forward to in the spring of years gone by when the first bunch of cheechacos generally accompanied by a few returning sourdoughs arrived, following but a day or two behind the ice. In those days, before the world ever knew of the existence of such a stream as the Klondike, and, indeed, there were few of the Yukon miners any wiser, for the Klondike was on the wrong side of the river to carry any gold and it was never given a thought. Sixty-mile, Fortymile and Birch creek were all on the other side and with the exception of a few bar diggings on the Stewart they were the only streams known to contain placer deposits. In those days the postoffice was in one of the company stores and the agent at the post was likewise the postmaster. Incoming voyagers with mail left their letters at the store and sometimes they were received, but more often they were not, being finally worn out by the repeated handling of those who longed for the letters that never came. In those days the first question asked a newcomer as he pulled his boat up on the beach at Fortymile was, "Did you bring any mail?" and the next one was "Have you any late papers?" and "Who is president now?" Juneau was the last postoffice passed at which mail could be received and it was the custom then to have letters directed there and leave an order with some friend to forward any that might arrive by any person who might be coming inside. Mail directed to Fortymile or Circle City that arrived at Juneau in the fall was held until some responsible person volunteered to take it inside. If none appeared it was sent around by St. Michael the following summer and would generally arrive at its destination within a year after it was posted.

In '93 through the influence of the old A. C. Co. the United States was induced to let a star route contract for the delivery of mail between Juneau and Fortymile which upon the strike being made on Birch creek and the establishment of Circle City was extended the following year to that point. True to the traditions of the past the contract was let to a professional star router who knew of Alaska only as a place in the far north, it was taken at a figure for a single trip one way and was never fulfilled. In '94 and '95 similar conditions existed. Early in '96 a contract was made with Hugh Day and Jack Carr to make four round trips between Juneau and Circle City and it was the only contract of that nature made in an early day that was

faithfully carried out. Both were old timers in Alaska, insured to all manner of hardships, could travel days on a piece of dried salmon and it was said of the former that he could make a poleing boat climb a tree. They received \$1200 for each round trip, but made no money at that. During the summer of '96 a Chicago company of which W. A. Beddoe was the manager secured a contract from the United States government. Mr. Beddoe accompanied the first mail inside in person, passing the spot where Dawson now stands in August, '96. His agents at Juneau dispatched another later in the season and that was the last until the following summer.

There was other mail received and dispatched, however, but it was entirely by private parties and at the currently accepted rate of one dollar per letter. It was imperative that the company posts send out requisitions over the ice for goods needed the following season and this was a mission that for several years was entrusted to Joe Cooper. He would leave Fortymile shortly after the first of the year and in addition to the

his party as told by him on his return to Juneau the following April were so frightful as to be well-nigh incredible. After untold hardships they succeeded in reaching the Indian camps on Taku arm. Here Jackson determined to wait a day or two and rest and have some new moccasins made. The white men had been a drawback to the Indians, not being able to travel as fast as they, and in order to be as little hindrance as possible they consented to go on and not lose any time. They were shown the direction to take and told to turn to the left when a certain outlet of the lake was reached. The next day Jackson and his companions started out and upon arriving at the place where the white men should have turned off it was seen they had not followed the directions given them. The Indians continued on and that was the last they ever saw of Hodges the late T. C. Healy with his friend learned the white men had discovered their footprints to the Indian camp, where they bought and traded for all the provisions they could get and in

that did not contribute generously to him, who had bravely brought their mail in in spite of vicissitudes frightful to contemplate. Jackson returned to Juneau in April, his face showing the effects of the awful experiences he had undergone, there being scarcely a spot anywhere on it that had not been deeply frozen. That is one of the stories of early mail days when men considered themselves fortunate to get letters once a year.

Another experience was once had by the late T. C. Healy with his friend Fred Gasch, formerly of Seattle. They left Juneau with a bag of mail in February, '96. While crossing the Chilkoot pass a storm so severe was encountered they were obliged to turn back to Dyea, caching the mail in a ledge of rocks where they thought it could easily be found. Several days later when the storm had abated they again were on the summit, but so greatly had the drifting snow changed the appearance of the surroundings that they were unable to find the cached bag, and though several days were spent in the search it had to be given up as lost. In the summer the

carriers of the new strike on the Klondike and as Joe Ladue and Theo. Anderson would be found here five letters were taken out for the former and two for the latter. The bag was again sealed up with the determination not to open it again until Fortymile was reached. The next day, October 9, 1896, "Casey" tied up his little craft near the slough behind the mouth of the Klondike river, found Ladue and Anderson and in giving them their letters made the first delivery of mail in Dawson. They found others here at the time, among them a Mrs. Ferguson, the first white woman to arrive at the new camp. She begged piteously to be given her mail, with tears streaming down her face declaring she had not heard from her home in over a year, and it was in vain that the mail carriers pointed out the lateness of the season (the ice was already running thick) and the necessity of their reaching Circle City before the river closed. Woman's tears proved irresistible and gain was the bag opened.

At Fortymile the following day 140

from Circle over the ice and Carr arrived he left 176 between "Casey's" charge, who volunteered to deliver them up the creeks. When the river opened that year "Casey" and his memorable boat ride from Dawson to Circle in company with his own thoughts and a load of mail being marooned by some friends he thought it a good joke, but he was destined to play still another part in the postal department. Shortly after his arrival in Circle he was named postal clerk, was placed in charge of the Dawson mail that had been accumulated in Circle and accompanied with it on the first up-river trip to the scene of the new strike. In arriving here the A. C. Co. placed a corner in their store where the dry goods department stands and there was opened Dawson's first postoffice with "Casey" an American, as postmaster. He remained in that position until receiving his remuneration from Captain Hansen of the A. C. Co., being relieved by Captain Dyer, the N.W.M.P., who became the recognized postmaster and was assisted by Constable Carter.

During the remainder of the summer of '97 and the following year the only mail received in Dawson was that which found its way to private parties. Richard of the United States contract from Juneau to Circle, but under it the agents of the Yukon fared no better than under previous contracts. The summer of '98 saw but a change, the Dominion government being too busy making new laws figuring up the prospective value of their newly-found Eldorado. From arriving from Skagway, the Sheep Camp often brought quantities of letters which had accumulated at those points for the gnats who had passed, on the river. The front of many shops tents along First avenue were found adorned with the legend "mail here." If you were expecting mail and inquired for them of the police in charge it was a chance whether you received any. And if you were fortunate as to find some you were expected to pay one dollar each for their delivery. Such remuneration, however, did not last long. The police swooped down upon the self appointed postmasters and confiscated their stock of letters, so that such action "condemned with Majesty's mail service." Late in the summer of '98 a postoffice was opened in the log building which stood next door to the Green the clerks consisting of members of the police force. On the day that fall that mail arrived a large people would be found standing on street two and three blocks waiting for their turn to get mail. Ladies were privileged to enter side door without standing in line and many of them for a number of long, tedious wait.

In October, '98, Mr. J. J. the present postmaster, arrived took charge of postal affairs, coming proved a God-send to the people of Dawson, and after much chaos had order restored in the old Administration building and for the first time the postoffice worthy of the name moved to the new postoffice on December 1, 1900.

During the winter of '98 the had charge of the mail and his praise cannot be given for their valiant efforts. Through bitter cold and blinding snow they pushed on with their bags of letters so eagerly awaited, unrewarded and conscious only of their own duty. With the opening of navigation in '99 the government mail contract to the Development Company and the first time in the history of the mail matter was received and patched with some degree of regularity. The winter of '99 days were played in the service until following winter the experiment using horses was tried, but were made in order to save



DANGERS OF ICE TRAVEL.

company mail would take letters for any others at the usual rate. It was necessary to carry a camp outfit, 30 days' grub and sufficient dog feed to last the entire trip, as there were no posts or road houses between Fortymile and Dyea except at Sixty-mile and Pelly river and they were always so short on provisions they were never known to have anything for sale. At the Tagish houses one might find some salmon, but the chances were against it. Early in the winter of '95 Jimmy Jackson, an Indian living in Juneau, was commissioned by the A. C. Co. to bring in the company mail and any other letters that might be on hand at the time of his departure he on hand in the Juneau postoffice. He left Juneau in December accompanied by his half-breed nephew Albert, a Chilkat Indian named Bob and two white men by name of Hodges and McNelis, the former being a printer who for some time had worked on one of the Juneau papers. The winter of '95 was the most bitter and fearful ever known on the southeastern coast of Alaska and Jackson, fearing the storms of Chilkoot pass, determined to cross the coast range by way of the Taku, and thus fall in with some Indians he knew to be camped on the Taku arm of Tagish lake. The experiences of Jackson and

spite of the Indians' warnings again started out to follow Jackson's trail. They were never seen again until the Aukin strike in '98 when some prospectors found the grinning skeleton of ore, the bones gnawed bare by the wolves, identification being made by a watch picked up near by. Of the other not a trace was ever had. The troubles of Jackson and his fellow Indians had only begun. They had to break trail constantly, and the storms and cold were almost unbearable. Slow progress was made; their dogs began to give out and the men themselves were reduced to short rations. Had it not been for the Indians meeting Bob Inley at the foot of Lake Lebarge on his way outside it is doubtful if they would ever have reached Fortymile. At that time their dogs were all dead, the last one to give up having been eaten, and they only had a part of one ham and less than two pounds of flour left, and were pulling their sled themselves. Inley divided his grub with them and they eventually reached Fortymile, where Jackson was made quite a hero of. After he had delivered the mail and told his story one of the miners who had received his first news from home in over a year passed a tin cup around among the crowd assembled and there was not a poke

missing bag was found by Henry Hyde, who brought it in to Fortymile, and in that bag were the identical Y.O.O.P. pins now being worn by the members of the order, they having been made by Valentine, the Juneau jeweler.

The distinction of being the first to deliver mail to the now thriving city of Dawson belongs to no less a personage than "Casey" Moran, now on the staff of the Morning Sun. "Casey" and Billy Ash left Juneau about September 10, '96. At Linderman they picked up the Beddoe mail, were fortunate in securing a boat which had just landed some outward bound Yukoners and got away from Bennett September 20. The bag of mail contained 1400 letters and by the time they reached Stewart it was a sorry-looking sight. Their boat leaked so that there was constantly about four inches of water in the bottom, it rained until they were soaked through and through, so when Stewart was reached it being a bright day they decided to open the bag and dry the contents in the sun. "Casey" also played the postmaster, delivering three letters at Stewart for people who happened to be there. The bag was again opened at Sixty-mile and three letters were left for Arthur Harper, then there. He told the mail

letters were left with George Baker, then agent for the A. C. Co. at that point, who received for them in the name of Jack McQuester. "Casey" and Ash had also insisted upon and obtained receipts from every other person to whom they had delivered mail en route. Circle City was reached October 16, the river at the time being nearly bankful of slush ice. In making his report to the postal authorities at Portland, Oregon, of the arrival of the mail, Jack McQuester recounted with considerable pride the care "Casey" and Ash had given it, of them having taken it out of the bag at Stewart in order to dry the letters, and the delivery of a number en route. The reply came in due time and in it the officious, hair-brained inspector expressed the regret that the distance of Circle City from his office alone prevented the vigorous prosecution of the carriers for having dared open the mail bag while in transit.

The next mail to arrive down the river was brought over the ice by Hugh Day, but unlike his predecessors he did not stop at Dawson, but proceeded direct to Circle City. Another mail arrived in April in care of Jack Carr. "Casey" in the meantime, attracted by the news of the new strike, had returned to Dawson

(Continued on page 7.)

Mrs. G. best man wife says he never slightest. Mrs. S. must be great nic

"Why do on calling for a woman. Really who can't say why no as eleva

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