

Celtic Guide

Volume 1, Issue 2 - February 2012

INSIDE

- Letters *to* and *from* the editor
- Celts of the Great White North
- *Iditarod* - The Scots connection
- . . . and much more!!

NEXT MONTH:

Saint Patrick
with a guest author

The Celtic Cross
with a guest author



From the Editor

Hello again!

Appearing on the following page are some encouraging e-mails we've received since our first issue of Celtic Guide.

I have visions of this online magazine becoming much like the old Harper's Magazine, with hopefully some great storytelling – but, in this case, all of it of Celtic interest.

Along with these messages, I have received some great offers of help. This issue will feature my first contributing authors.

With much of the Northern Hemisphere experiencing cold weather and snow, what better time to celebrate the Celtic contribution to the opening of the Great White North, particularly the Yukon River Valley?

This issue is dedicated to this major pioneering effort undertaken by many men of Scottish and Irish heritage. By the time you finish this edition of Celtic Guide it should be obvious that this wild region of North America owes much of its development to people of Celtic blood, some even born in these ancient countries, some born in Nova Scotia, and others born in Canada and the United States, of Celtic families.

The Yukon River Valley is still, today, one of the last great wildernesses where human endurance is pushed to the limits in the search of gold, game or even just solitude. This rugged country, reminiscent of the Highlands and islands of Scotland and Ireland, added the additional factor of well-below freezing winter temperatures and vast distances between outposts.

Still the Celt survived!

We are privileged to have some of the best Yukon River historians alive to help us as we wander down this trail. Rod Perry has been part of the history of the Iditarod since the very first race, forty years ago. He offers a story on a Scot who coined the name Iditarod. Ed Jones and his wife Star have been premier historians for both Alaska and Yukon, following in the footsteps of one of their mentors, Pierre Berton, perhaps the greatest historian ever, concerning the Great White North. They have provided me with Yukon River history for the last six years and introduced me to many Alaskan/Yukon historians along the way.

There are other great surprises awaiting the reader, so enough of my rambling. It's time to mush down the trail of our second issue of Celtic Guide, with a short detour, here or there. I sincerely hope you enjoy our efforts.

Jim McQuiston, Editor & Publisher

We've got . . .

Wow, this is so impressive! I just took a quick look and will peruse it more thoroughly later. I'm sure my mom and dad will like to see it so I'll forward it to them. Congratulations!

*Ellen,
Pennsylvania*

I finally managed to have a look at the Newsletter. I like it! I'll have to think about how we can contribute.

*Albert,
Aberdeen, Scotland*

Thank you so much for your magazine!! I look forward to reading more. I love the Celtic culture that I evolved from and I enjoy reading all about "us."

*Laurie,
Michigan*

Bravo! Thank you. I looked it over and can't wait to read the whole thing! Posted a link on my Facebook page, which my large Irish family is all on, also! Very nice.

*Jessica,
New York*

Big congrats on Celtic Guide, and I've only perused it thru once, so far. I'll be taking more time with it over this weekend. I'm confident it can anticipate a good, full life ahead. I'll certainly be doing my part to get the word out! I'm excited about it, and for you!

*Cass,
Vermont*

Can't wait to check it out!

*Erin,
State of New York*



I have just read your first issue of the Celtic Guide and enjoyed it a great deal. I especially liked the piece about the fiddle. There was an old one that my Granddad owned but sadly it has been lost. My youngest son is interested in bagpipes, and music in general, so I passed the article along to him. I wish you great success.

*Faye,
Oklahoma*

Jim you're on the ball my friend.

*Jeff,
Pennsylvania*

VERY, VERY good !!!! Loved it !!!

*Mary,
Georgia*

My hat is off to you Jim. Great read.

*David,
State of Washington*

Hi Jim. A cousin, found through Ancestry, sent me your new newsletter. We're Scotch-Irish so I'm looking forward to reading it each month.

*Karen,
Indiana*

Music, music, music . . .

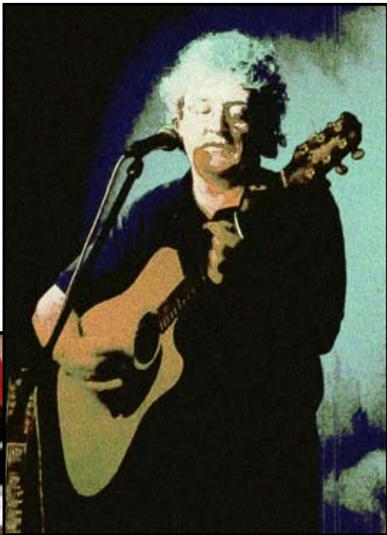
Before we head off into the Celtic history of Alaska and the Yukon Territory, I thought I'd spend a moment on my other great Celtic love - music!

In January, your Celtic Guide made two road trips to spend some long weekends in both Washington, DC, and Columbus, OH.

In Washington we ran into the oldest Irish Catholic church in that city - St. Patrick's – a story that will be told in the March issue of the Guide.

We also visited the number one Irish pub in Washington - *The Dubliner*. This venue provides authentic Celtic music typically every day of the week, and has for years.

We were lucky to hear Brian Gaffney perform. Gaffney was born in Tralee, County Kerry, Ireland, and has been playing music in pubs since the age of 13. Though he has performed along with many other musicians, he spends some of his time on stage as a solo singer and guitarist.



Here are a couple of our special kind of drawings - below is shown the interior of The Dubliner Pub in Washington, DC, along with a shot of Celtic musician Brian Gaffney, from County Kerry, one of the many “regulars” who perform at this great meeting place.

Gaffney's web site is at: <http://www.briangaffney.com/>

The Dubliner can be found at: <http://dublinerdc.com/>



Meanwhile, over in Columbus, OH, we found that thousands of Irish refugees settled there to escape the “Great Hunger” of their homeland, and to find personal and religious freedom. They’ve played an important part in that town’s history ever since.

The Claddagh Pub, which is located in downtown Columbus, typically holds music sessions each Sunday. We joined in with some of the best the area has to offer. We also met a wonderful Irish gentleman by the name of Gary, who had only been in America four days. He was hired by the Claddagh to work at several of their pubs. He’s been doing this type of work since he was 16, back in Dublin, Ireland.



Below is a drawing of part of the interior of the Claddagh Pub in Columbus, OH, plus a sketch of the sessions held there Sunday, January 14, 2012. The gentleman playing the flute is Brian McCoy, a member of the Kells Band and one of the best Celtic flute players around. The lady in the background, on guitar, is his wife, Kim – another excellent Celtic musician. Kim performed with the great Aoife Clancy during the summer of 2011. Brian has performed with the Makem Brothers, with Gaelic Storm, and others.

The Kells Band can be found at: www.thekells.org/

The Claddagh at: <http://www.claddaghirishpubs.com/>



Celts of the Great White North

Written by Jim McQuiston, with assistance from Ed and Star Jones

My interest in the “taming” of what might still be one of the world’s last frontiers – Alaska and Yukon – began when I first realized that one of my shirt tail relatives is actually the only man ever to be named Father of Alaska and Father of the Yukon. He is highly honored by many Yukon River historians and, although his tale is very interesting, I mention him here mostly as a thread to connect many other Scots and Irish adventurers (and a few of Scandinavian blood) who entered this forbidding land years before the great Klondike gold strike – a strike which electrified the world, and fed Jack London, Pierre Berton, and Robert Service with fodder for their stories, histories and poems about this rugged land and its equally rugged people.

On my last night along the Yukon, in August of 2007, I sat on a back porch that formed one corner of a square of homes that included, on the next corner, (the partly-Scottish) Jack London’s miner cabin, rescued from the wilds by the Norse-blooded Dick North. The next corner was formed by Robert Service’s Dawson homestead. Though born in northern England, this famous Yukon poet spent most of his time in the old country living in Glasgow, Scotland, and even worked for the Bank of Scotland, before coming to North America. The final corner was established by the boyhood home of Gold Rush historian Pierre Berton. While Berton’s father was French, his mother, with the maiden name of Thompson, was of Scottish stock.

Sitting with me, that night, was John Gould, the historian of the Yukon Order of Pioneers, whose ancient Scottish name

was originally Guild. Also present were my Yukon mentors Ed and Star Jones – Ed being of a mix of Celtic stocks and actually having spoken the Welsh language as a youth. Ed and Star are authors of the book *All That Glitters* (available on Amazon), plus some significant reports for the Alaskan and Yukon governments and for fellow historians.

I was also lucky to meet Jim Archibald, one of the premier independent miners of the Klondike region, today. The Scots-blooded Archibald removed any doubt I might have about my relative’s significance when he stated, “Dawson wouldn’t be half the town it is today without Jack McQuesten. I feel just as indebted to him as any miner he ever grubstaked.” Coming from this man, that was really saying something!

Captain Jack McQuesten had similar roots to mine in Scotland, Ireland, and Colonial America. But the story really begins in British Columbia long after Jack had entered the gold mining business. The California gold rush had pretty much panned out. Folks were moving into Montana and Canada looking for more gold.



In 2007, a bagpiper in Dawson leads Mounties and the Yukon Order of Pioneers in honor of the Celtic “Father of the Yukon.”

Jack, along with his father and three other family members, was among those who first went into British Columbia – all of them but Jack leaving by 1863, due to the extreme weather and rugged and barren conditions.

The temperature was so cold during the first years of gold mining in southwestern Canada that many mules froze to death. Jack teamed up with one of the first known of his Celtic buddies, Mike Shannon, and these two diehards stayed on longer than most. But the weather became too much even for Jack and he left his Irish friend behind for the safety of a distant Canadian fort.

When he returned in the spring, Shannon was nowhere to be found and so Jack journeyed to another Canadian fort where he met long-time partner-to-be, the Irishman Al Mayo, the man who first told Jack about the Civil War, as he had missed the whole thing in his role as a mountain man.

Together, these two Celts made their way slowly towards the Yukon picking up another Celtic partner along the way – one John McKniff or McKreiff, depending on which set of records you refer to.

These men had made financial arrangements with the powerful Hudson's Bay Company for the purchase of furs that they trapped or traded for. The two main HBC point men for their transactions were named Sibistone and McDougall, both of these being Scots names.

Eventually, McQuesten and Mayo met up with two men born in County Antrim, Northern Ireland - Arthur Harper and Fred Hart(e). These men were praised for being "Ulstermen," which typically had the dual meaning of most likely being Presbyterians, and also of being hardy and strong-willed.

McQuesten, Mayo and Harper are considered

the three men most responsible for opening up the Yukon River Valley. Their accomplishments have already filled many books. (Harper's son was also the first man known to have climbed Mount McKinley, named, of course, for the Scots-blooded U.S. President McKinley.)

These men made their way into the Yukon via the Mackenzie River, named for the great Scottish explorer, Alexander Mackenzie, born on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. Their destination was Fort Yukon, a primitive wilderness fort established by the Scot, Alexander Murray, who came to North America from Edinburgh, Scotland, and married the daughter of chief Yukon trader, Colin Campbell.

Another way "in" was over the Chilkoot Pass. An unidentified "red-haired Scotchman" was the first white man to attempt to cross over the infamous pass. He was captured by Natives



This 1898 photo shows the summit of the Chilkoot Pass, over which thousands of men traveled into gold country, and where hundreds of men died, trying to get there.

and returned unharmed. The pass was finally opened by troops under the direction of another Scotsman, Lieutenant E. P. McClellan.

The first white man to cross the pass and return was surnamed Holt. Though Holt is often thought of as an English name, there were many Holts that came to America from Ireland.

One often-mentioned personal Chilkoot experience was recorded by Irishman Alfred MacMichael, in a letter to his family.

Some of the Celtic-named rivers and lakes that McQuesten and his friends frequented were the Fraser River, Finley River, Nelson River and Stewart River. Jack reports that John Frazer and T. Boswell (most likely two more Celts) were the first to find gold on the Stewart River.

McQuesten is perhaps the most referred to author on the early years of the Yukon, having written down his impressions in his diary – now known as *Recollections*. He also penned an important letter to another Scotsman, Albert McKay, from which much early information has been gleaned. Another Irishman Jack partnered with was Tom “Mickey” O’Brien.

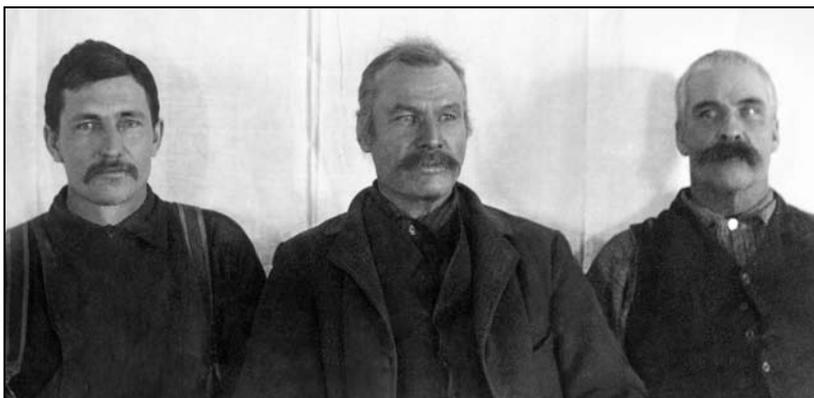
The line of demarcation between Alaska and Canada was finally officially established mostly through the work of two Scots - William Ogilvie, representing Canada, and John McGrath, representing the United States. Each left behind landmarks in their names, as did McQuesten, Mayo and other Celts of the Great White North.

Another man to do so was the explorer John Muir, for whom the Muir Glacier is named. A “Mr. Wallace led the first party ashore,” at that glacier. Muir and Wallace, of course, are very famous Scottish names.

Robert Campbell is the Scotsman credited with the discovery of the Upper Yukon, a river that was thought to flow due north into the Arctic Sea. He named it the Lewes for his fellow Scots explorer, John Lee Lewes. Campbell was sent to this wilderness to continue the work of another Scotsman John McLeod.

It took a third Scotsman, James Bell, to realize this was just the upper portion of the Yukon River. Bell is typically credited with naming the mighty Yukon River. Campbell, along with James Stewart, for whom the

Stewart River is named, founded Fort Selkirk. Selkirk is the Scottish location where William *Braveheart* Wallace was named Guardian of Scotland. Stewart was the long-time royal family of Scotland; Campbell, one of its largest clans. Another name, as prominent in Scotland as Stewart and Campbell is that of McDonald.



These three Celts are (l to r) Tom “Mickey” O’Brien, the owner of the first legal brewery or distillery in Dawson, Yukon; Jack McQuesten, Father of the Yukon and of Alaska; and Al Mayo. Both McQuesten and Mayo, along with Ulster-born Arthur Harper are the three men most credited with opening up the Yukon River Valley.

As these earliest pioneers came into this wild territory, some of them met up with the Rev. Robert McDonald, who had already been evangelizing to Yukon River Native groups.

Later, it was Pete McDonald who brought the very first horse into the Yukon River Valley.

The first men known to have explored the Klondike River for gold were Scotsmen named Henderson, and Carmack. Carmack (or McCarmack) is often given credit for the big gold find that kicked off the Klondike rush. He received his grubstake from Captain Jack.

Additional Celtic Yukoners that we know of include the names of McPhee, McGraw, McCoskey, McCue, McArthur, Lowrie, Hutchinson and Hamilton.

It is so plainly obvious that men of Scottish and Irish descent played an incredible role –perhaps *the* most significant role – in opening up the Yukon River Valley, and thus all of Alaska and Yukon, to a curious world.

The Klondike . . . a Viking name?

It was due to Scots Jack McQuesten and Rev. Robert McDonald that the Native name for the Klondike River was even recorded. These were two of the earliest white men to ever explore the Yukon River. Jack names it as Throndiak, Trundeck, and Tronduk. Rev. McDonald noted that the name meant something similar to “hammer water” in the Native tongue.

How the name changed from Throndiak to Klondike has long been a point of conjecture, typically being blamed on illiterate miners.

Still, it is hard to see how Tron or Thron would become Klon, unless one looks at an old map drawn by one of Jack’s suppliers by the name of Moise Mercier.

Mercier, who resided a thousand miles or more away from this area, writes the name with the T set apart a bit from the rest of the name. He writes the balance of the name as “Chondiok” with a capital C and his H easily looking like an L. It would be understandable for a newcomer to read this name as The Clondiok and, in fact, Klondike was often spelled Clondike or Clondyke in its early years.

There is a theory, out there, of where the Native name of Throndiak might have come from. One story says that the first white men the Native groups along the Yukon ever met were Vikings, possible escaping troubles on Greenland or Iceland.

In fact, one early Yukon explorer reported finding a group of Natives along the Arctic Sea who were taller than average and had blue eyes and fair hair sprinkled throughout their people. They were thought to be at least partially descended from Vikings.

The Bering Sea, which separates Alaska from Siberia, was named for Vitus Bering, who, though sailing for Russia, was actually a Scandinavian. In fact, many of the so-called Russians along the west coast of Alaska, in those early days, were actually of Scandinavian or Russo-Scandinavian bloodlines.

The Native word of Thron meant “hammer,” and the second half, diuk, meant “water,” or “water dam.” The Natives would hammer stakes along the Klondike shoreline to dam up



This 1880s map, drawn by Moise Mercier, was meant to show the location of Jack McQuesten’s remote trading post. The name of the Throndiok River appears to be spelled with a capital T, then a capital C plus hondiook. “T Chondiok” may have been mistakenly read as The Clondiok, which then became The Klondike.

the river with nets in order to catch fish. In fact, the translation of Throndiak is given by some old sources as “hammer a water dam.”

In Scandinavian culture Thor is the “hammer god,” while a dike is a water dam. Coincidental or not, both Throndiak and Thor-dike have a very similar translation. Perhaps the Klondike name originated from the Norse language.

Regardless of the source of the name of this famous river, it is fair to say that Vikings, or if you will, Scandinavian peoples were in the Yukon River area very early on, in one capacity or another, followed closely by Scotsman, Irishman, and Nova Scotians.

Iditarod!

Editor's Note: *We are incredibly lucky to have Rod Perry as an author in this month's Celtic Guide. He has been deeply involved in the Iditarod dog sled race since its inception and is most likely the world's expert on its history. The word "Iditarod" has been named the most marketable word in Alaskan history and has become part of the lexicon of language throughout America and the world. And it all traces back to a Yukon River Celt. Rod has written two of the best books ever on this famous race. His web site can be found at:*

<http://rodperry.com/>

Rod Perry: *It took the rising star of the famous Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race to draw attention to the history of the world's last great gold rush trail and gain its inclusion in the National Trails System. As the dazzling spotlight trained upon "The Last Great Race on Earth®" spilled sidelight onto trail history, it illumined John Beaton, co-discoverer of Iditarod gold and the man claimed to have coined the name, "Iditarod."*

In 1801, on the vessel *Dove*, out from the Isle of Skye, ventured a large group of staunch Roman Catholic Scots Highlanders eager for land and opportunity. Among them sailed Angus Beaton, a farmer. Not long after settling with his shipmates around Pictou, Nova Scotia, Angus married Christine MacDonald. In time, the pair's son, Donald married Flora (nee MacLean), who, on August 9, 1875, at Rear Little Judique (later St. Ninian), Nova Scotia, bore John Beaton.

The Beaton's clan name of Macbeth derives from their roots going back to that famous Scots king whose 1040-1057 reign ended in assassination by Malcolm. For self-preservation, many Macbeths became Beatons or Bethunes and fled to Ireland. They gradually made their way back into Scotland.

The Isle of Skye, particularly, attracted many Beatons and other dedicated backers of the last



Scotsman John Beaton in a very early photograph.

of the Catholic Stewarts, prominent among which was Bonnie Prince Charlie, claimant to the thrones of England and Scotland. The dawn of the nineteenth century saw a huge swell of out-migration from the British Isles to North America. The Scots on the *Dove* rode the front of the wave.

John Beaton, quiet and astute, but magnetized by the Yukon and Alaska gold strikes that had inflamed the continent, left Nova Scotia in 1899. Through the worked-out placers of British Columbia to the already-claimed Klondike he ventured, and considered the recent rush to Nome. Obviously, he was late. Chances for rich diggings greatly multiplied for the prospector positioned among the first arrivals at a new strike. But holding the prevalent faith among gold hunters that Yukon Territory and Alaska held major wealth yet to be discovered, John dedicated himself to searching the North.

Beaton's next few years appear sketchy. It is thought that he labored in the great hard-rock mines of Juneau, Alaska, for a grubstake, and prospected along the Yukon downstream from the Alaska-Yukon border and around Fairbanks.

What we do know is that somewhere in his peregrinations he acquired that resource almost all far north prospectors found indispensable to a successful venture: a hard-working, trustworthy,

and compatible partner. John, in fact, found two. The trio worked out an arrangement for a solidly-based operation.

Merton “Mike” Marston would labor in town to support the field efforts of Beaton and William Dikeman. The men concentrated on the area of significant Upper Innoko River gold finds around Gaines Creek and Ophir. These discoveries were located roughly half way between Nome and Cook Inlet.

Elsewhere, as the year 1908 began, four intrepid men driving eighteen dogs set out from Seward on a grueling reconnaissance. Nome—with its shipping cut off for seven months yearly by pack ice—had been crying out for a shorter, more direct path for movement of mail, light freight, and travelers than the thirteen-hundred-mile-long route they had been using through Fairbanks to Valdez.

Hundreds of miles should be able to be eliminated if only a suitable and affordable trail could be built between the established Yukon River Trail at Kaltag and the ice-free shipping waters of Resurrection Bay. “If,” “suitable,” and “affordable” were the operative words.

The United States Army’s Alaska Road Commission’s exploration, led by highway engineer Colonel Walter Goodwin, would evaluate whether what was then only a hardly-traveled passage over hundreds of miles of almost unknown wilderness could be turned into a trail of high enough quality to be an upgrade over their well-developed route. If so, would it be enough of an upgrade to justify going to the considerable expense and effort to build and maintain it?

To answer those questions, their bold party headed into the teeth of an Alaska winter. They would dare some of the wildest real estate in the subarctic and the daunting crossing of the greatest mountain range in North America.

It took the reconnaissance crew sixty-six days of toilsome walking and snowshoeing, breaking trail ahead of the dogs and helping the animals move their mountainous loads, to force their way through to Nome. Midway, incidentally, they had worked their way right through the area where John Beaton and William Dikeman were prospecting.

Colonel Goodwin—who would, years later, perform important work on the building of Los Angeles’ famous Mulholland Drive—wrote in his summary report that the route would be feasible only if two advancements came to be.

The first big “if” was if the proposed Seward-Fairbanks railroad were to progress as far as the head of Knik Arm (present day Wasilla area). That would both give them a trail head 160 miles closer to Nome, and bypass the crossing of Crow Pass in the Chugach Mountains – a feat that bordered on the impossible for a freighting dog team.

Goodwin’s second big “if” was – if there would become a higher demand for traffic over their just-scouted route. Such increased traffic might come about, he wrote, if either more gold turned up in the general area where Beaton and Dikeman were then working, “or some (other) big strike is made along the route...”

The snows of Goodwin’s passage warmed into spring; spring melted into summer, and the contents of the explorer’s report sat gathering dust, perhaps in a folder under some such heading as “Projects Investigated and Found Wanting.” However, that status would soon change. Decisions and actions of two men were setting in motion exploration which would lead to one of the greatest events in Northland history.

Through careful business dealings, in the fall of 1908 John Beaton and William Dikeman were able to buy the KPM, a small steam launch. Having taken on a cargo of supplies at the Yukon River village of Holy Cross, they motored back up the great flow to the major Lower Yukon tributary, the Innoko River.

The partners intended to ascend the hundreds of miles of its twisting course to winter in the headwaters area they had been working when Goodwin passed through. However, after pushing a considerable distance upstream, upon coming to the mouth of the Innoko’s main tributary, they decided to turn their prow up that mysterious current. No other prospectors had ever been known to ascend it, nor did it carry a name familiar to white men. The two gold hunters decided to winter as far upriver as they

could work the KPM, probing the unknown country for the yellow lure.

Cutting a longer story short, on Christmas Day, from the bottom of a twelve-foot-deep test hole on Otter Creek, John Beaton cried up to William Dikeman, "GOLD!" Their find would set off the last, great, old-fashioned, devil-take-the-hindmost gold rush in North America. Eventually, their discovery would be found to boast the widest pay streak ever found in the North.

One can almost imagine that, in the holiday vacation silence of Nome's empty Alaska Road Commission office, Goodwin's feasibility report commenced to shake in its folder and the words, "or some big strike is made along the route..." began trying to jump off the page and shout.

In a country so remote, with no competing prospectors, the partners were able to take their time in the staking process. Nothing like it had ever been seen in any of the other great gold strikes of the North. In the wild stampedes of the Klondike, Nome, and (a little less so) Fairbanks, prospectors could afford but limited time on the site, staking furiously, then breaking away hell-bent-for-leather to the recording office to nail down their claim.

Beaton and Dikeman, under no pressure, methodically worked their way along. Monthly the law allowed them to stake two claims apiece, and by proxy two apiece for others (like their partner, Mike Marston) – eight claims a month total. By the time the river broke up and freed the KPM to steam to Ophir to record their claims, they had an incredible mile of Otter Creek tied up.

During their time on that river, previously unknown to white men, John Beaton began to call it the "Iditarod."

John immediately took up another stampede. Rushing back to Nova Scotia he married Florence MacLennan of Inverness County, close to John's former home. The two dashed back to John's diggings where Florence became the first white woman in Iditarod country.

Dikeman, after extracting some of the most easily-mined gold, sold his interests to the Guggenheims for a quarter million dollars. That was a fortune hard to turn down at a time when

a worker out in the States averaged about three dollars a day.

Beaton, though, canny Scot that he was, resisted the quick windfall. Then, by a succession of shrewd moves he realized many times the quick profit turned by his old partner. After mining some of his placers he optioned rights to the "Gugs" to mine once through his Otter Creek claims. Pocketing their \$250,000 option payment, he watched developments.

The Guggenheims, after extensively core drilling his properties, decided not to mine. John, having gained their expensive drill data, free of charge, used the findings to attract various miners to lease out his claims on a once-over basis. Royalties paid by these operators added to Beaton's coffers. And when they had finished, he still owned his claims. From them, he and his future partnerships would take fortunes by dredging.

When word of the great discovery first broke, hordes rushing to the area created instant boom towns of Iditarod, Flat, and half a dozen sizeable satellites. Briefly, Iditarod grew to become Alaska's largest city. Some reports estimate it peaked at as many as ten thousand. Service by riverboat was limited to about five ice-free months yearly, sometimes fewer. With the population demanding expeditious movement of mail, freight, and travelers year around, construction of a Seward trail took on high priority for Col. Walter Goodwin.

Previously, when it was only Nome crying out for a Seward trail, with its post-gold-rush population shrunken to a tenth its former size, that small town's needs did not constitute enough demand to make building it feasible. But the area of Beaton and Dikeman's strike peaked at about three times Nome's population. Furthermore, Iditarod Country lay several hundred miles closer to Seward. The combined factors powered a demanding rationale for building the trail.

During the winter of 1910-11, Colonel Goodwin began working from the north with nine men and six seven-dog teams. Relative to his, "or some big strike is made along the route," Iditarod fulfilled the criteria close enough; though not exactly right "along the route," it

would only require a wide side loop branching from the course that his recon had previously looked over. Building first the Iditarod loop to service the bigger population and later the cut-off straight toward Nome would serve both.

From the south, Anton Eide supervised workmen cutting and marking toward Goodwin. As these Alaska Road Commission crews finished the Iditarod Trail, entrepreneurs immediately followed, over the spring and summer feverishly throwing up roadhouses.

The next fall, the trail almost melted down from use. During one week alone in November of 1911, some 120 dog teams pulled out of Knik, on Cook Inlet, bound for the Interior. And that did not make up the majority of the traffic. Most travelers did not have dogs, so walked. Gold flowed over the trail, too. Some individual miners brought shipments out by dog team.

John Beaton, having diversified into coownership of Miners and Merchants Bank of Iditarod, sent out yearly gold trains conducted by colorful former Black Hills stage coach driver, Bob Griffis. On December 31, 1916, forty-six Griffis dogs, making up several teams, pulled into Knik with their heaviest load ever, 3,400 pounds of Iditarod gold. (Have fun with that figure factoring in inflation and today's gold prices!) During stopovers the laden sleds were left outside the roadhouses untended; remoteness and climate were Griffis's best guards. No robbery was ever attempted.

Just when things seemingly couldn't go better in the life of John Beaton, tragedy struck. Florence, pregnant, and accompanied by the couple's two children, Loretta, age six and John Neil, age four, drowned at sea when the *Princess Sophia* went down with all hands after hitting a reef north of Juneau. In the worst maritime disaster in Alaska history, 353 souls were lost. So many prominent Alaskan's perished that it was said of the *Sophia*, "The North went down with her." To the bottom, too, went almost all of Iditarod's gold production for the year.

Heartbroken, John left the active working of his ground to others and, perhaps for recovery as much as anything else, bought a ranch in British Columbia's Blue River country. He also

partnered in the building of the Strand Theater in Seattle. Several years passed. Then during one of his forays outside, John chanced to meet Mary "Mae" (nee MacDonald) Grant, a young widow who had a daughter named Jean. Conversation led to their discovery that they had grown up near one another in Nova Scotia. Mae became Mrs. John Beaton on February 12, 1924.

Returning full time to Alaska and his mining, Beaton continued to diversify. He became active in the buying and selling of mining properties, sometimes owning dozens. On another front, though he never set out to become an aviation industry founder, he became one.

Because they had the money, the heavy equipment, and an abundance of mine tailings for material, and because their remote, multimillion-dollar operations needed ready access to air transport, the miners of Flat—which long survived neighboring Iditarod as a town—built a superb gravel airstrip.

In the early years of Alaska bush flying, planes crashed regularly. Understandably, lending institutions were loath to lend to air carriers and insurance companies wouldn't insure them. Needing to make sure the fledgling companies which serviced him remained in business and profitable, John helped put both Star Air Service and Bethel Airways on a solid footing, even buying and leasing several aircraft to them. Star eventually became Alaska Airlines and Bethel, via several mergers, became an important component of Wien Airlines. At the time Wien closed for business it held the distinction of being the second oldest airline in the United States and flying to more destinations than any other airline but Russia's Aeroflot. Noted air-business historian Ray Petersen, who began his flying career with Star and finished as C.E.O. of Wien flatly stated, "He [John Beaton] started both those airlines [Star and Bethel Air]. Back then he was the only one who could have."

John Beaton helped his friend, Anchorage businessman A. A. Shonbeck build Anchorage's first airfield, a grass strip upon which John liked to practice his golf game.

In another public-spirited endeavor to help build Alaska, Beaton and Shonbeck sent a lush

sampling of produce from their Matanuska Valley properties to Washington D. C. Doing so, it is said, helped convince the federal government the land was capable of sustaining a government-sponsored colonization under discussion. That colonization by Minnesota farming families became famous in Alaska's history. It started populating the Mat Valley in earnest and resulted in Palmer, Alaska growing as its center.

During their travels John and Mae especially enjoyed crossing Canada by rail to visit the place of their childhood, Nova Scotia. They stayed at nice hotels and dressed stylishly, and, though not spendthrifts, it would not have been hard, seeing them on the street, to guess they had money. But out on his mining operation, John, clad in bib overalls and pulling on his corn cob pipe, looked like just another of his hired help.

He was happiest when mining. One property he acquired was the Gaines Creek dredge and claims near where he and William Dikeman had been looking back in 1908 before heading for Iditarod. For a number of years, with his pal, "Double A" Shonbeck he worked that ground. Then in June of 1945, driving on a mining road, the partners' pickup plunged from a bridge abutment into Gaines Creek. It was reported that, while driving, Shonbeck suffered a fatal heart attack. Miners who rushed to the scene were said to have found the doors jammed, preventing Beaton's escape.

Kindly, cheerful, optimistic, wise and generous, John Beaton was also characterized as small, quiet, calm, and of good humor.

That might surprise someone expecting a frontiersman of such larger-than-life reputation to be of imposing stature, rough, impulsive, and dominating. Since losing his first family, those around him knew he held a deep-seated fear of drowning. So it is ironically sad that he should be taken that way. John Beaton had been a man of high adventure who had experienced his share of hair's breadth escapes. It was remarked that he had beaten death numerous times, but just couldn't that last time.

Most surprisingly, of the four major gold discoveries of the North, the Klondike, Nome,

Fairbanks and Iditarod, the former and latter were found by Nova Scotians. [Nova Scotian Robert Henderson mined gold in the Klondike prior to George Carmack's blockbuster strike in another part of the drainage.] John Beaton is noteworthy among all of the discoverers of the major gold deposits of the Yukon and Alaska as, arguably, the most astute businessman of the lot. Certainly, he was the only one who stayed and put his money to work to build Alaska.

And the Iditarod Trail? The old trace had an appointment with destiny. After Iditarod became a ghost town and the path grew up in trees and brush, it slumbered.

Because no road was ever built over the old route, through the decades of abandonment the country it traverses remained largely raw wilderness. That preserved its primitive character and colorful, gold-rush luster.

To the trail's romantic allure may be attributed one of the main reasons the Iditarod would one day live again. A half century after heavy trail use died out, in a man-and-team-against-the-wilderness setting, the aged path would experience a glorious rebirth. From its long sleep it would awaken to hear the barely audible hiss of runners and creaking of sled joints, feel the staccato footfall and listen to the panting of trotting huskies. The world's longest, richest sled dog race would yearly be held over its spectacular miles.

Nothing else is now so universally acclaimed to epitomize the very Spirit of Alaska. It has gained such international renown that if questioned, "What comes to mind first when you think of Alaska?" it's likely that more people around the world would answer, "the Iditarod" than anything else.

But the idea to hold the "Last Great Race[®]" over its course would never have entered the fertile mind of founder Joe Redington, had there not first dwelt within him a deep yearning to relive something of the old trail's romantic past. His race is, in part, an Old North reenactment. It takes us back to the times when Iditarod country boomed, gold flowed, its trail pulsed, and humble Scot, John Beaton, stood atop—and at the bottom of it all.

Yukon Jack® . . . a Celtic brew?

It is thought by some Yukon historians that the famous (almost infamous) whiskey Yukon Jack® is named for Jack McQuesten, a Celt who garnered many nicknames during his years on the Yukon, including Father of the Yukon.

When law and order came to the Canadian side of the line of demarcation between Canada and America, in the form of the Canadian Mounties, Jack McQuesten and Tom “Mickey” O’Brien were the only two men mentioned by name as being part of the “whiskey gang,” carrying on the old Scottish and Irish tradition of brewing their own “water of life.”

Mickey O’Brien went on to establish the very first legal brewery or distillery in Dawson City, Yukon.

Jack simply moved his operation across the line into Alaska, where U.S. law enforcement did not have much of a presence yet.

The border between these countries was often used to skirt the “law.”

For instance, Postmaster Jack McQuesten received mail for his Canadian outpost of Forty Mile at an almost imaginary place in Alaska, named Mitchell. Though its exact location has yet to be discovered, it is believed to have been a small miner’s camp located up the Forty Mile River. Since the postman arrived at Forty Mile first, it is thought that the mail was simply delivered in Canada,

rather than carried to Mitchell, Alaska, and then returned to Jack’s post office/trading post.

Postmarks from this unique “Canadian” U.S. Post Office are some of the most sought after postal collectibles. Jack is also said to be the inspiration for the Klondike pocket flask bottle, another sought-after collectible.



I received this antique Yukon Jack® decanter as a present in appreciation for the writing I have done on Captain Jack. I like to think this figurine is meant to represent him. No one has ever presented any other evidence as to whom this famous liquor is named for, and a large group of Yukon River historians have agreed it was most likely named for the Father of the Yukon.

So, what's next?

March is on the horizon and it is best known, in the Celtic world, for the celebration of St. Patrick's Day. I should have an article on St. Patrick's Church in Washington, DC, a church I visited in January of this year. Also, we have a possible article on St. Patrick, written by an owner of a Celtic products web site, who has authored many articles on all things Celtic. In addition, a gentleman from America, who studied for ten years in Scotland, in Scottish history and the Gaelic language, and who also taught Gaelic in Nova Scotia for an additional ten years, may be writing an article on that ancient language.

The majority of the March issue will be focused on the Irish portion of the Celtic race because of the special holiday celebrated in this month. However, there will be a variety of additional stories to tell, from other lands.

Just as March is significant because of St. Patrick's Day, April is important because of National Tartan Day, and so the April issue will focus on that day, and the surrounding stories that led to its establishment, including Robert Bruce and the Arbroath Declaration.

As a precursor to those stories, it is generally accepted that Robert Bruce followed on the heels of William *Braveheart* Wallace. There is some indication that Bruce, himself, was referred to as *Braveheart* at least on one important occasion – a story for another time. The following little tidbit began with my January visit to Washington, DC, and the Ford Theatre, where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

I knew President Andrew Jackson was a big fan of William Wallace and recommended the reading of his life and the life of Scottish chiefs to other men that he advised. In Washington, I learned that Abraham Lincoln named one of his sons William Wallace Lincoln – a son who died very young.

Realizing that two of perhaps the three most important early presidents of the United States appeared to be fans of Wallace, I wondered about George Washington. Low and behold, I learned that Washington had a snuff box allegedly made of wood from an oak tree in which Wallace is said to have hidden, or as Washington's will states, "the box made of the Oak that sheltered the Great Sir William Wallace after the battle of Falkirk."

There are so many more great stories to tell and we can't see any lack of them for many months to come. Stay tuned!

Jim McQuiston
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