

## **Few locals found fame, fortune in Klondike Gold Rush**

Back in the late 1800s, a fair number of Central Illinois residents found themselves in the wilds of Canada's Yukon Territory panning and digging for gold. Not surprisingly, most returned from that unforgiving landscape a little poorer and a whole lot wiser to the ways of the wider world.

The Klondike Gold Rush began in earnest during the summer of 1897. Fortune seekers flocked to a stretch of eastern Alaska and the Yukon where rich gold deposits were discovered a year earlier. Area residents were among the thousands upon thousands of would-be miners who risked life, limb and the family nest egg (often losing one or more in the process) to gold fever.

In August 1898, George Lurshen of the DeWitt County community of Weldon returned from the Klondike having lost \$1,000 (or the equivalent of more than \$29,000 in inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars). "Mr. Lurshen comes back to his wife and little family with not much beyond a pair of strong arms and willing hands," commented *The Pantagraph*.

In a letter to George W. Stubblefield, local resident and Klondike prospector George E. Case provided a colorful portrait of the Yukon gold fields, where life was cheap in the extreme. Suicides were common, as were the drowning deaths of inexperienced miners navigating boats through the swift, choppy waters of the region's glacial rivers and streams. Case recalled five miners lost in single day to the frigid waters of the White Horse River. "They seemed like people possessed of the devil and devoid of good sense," he wrote of those who were killed foolishly running the rapids blind.

To Case's apparent surprise, there were a fair number of women in Dawson City, the great boomtown of the Yukon Gold Rush. "Most of them are dressed in a rather flashy manner," he wrote in what was perhaps a veiled reference to prostitution. "One can get nearly everything if he can pay for it ... most of the currency is gold dust, and one cannot do business without gold scales." Even subtropical fruits such as oranges were available—for a price. He also noted the town was "full of idle men," many of whom were failed miners dumbstruck by utter failure.

Edward Johnson of Bloomington also returned from the gold fields in August 1898. Though he only made it as far as St. Michael, a community on the Alaskan coast, he did have some interesting observations for *The Pantagraph*. Sled dogs were everywhere, he said, adding that "when one dog barks every dog in the city sets up a howl; the combined effect being indescribable and alarmingly terrific."

Typhoid fever was a constant threat, and many miners suffered from scurvy. It was said that six months in the Alaskan and Yukon wilds would take more out of a man than ten years mining in the Colorado Rockies. "Not a man stays in the Klondike three months without being more or less broken in health," continued Johnson's observations, with

“some miners returning with \$50,000 of gold who would give all of it to get back the health they took with them.”

Despite the harsh conditions and loss of life, the beckoning, glittering promises of the Klondike Gold Rush—both the wealth and high adventure—captured the imagination of the American public. In mid-October 1898, the touring theatrical production, “Heart of the Klondike,” came to the Grand Opera House in downtown Bloomington (see accompanying image). The Daily Bulletin, another Bloomington newspaper, called it “an extraordinary powerful and vivid reproduction of the scenery and life of that vast treasure house of the eternal ice king to which millions of longing eyes are turned.”

In early November 1898, Robert L. Maxton of Saybrook recounted his experiences in the Great White North. Maxton, a veteran of the Black Hills gold rush three decades earlier, had left for the Klondike with other local adventurers. “He chased the golden will o’ the wisp for 5,000 miles, yet it appeared ever ahead, shadowy, yet attractive,” commented the Bulletin.

After spending 50 days prospecting along the upper Copper River, Maxton concluded that whole region was a “fake so far as mining is concerned.” Gold was everywhere, but never in “paying quantities.” He believed that this latest gold rush was a “gigantic swindling scheme” perpetrated by the railroads and steamship lines to boost traffic and thus revenues. If anything, the future of the Klondike would entail grazing livestock during the summer months. Even a jaundiced Maxton, though, praised the country as a “wonderland of beauty.”

One of the more remarkable Klondike stories was told by Bloomington-born Kate Rodenbach, whose father Herman Boeheim was a hired man for Judge David Davis. Orphaned at the age of 12, Kate became a “nurse girl” to a prominent family before leaving Bloomington and eventually marrying John Rodenbach, a brakeman for the Chicago & Alton Railroad. After his death in 1891, Kate worked as a Pullman car cleaner, among other tough jobs, before becoming a housekeeper to a sister and brother of Klondike millionaire Clarence Berry of Salem, Oregon.

Rodenbach then traveled to Dawson City with Berry and his new bride. While Berry became one of the more successful miners and speculators of the Klondike, Rodenbach struck out on her own. She became a cook in a mining camp cook and then proprietor of a boarding house. “The miners used to come twenty miles in the freezing winter and ask me to bake for them,” she recalled. “I have been given \$5 many a time for a loaf of hot bread.”

At her hotel she cared for a Swedish miner (or so the story goes), whose frostbitten feet were crudely amputated. Before he died, Rodenbach promised to look after his daughter, who was in Sacramento. In exchange, the dying Swede handed over a deed to a claim on Hunker Creek. As fate would have it, the claim earned Rodenbach a tidy sum.

After her wild and woolly Dawson City days, she settled in California with an estimated \$60,000 or more to her name. “The woman who had to work early and late in a cheap lodging house at Los Angeles in the winter of ’94 and ’95,” The Pantagraph noted of Rodenbach, “lives nowadays at the most costly hotel in the state, has her private coach and coachman and orders her gowns from the most fashionable modistes in San Francisco and Los Angeles.”

So despite the raft of failures, there was at least one local success story when it came to the pitiless Klondike. “I advise none but the most rugged and experienced miners to go into that horrible arctic region,” said the 37-year-old Rodenbach in December 1898. “The days for getting rich there suddenly have almost wholly gone.”