

TRAVELING IN YUKON ICE

Sidney Church Vividly Describes Its Terrors.

The Trip From Bennett to Dawson in the Late Season One Never Forgotten.

From Wednesday's Daily

As the Yukon river is ice bound for nearly eight months of the year, the short season of navigation is marked by the great activity of the shippers. Tempted by the prospects of the neat fortune afforded by a cargo of goods landed in Dawson in the right condition of the market, a small army of merchants and small traders make annual attempts to guess the shortages of the winter market, and what is more difficult, to land the cargo safely in Dawson. To those whom experience has taught the philosophy of bribing steamship and railway officials to gain precedence for their freight, and whom fortune has endowed with the means to do so, the task is comparatively easy, but those who have yet to learn, usually spend the precious months awaiting the pleasure of transportation companies to move their goods, and find themselves about the month of September at the head of Lake Bennett with the problem of the Yukon before them.

At this time the preceding dry months have so lowered the water that only the lightest draft boats are able to get over the sand bars, and with their competitors thus disabled, the owners raise their freight rates to an abnormal figure, but are unable to handle the vast quantity of freight which anxious shippers wish to get to the Dawson market while still the water flows. Not only belated traders, but claim owners with shipments of machinery, and large transportation companies, unable by the disabling of their large boats to deliver contracted freight, have freight piled in the warehouses, or this overflowing, ranged in piles along the beach. Under these circumstances their only chance is to build scows, and trust the precious cargo for its 600-mile journey to a haphazard crew.

The sawmill at Lake Bennett is run to its full capacity to furnish scow lumber and its owners employ every carpenter obtainable that they may sell the finished scows to shippers. For a month preceding the close of navigation the small town booms. The hotels are crowded and people are camping on the beach. The price of labor rises from \$3 to \$8 or \$10 a day. Scows worth \$150 are sought for at \$500 to \$800. The beach is lined for half a mile with scow builders, and the rasping of their saws, and the merry "clink," "clink" of the calkers mark the activity of the place from dawn to darkness. Even at night by the aid of lanterns, the shippers, who seem never to sleep, are engaged in sorting freight on the beach and transferring it to scows. Ever and anon is heard the heavy "swish" as a newly finished scow is launched. Sails are being trimmed preparatory to starting off down the lake with the first favorable breeze, and from the sawmill across the lake scows are being continually brought over to be loaded from the warehouses.

The scows are usually 12 to 14 feet wide and 40 feet long, with straight sides and ends, and are fitted on bow and stern with long "sweeps" which are used as oars give lateral motion. There is also a mast rigged forward to which is hung a square sail for service in crossing the lakes.

There is great difficulty in securing experienced river men for this trip, as there are hundreds of scows and each requires a crew of at least four.

"Good morning! Would you gentlemen like to go down river?" a scow owner might ask of two young men who would be idly watching the loading.

"Oh, I don't know," one would answer. "We have just come in from Atlin and were going down to Seattle. What do you pay?"

"Two dollars a day and board until you reach Dawson. Better decide to go down. There is plenty of work going on down there and wages are high."

"What do you say?" one would ask the other.

"Well, I promised my mother I would go out this fall. Still I hate to go home broke. Suppose we chance another year on Dawson?"

"Done!" and they would shake hands to bind the agreement. "When do you leave?" to the scow man.

"We are ready to go now. We have a favorable wind and were only waiting for two more men."

"We'll have to go up to the bunk

house and get our blankets, but we'll be back in 10 or 15 minutes." And with crushed hopes given a new lease of life, they would start briskly towards the town. In an hour their white sails would have disappeared around the point in the lake.

Perhaps conditions were favorable and they were not blown against the precipitous south bank and wrecked when but one mile out. Perhaps they observed instructions to keep close to the right bank at Windy Arm, and were not blown to the north bank and wrecked on the long beach. Perhaps they survived the rushing turmoil of Miles Canyon, avoided the menacing rocks which fill the channel of Squaw and Whitehorse rapids, and kept clear of the deceptive, sucking side currents and whirlpools which lead to death. Perhaps fortune was kind and they were not wind bound on Lake Lebarge, nor wrecked by storms on its treacherous water. Perhaps they were not carried by the swift current on any of the wreck-marked rocks of Thirtymile river. Perhaps, like the pillar of cloud of scriptures, some unseen finger marked out the clear channel that they were not hopelessly grounded on one of the thousand sand bars which are a constant menace to navigators from Five Fingers to the mouth of the Yukon. Perhaps—but it is not likely—they reached Dawson City. And considering that long experience in river work is necessary to properly "read" water the wonder is, not that so many are wrecked, but that any reach their destination.

Even those who are fortunate enough to land their cargo safely must sell at a high price to come out even, for since they left Seattle there has been a continual expense bribing steamboat agents, wharfingers, railroad officials, paying inflated prices for scows, the wages of the crew, the charges of the Whitehorse pilot, and the excessive charges for towing across lakes in case of adverse winds. All these have raised the price of the goods to an alarming extent, and except in cases where shippers guess the market shrewdly, their ventures are often losing ones.

But the natural dangers of the river are increased fourfold by the float ice, which early in October fill the river, becoming gradually heavier until finally it jams and freezes solid. This ice is formed partly in the lakes at the head of rivers, and being broken up by the winds is carried down by the current. But the most serious element to contend with is known as "anchor ice," which is not formed on the surface but on the bottoms of the rivers. This is peculiar to the north. There are many theories regarding its formation, but one of the most reasonable is that the water in swift rivers reaches a temperature considerably below the freezing point before it actually freezes. On the bottom where there are little dips, the water is necessarily quiet and ice forms around the stones. As it gradually increases in size, the cake with small stones incrusts in the bottom rises to the surface. When these dirty ice cakes are seen constantly bobbing to the surface the hardy Yukon pioneer, or "sour dough," as he is popularly known, will tell you that in a very few days the river will be closed.

A party who left Bennett lake last fall gave the following account of their trouble with the ice:

"On the 7th of October we left Lake Bennett with two scows loaded with provisions and a crew of eight men. Until we reached Five Fingers, good fortune was with us. From this point we had more or less trouble with bars, but whenever we struck these by jumping into the ice cold water we were able to swing the scow into the current again. Others were not so fortunate, for as we proceeded, the bars became more and more dotted with stranded scows, and we learned that many of them had been for days helpless and for a month on the way.

When we reached Fort Selkirk, where the long, high, black walls mark the mouth of the Pelly, we saw on the other side of the broad river a continuous, rushing ribbon of white and knew that the ice from Pelly lakes had broken loose and was being belched to the full capacity of that river into the Yukon before us.

To prevent the possibility of our being separated—for we had but one cooking outfit—we lashed the two scows together side by side, and as we came to where this belt of ice gradually spread itself over the surface of the entire river we worked our scows towards its center in order to prevent our being crowded too close to shore. This ice, on account of much crushing, was at first almost as soft as snow, but as the temperature began to fall below the zero point it formed in hard, solid masses, some of them an acre in extent. As we would come to a narrow place in the river the ice would jam into a compact, grinding mass in which our scows

were in danger of being crushed. As we would reach swifter water it would break into sections, leaving narrow channels through which we were occasionally able to bring our scows nearer the center of the river. The sand bars became again a matter of anxiety as, held prisoners in the ice, we no longer had the chance of avoiding them. This condition in a measure favored us, as the sand bars were clearly marked ahead by the ice cakes sticking fast and gradually forming a wedge which, unless we struck it fair, would sheer the cake surrounding our scows. When the afternoon wore on and we wished to tie up we would take advantage of every opening in the ice to work shoreward and endeavor to reach some sheltered piece of water behind a point. In the morning we would have to cut our scows off the shore ice which would form around us during the night.

"In this way we managed to reach Steamboat slough, 100 miles from Dawson. Here we were forced into the wrong channel. We could see by the ice that was lodging at points in the river that the water was shallow, but just as we were thinking ourselves safe, our hearts sank as we felt the scows grating on the gravel bottom. It was in vain that we threw our weight on poles and tried to force a passage to the deep water beyond. The grinding increased, the scow swung broadside to the current and scooping up a wall of gravel in front, stopped dead, and we were grounded. It did not improve our spirits to see another scow at that moment pass safely by on the port side. By lightening from one scow to the other, we managed to get one free and into deep water, but before we could transfer the cargo and lighten the other, darkness closed in. Here we were forced to spend the night with one scow swinging in the swirling water by a stout line made fast to the grounded scow. This was receiving the shock of a continuous stream of rushing ice cakes. The weather was bitterly cold but we spread our blankets on the deck head. All the long, dark night the grinding noise kept up, and as an ice floe of huger proportions than its fellows crashed into our sides, the scow trembled, and we started from a fitful doze with the conviction that we were moving over the bar. But a glance at the outline of the trees against the dull sky dispelled the illusion. As morning broke we found that the ice had crushed a hole in the side below the water line, and it would be impossible to proceed with that scow. We therefore cast off and proceeded with the other.

"A short way farther we were hailed from the bank by a member of the Northwest Mounted Police force, who informed us that a big jam had formed there, and had broken but an hour before, but that it would undoubtedly form again a short distance below; that it would be impossible for us to reach Dawson, and advised us to make shore at once. This was impossible, as we were carried helplessly between the big walls of piled ice, where the jam had occurred such a short time before. The policeman followed along the bank for a time to render assistance, but finally gave up. One of our men (he claimed the distinction of being a "sour dough") now regaled us on the danger of ice jams. He said that once formed the ice from above still forged forward with irresistible force, piling higher and higher, and crushing like an egg shell even the strongest craft. But no jams appeared and our course became easier. The smaller channels were now choked with ice, the only channel open was deep, and through this the ice crushed its way in a slow-moving, uniform belt. Fast imbedded in the middle of this belt was our helpless scow. Aside from this narrow course, the surface of the river was a white, immovable ice-field.

"In this condition we traveled all day, sometimes touching the edge of immense whirlpools, or narrowly escaping huge rocks which tore the ice belt as we passed. Again in sharp bends of the river, where it seemed the rushing current would dash against the bank, the ice acted as a cushion and prevented a collision. At nightfall we passed the mouth of Indian river, but 28 miles from Dawson, and as we were fast prisoners in the ice, we expected to be carried past Dawson about midnight and down the Yukon until chance threw us on a bar or in an ice jam.

About 10 o'clock we heard an unusual grinding about us, and sounding with a pole, we made the astonishing discovery that we were standing still. In a few moments with a great urging of the ice we moved again slightly, then stopped. Then out in the darkness we could hear a great rushing of water. Then all was still, and the Yukon river showed no further signs of life until the 7th day of the following May.

"The next day we walked ashore on

the ice, and as the river showed no signs of breaking, packed our blankets on our backs and broke trail to Dawson, 15 miles distant, arriving on October 27th or just 20 days since our start from Bennett.

"What became of our abandoned scow? It seems when the company sent back to have it looked after, they found that a jam had formed above it, and this breaking, the rush of ice and water had ground it to pieces and the scow and cargo are now on the bottom of the Yukon."

In this way is nearly a million dollars' worth of merchandise lost every fall on the Yukon, or is stranded so far back that it would cost more than the value of the goods to have them freighted in over the ice.

Nor can the loss be figured in terms of dollars and cents if human life is an asset, for "Drowned in the rapids," "Lost through the ice" and "Frozen to death on the trail" formed many a headline in Dawson City's press last fall, and the sufferings and weariness of those who stranded far above are compelled to make their best way over an almost impassable trail and facing at times the bitterly cold Arctic wind, can never be described. — Sidney Church.

At the present rate of consumption, the white fish Pacific Cold Storage Co. brought in for the winter season will all be gone long before Easter.

Memorandum books, 1901 diaries, all kinds, at Zaccarelli's.

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Notice.

NOTICE is hereby given that the following survey, notice of which is published below, has been approved by Wm. Ogilvie, Commissioner of the Yukon Territory, and unless protested within three months from the date of first publication of such approval in the Klondike Nugget newspaper, the boundaries of property as established by said survey shall constitute the true and unalterable boundaries of such property by virtue of an order in council passed at Ottawa the 2nd day of March, 1900.

CREEK CLAIMS No. 32, 36a, 37 and 38 Gold Run creek and creek claim No. 2 on a tributary at 36 Gold Run creek, in the Dominion mining division of the Dawson mining district, a plan of which is deposited in the Gold Commissioner's office at Dawson, Y. T. under No. 40 by T. D. Green, D. L. S. First published February 6th, 1901.

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SOCIETIES.

THE REGULAR COMMUNICATION of Yukon Lodge, (U. D.) A. F. & A. M., will be held at Masonic hall, Mission street, monthly, Thursday on or before full moon at 8:00 p. m. C. H. Wells, W. M. J. A. Donald, Sec'y

Bids Wanted.

Tenders will be received by the undersigned until 12 o'clock (noon) on Tuesday, February 19, for the purchase of the stock of men's furnishings belonging to the estate of Abraham Alton, deceased. Stock may be inspected on application to

G. T. CLEMENT, Acting Public Administrator, Old P. O. Building.

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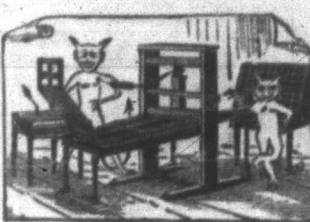
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