

Washburn history: Great Klondike Adventure

By Lars Larson
Columnist

As the great pine lumbering boom began to decline in 1896 another boom attracted the attention of the people of Washburn: the gold rush in the Klondike region in the Yukon Territory in northwestern Canada.

To reach this rugged, isolated region, prospectors traveled by sea from Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, or San Francisco to Skagway or Dyea, small settlements in Alaska at the end of an arm of the sea north of Juneau on Alaska's inland waterway. From there two trails led over the mountains to the interior through two passes, Chilkoot Pass from Dyea, with the summit at 3,600 feet, and White Pass from Skagway, with the summit at 2,900 feet. Once over the mountains both trails led to the headwaters of the Yukon River, which flows roughly northward to Dawson in the Klondike region, from where prospectors fanned out to the gold fields to pursue their fortunes. The trails were incredibly steep and rugged, impossible for horses, mules, or dogs to traverse. Men (and a few women) became beasts of burden, pulling their heavily loaded sleds through harsh winter weather by sheer will power. Of those who attempted the journey, many died along the way, and many of those who made it over the summit and to Dawson were bitterly disappointed to find all of the productive claims taken up. In fact, the surest way to make money was to sell supplies to the miners at highly inflated prices.

In 1897 a group of Washburn men decided to try to improve their fortunes by going to the Klondike to prospect for gold. This was not the harebrained scheme of a few restless bachelors, for most of the men were married and responsible businessmen. The six men in the group included Pete Peterson, a businessman and former town treasurer; William H. Smith of

the Babcock and Smith quarrying company at Houghton; David Hedlund, a member of the town board; William Olson, a businessman and two "favorably known young men," Charles Olsen and Oscar Lundgreen. The Times declared that the "party is made up of as good a quality of men as ever started on such a trip." The expedition's equipment was prepared at a "Klondike shop," located on the corner of Washington Avenue and Third Street West. Included were several sleds with eight foot runners "shoed in brass," between 40 and 50 dogs, heavy old-gold mackinaw clothes, heavy footwear, and fur caps, fur robes for bedding, tents and so on.

A farewell party was held for the men at the opera house, where a large crowd "bid them farewell in a formal and public manner and a pleasant time was spent by all present." The group departed with their equipment and dogs in a "special tourist car" on the evening train on Feb. 2, 1898. The Times reported that over 500 people were at the depot to see them off. Their route took them by train from Washburn to Seattle, Washington, then by steamer to Skagway, Alaska. In Seattle the steamboat on which they had booked passage to Skagway refused to allow them and their dogs and equipment on board because of a lack of space. By a subterfuge three of the party, with some of the equipment, were able to board the steamer, while the other three remained "to bring the transportation company into line." They hired a lawyer, the result being the steamship company eventually agreed to pay all of their expenses and transport them and their equipment to Skagway.

Nothing is known about their journey from Seattle to Skagway, and then to Sheep Camp. Sheep Camp, about 14 miles north of Dyea, was located at the beginning of the trail over the Chilkoot Pass. On March 21, 1898, William

Olson wrote to his business partner, D.S. Estabrook, that "the pass is a 'holy terror' . . . Here hundreds of men get discouraged as soon as they see the pass, and turn back home. . . . They say there are 100,000 men on the trail now and I believe it." He went on to say that they had no intention of giving up and "coming back" as long as their health held up. He complained about the "hard work every day, from five in the morning until eight or nine at night." While they had occasional spats over work, they were "getting along fine. . . . But there are a good many men here that quarrel, fight and even shoot each other—men that have known each other for years. . . I tell you it is tough." So far the group had spent \$2,000 and had yet to pay the duty charged by the Canadians at the boundary.

While family and friends in Washburn probably received news from members of the group, nothing about them was published in the Times for the remainder of the year. In mid-January of 1899, William Smith returned (apparently Charles Olsen had returned earlier). He brought back some "little gold nuggets," stating that while the reports of gold were "greatly exaggerated, gold is there if a man has the perseverance to stay long enough to find it." He had a claim near Dawson, "which he hopes to realize from." In August three more members of the original group returned, the Times reporting that "None of the 'boys' have struck it rich, but it is understood that they have all done fairly well." Pete Peterson, the last member of the group, returned in early October, the Times noting that he, too, had done "fairly well in the Klondike." The men did not have much to say "regarding the riches they had obtained," but apparently "did better than they would if they had remained at home, and feel well satisfied with their trip." So ended the great Klondike adventure.