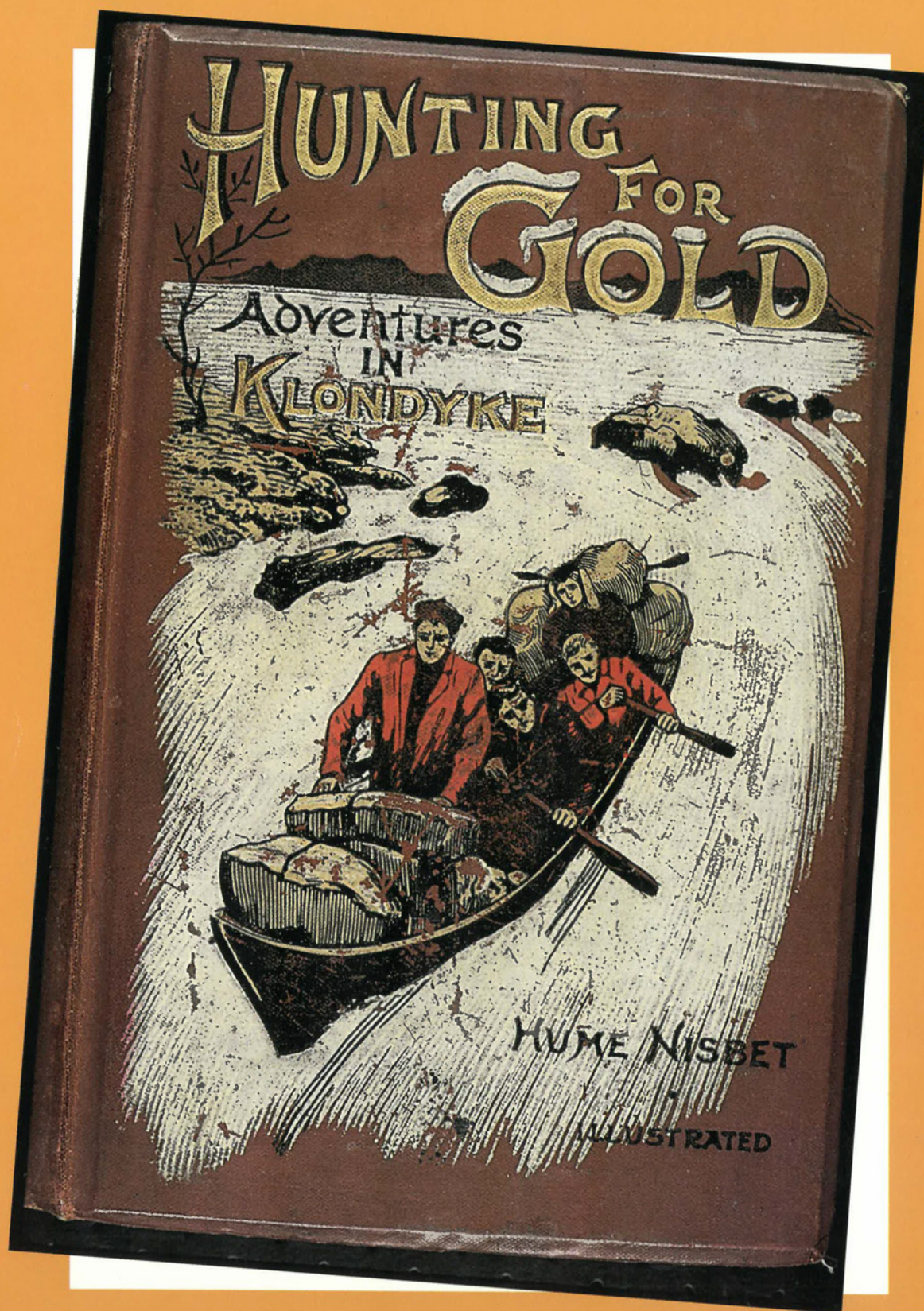
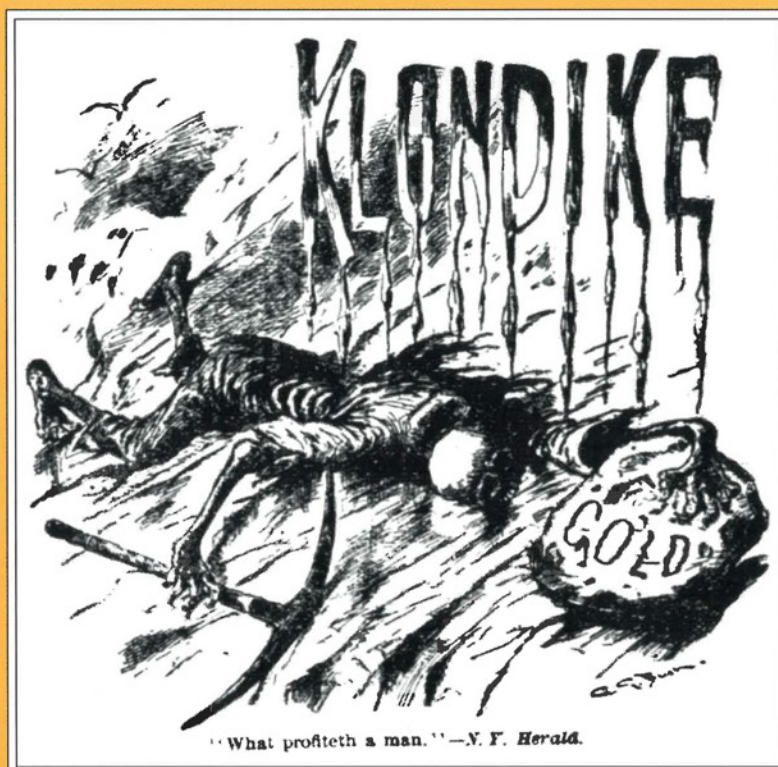


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A Gem in the
Literary History of
the North

EDITOR'S NOTE

What follows is Terrence Cole's preface to the Klondike commemorative edition of William B. Haskell's memoir, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields*, reproduced here with permission of the publisher, University of Alaska Press.

One Man's

ADVENTURE

in the

KLONDIKE

By Terrence Cole



BEFORE READING any memoir of the Klondike gold rush, it is wise to remember the warning that appeared in the *Seattle Times* in August 1897: "They now say there are more liars to the square inch in Alaska than any place in the world." Gold fever and gullibility naturally go hand in hand, but the Klondike craze of 1897–98 stretched the limits of irrationality to new heights. As one reporter said, the discovery of gold in the Klondike unleashed such a barrage of crazy schemes for instant riches that it seemed as if some gigantic "insane asylum had been thrown open and the inmates turned loose."

"The magic word 'Klondike' seems to be ample indorsement [sic] in the estima-



From Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields* (1898)

tion of the public for any kind of an Alaskan proposition," the *Chicago Tribune* stated in the summer of 1897, "no matter how wild or ridiculous its scope. . . . If some crazy man should propose the sawing of the flinty Alaskan ice into railway ties and telegraph poles . . . it would cause no more than a passing spasm of surprise. Everything is possible in Alaska, according to the promoters."

A San Diego woman who followed the occult pleaded for money to fund a Klondike expedition in January 1898. "Now, you need not smile," she wrote, "but I know a man with great psychic powers who has studied occult science in Egypt, and this man has the power of leaving his body. . . . He recently left his body and went up to the Klondike region, and there he discovered a wonderful amount of gold." She and her far-ranging psychic traveler pledged to go back to the Klondike and bring home "TONS and TONS" of gold for whoever would provide them with a grubstake to feed their mortal shells.

William B. Haskell never claimed to have traveled on the astral plane, never tried to leave home without his body, but he returned from the Klondike in 1898 with his own remarkable story. Haskell's *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields* (1898) is a literary and historical gem, far superior in both style and substance to any other Klondike memoir, and deserves a place on the shelf of classic western literature. In the tradition of Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, William B. Haskell's *Two Years in the Klondike* tells the hard reality of a young man's quest for adventure. Well-crafted and rich with humor and authentic detail, Haskell's book gives a vivid portrait of mining camp life and death that rivals the work of Bret Harte, Mark Twain or Jack London. Though what became of Haskell after 1898 is not clear—apparently he never wrote another book—he left an enduring legacy.

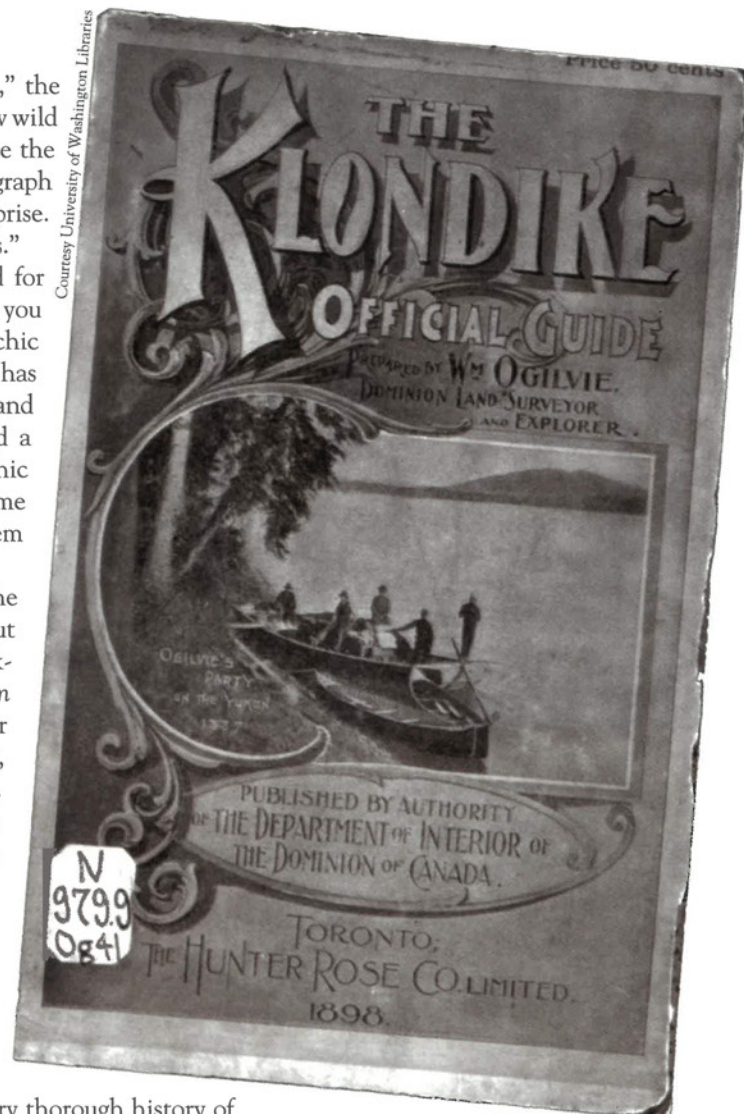
Haskell's autobiography has been a major source for every thorough history of the gold rush era in the past century, even though his book has actually been out of print for nearly a hundred years. A new edition of his memoir, published in commemoration of the gold rush centennial, brings back his remarkable eyewitness account of the Klondike stamped.



MOST OF THE Klondike books that swamped the market during and after the 1897–98 gold rush were as useless as the multitude of Klondike scams pawned off on unwary gold seekers—like food pills, magic gold separators, gold mining gophers, ice locomotives, homing pigeons and Arctic underwear. Publishers eager to cash in on the rush churned out a library-load of Klondike memoirs and Klondike travel guides, instant books by instant experts, usually comprised of material lifted from government reports, newspaper accounts and other guidebooks.

"The east is being flooded with worthless publications about the Klondike," the *San Francisco Chronicle* complained in August 1897, "most of which are filled with revamped stuff about gold mining in California and other countries."

In September 1897 the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, about to unveil its own Klondike Special Edition, blasted the trashy Klondike books which lacked both truth and literary merit. "During the past summer," the Seattle editor stated, "several books containing alleged 'Facts About Klondike' have been published and circulated, but in none of them has there been any reality. They have contained a mass of jumbled up matter, disconnected, incomplete and often unreliable."



ABOVE: One of the many guidebooks that proliferated during the Klondike gold rush.

OPPOSITE PAGE: "An exciting time." Arrival of the first Yukon steamer at Dawson.

Most of the Klondike books that swamped the market during and after the 1897-98 gold rush were as useless as the multitude of Klondike scams pawned off on unwary gold seekers...

GOLD RUSH DIRECTOR'S TOUR

There is no better time to visit the Klondike gold rush country than during the Alaska Gold Rush Centennial. In June 1998 WSHS Director David Nicandri will lead a tour to explore and retrace the original "gold rush route," first by ship through the Inside Passage, then by land across White Pass, past Lake Bennett, into Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory, and ultimately to Dawson City, the heart of the Klondike.

This is an opportunity to visit both Alaska and the Yukon with the added benefit of the director's historical interpretation of the Klondike gold rush of 1897-98 through a series of brief lectures and audio-visual presentations.

For more information on costs, itinerary and accommodations, contact Uniglobe Personal Choice Travel, 4009 Tacoma Mall Blvd., Suite E, Tacoma, WA 98409; Tacoma/Pierce County 253/473-6250; Seattle 206/431-1286; all others 1-888-473-6250.

"White Pass Hotel." On the Skagway Trail—the "hotel" consisted of no more than a small log hut (center).



GENERALLY, KLONDIKE books varied in price anywhere from 25 cents to as much as two dollars. High-pressure salesmen peddling A. C. Harris's *Alaska and the Klondike Gold Fields* (1897) door to door were urged to "work eight to twelve hours every day. Visit every house, and try to sell a book to every voter in your territory." Equipped with a special large pocket inside their coats to keep the prospectus hidden until just the right moment, the agent approached each home with a memorized spiel.

"Good morning, Mr.——. My name is ——, and I am introducing a work in which everybody is interested. I say everybody, for I have found such to be the case. A great deal is said . . . about the wonderful discoveries of gold in Alaska, and people want to know all about it. They want reliable information, not mere newspaper stories that one can place little dependence upon. Now here is a work that is reliable; and it is comprehensive, telling you all about Alaska and the Gold-fields."

"[Now show your canvassing-book, and call attention to its size, the style of binding, the excellent quality of the paper, and read the title-page in a clear distinct voice, having previously practiced it until you can read it fluently. . . .]"

After listing the many topics covered in the book, the agent was told, "read over the names of your influential subscribers," and mesmerize the customers with the "array of signatures" on the order form. "Men often subscribe because their neighbors have."

Every volume on the market claimed to be the indispensable Klondike Bible for gold seekers, the only true word on what was needed in the north, and warned of the dangers of rival publications. "Beware of the *worthless catch-penny* books that are being issued," stated one Klondike publisher, "prepared by *newspaper* men with *paste and scissors* out of clippings from newspapers—*wholly untrustworthy*." The so-called *Official Guide to the Klondyke Country and the Gold Fields of Alaska* (1897) from the W. B. Conkey Company of Chicago—official only because it was mostly stolen from official-looking articles and documents—claimed to include all the "useful and trustworthy" information about the Klondike. "There is living and reliable authority at the back of almost every statement," it claimed.

Charles Frederick Stansbury, author of *Klondike: The Land of Gold* (1897), honestly admitted he knew nothing about the Klondike when he started his book and only wrote it because he wanted practical information in "a non-hysterical and concrete form. . . . Not being able to find it, he compiled this volume from the best sources of information for the benefit of himself and the public."

Ghostwritten accounts by men who had returned from the Klondike, personal stories of the trail from rags to riches, appealed to a wide audience. William Stanley, the Seattle news-dealer who returned home with \$112,000 in gold dust, hired a secretary to help write *A Mile of Gold*. He professed to have no interest in whether his autobiographical account earned a profit. "If it entertains or instructs my readers, I will be well satisfied," Stanley claimed, "even though it does not result in a financial success, for of gold I have enough and to spare."

J. I. Clements, one of the discoverers of Eldorado Creek, said he wrote *The Klondyke* because after he returned from the Yukon he was "besieged daily by hosts of friends, acquaintances and



From Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields* (1898)

strangers, and deluged with letters from all parts of the American Continent" asking about the gold fields. "Unlike most of the books published on the Klondyke," his editor said, "this book is not full of wild, crazy statements made by irresponsible persons. . . ."

The vast wasteland of fake gold rush literature could have papered the trail all the way to the Klondike and back. In this literary wilderness William Haskell's 1898 "thrilling narrative" of *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields* is unique. In a charming, witty and poetic style, Haskell writes of his trek to Fortymile and Circle City in the spring of 1896 preceding the Klondike discovery, and recounts his adventures in the gold fields before and after the stampede of 1897-98. This gritty, realistic account of life in the north on the eve of the Klondike rush also details the enormous changes that took place once the flood of stampedeers arrived.

Few biographical facts are known about Haskell other than what appear in his book. Born on a farm in Vermont just after the Civil War, he was sent at age 15 by his parents to boarding school in Massachusetts. "Anything like hard study was out of my line," Haskell wrote, "and I seldom engaged in it. I would sit for hours and hear the city boys tell stories, would read tales of wonderful adventure, forgetting entirely to go to bed . . . I wandered about aimlessly in the fields of literature, not neglecting the great masters. But I never studied the lessons staked out by the teachers like so many narrow garden plats."

After leaving school Haskell found himself at age 22 behind the counter of a Boston mercantile store. "It took very little time," he admitted, "for me to discover that there was no romance in the life of a dry-goods clerk." His quest for "aimless adventure" took him west to Colorado and eventually Alaska in March 1896 following "rumors of gold." At that time, nearly a year and a half before the start of the great stampede, he joined a slow but steady stream of prospectors crossing the passes into the Yukon basin.



ASKELL WAS A KEEN observer of human nature, and his insightful, witty comments on conditions in the Yukon Valley in 1896-97 are delightful reading. These are among the finest pages in all of Alaskan literature, with choice sentences and paragraphs worth savoring slowly in every chapter. Whatever the topic, his comments have a ring of originality and authenticity, and a list of his witticisms could fill an encyclopedia of Alaskan life.

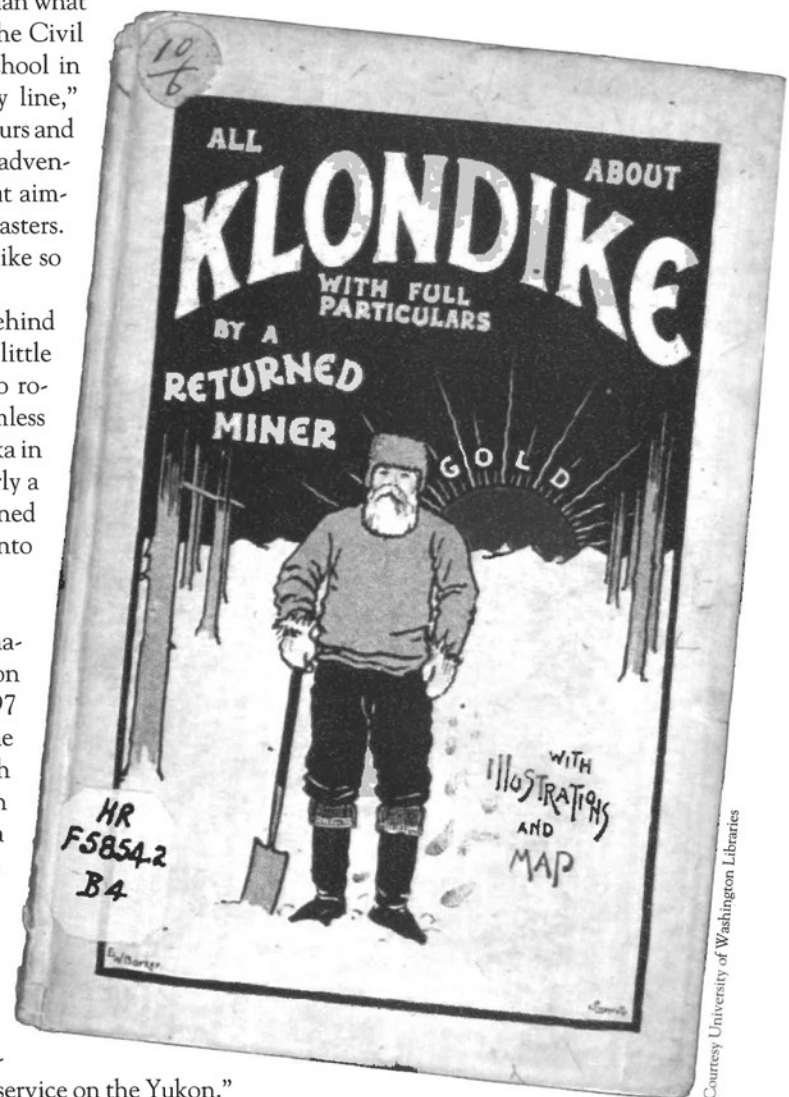
On traveling conditions: "The man who travels in Alaska only when the weather is good will make about a mile a month, on an average. And it is a country of magnificent distances." On the regularity of mail: "If any one is looking for a strong illustration of the uncertainties of existence in this world, he can find nothing better than the mail service on the Yukon."

On the quality of Alaskan bread: "It was a question whether the gold dust or some of the bread made in that camp had the greater specific gravity. It is fortunate that in such a climate the digestive organs are equal to almost anything."

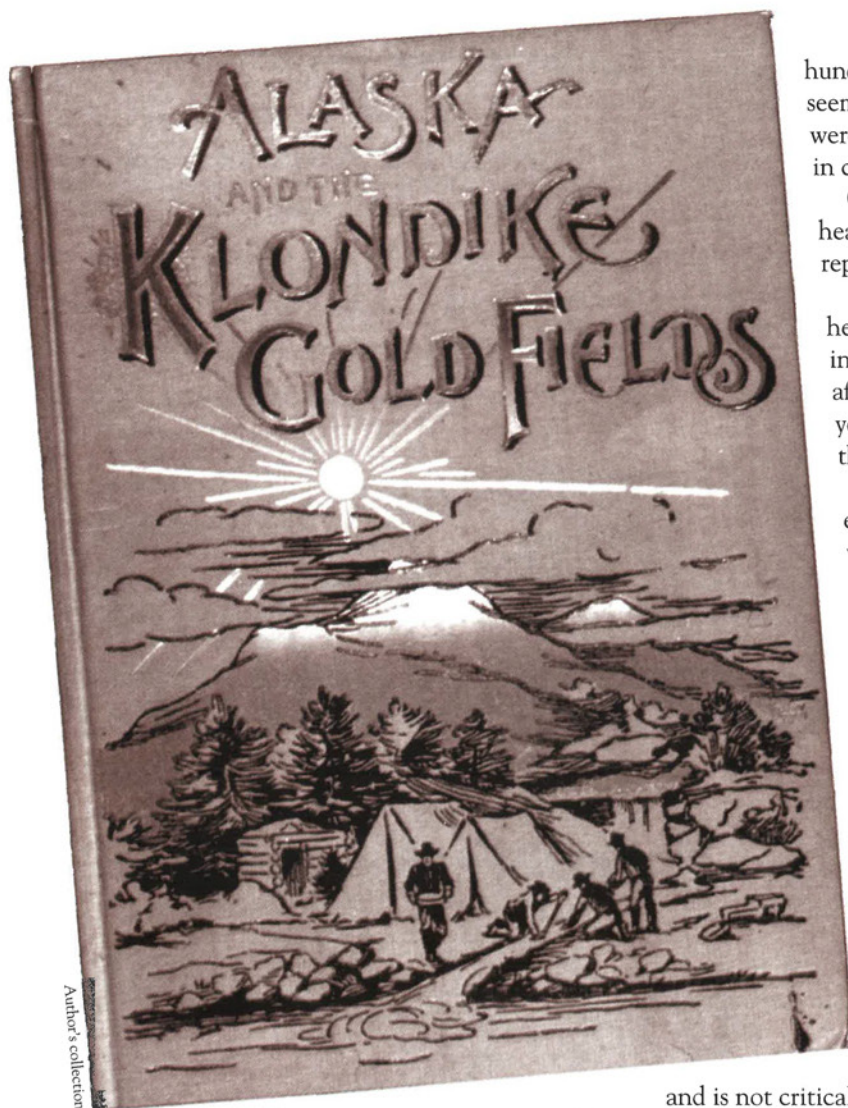
On the lack of reading material: "If one wishes to realize how interesting [labels on boxes of food] can be, let him camp in a gulch somewhere in latitude sixty-four, North America. A trademark on a pick handle becomes fairly eloquent in that solitude."

On hunger: "Many a time that winter I would often have gladly given one

On traveling conditions: "The man who travels in Alaska only when the weather is good will make about a mile a month, on an average. And it is a country of magnificent distances."



Ghostwritten accounts of the trail from rags to riches by men who had returned from the Klondike appealed to a wide audience.



Author's collection

This Klondike book was peddled door to door by high-pressure salesmen equipped with an enticing memorized sales pitch.

hundred dollars in nuggets for a slice of beefsteak. It did seem at times as if all the riches we were taking out were not to be compared with even the lowliest home in civilization."

On the weather: "Does it always rain here?" I once heard a traveler ask of an Indian. 'Snow sometimes,' replied the native in the most matter-of-fact manner."

On the aurora: "The more I reflect on this life and the hereafter, the more I am in doubt as to whether the gold in the frozen placers of Alaska is in itself worth going after. But the aurora of Alaska is worth seeing, even if you have to live on short rations of bacon and beans for three months and find no gold."

On the White Horse Rapids: "Terrible as is the experience, there are few places more sublime to the view. Standing on the bank in safety, the eye is charmed by the waters that leap and foam around the highly-colored rocks. You may watch it for hours and turn away with regret. . . . Everything is on a grand scale, and one acquires a faint realization of what this planet must have been in those untrimmed, uncut, glacial times when the earth was dotted with raging waters like these, and mammoths stalked or crawled about the gloomy hillsides."

On the lure of the dance hall: "After long seasons of hard work in the mines up the creeks . . . even the rasping music of a dance hall sounds sweet. The rough miner delights in a bit of a square dance, or the enlivenment of a reel, or, possibly, if his early education has not been neglected, of a waltz or polka. He knows that he is in a society which cares nothing about the cut of his clothes,

and is not critical about the grace of his steps."

On growing a beard in winter: "It becomes a solid mass of ice, and cannot be thrown off like a parka when entering a warm room. The only thing to do is to sit over the fire and let the glacier on your chin melt. In view of this inconvenience, the majority of miners keep their whiskers trimmed very short in winter, and allow them to grow in the summer as a protection against mosquitoes. Then they are a real blessing, and many times a man will wish himself as hairy as a baboon."



READERS MAY PICK and choose from the literary treasures in Haskell's book, but among my favorites are his reflections on mosquitoes, which he called "thorns in the flesh and destroyers of the soul. For he is a pretty good missionary in Alaska who will not swear once in a while in the mosquito season." Everyone who has ever been to Alaska in the summertime can tell stories about the horrific mosquitoes, but no one has ever matched Haskell's poetic depiction of walking through a swarm, like Moses trying to part the Red Sea. "One may hurl a blanket through a cloud of them, but ranks are closed up and the cloud is again intact before the blanket has hit the ground. All day long, and of course in July that means for about twenty-four hours, they are on the alert, always after anything that has blood in its veins. Any one who reads the Bible in this region in the summer must wonder at the weak nature of Pharaoh. There surely never could be a plague like this."

Today's reader cannot help but be struck by Haskell's generally insulting references to native peoples. His blindness to the charms of Indian cultures is all too

obvious. In contrast, his perceptive analysis of the place of women in northern society seems strikingly modern, as if the words were penned in the 1990s rather than the 1890s. Unlike many other gold rush participants, he took the women who went north seriously, instead of simply dismissing them as foolish females trying to do men's work.

Along the trail to Chilkoot Pass, Haskell observed women unlike any he had ever seen in his life. "One could not fail to notice many instances . . . in which the women seemed to show a fortitude superior to the men. It was a revelation, almost a mystery. But after a while I began to account for it as the natural result of an escape from the multitude of social customs and restraints which in civilized society hedge about a woman's life. . . . She steps out of her dress into trousers in a region where nobody cares. Her nature suddenly becomes aware of a freedom which is in a way exhilarating. She has, as it were, thrown off the fetters which civilized society imposes. . . ."

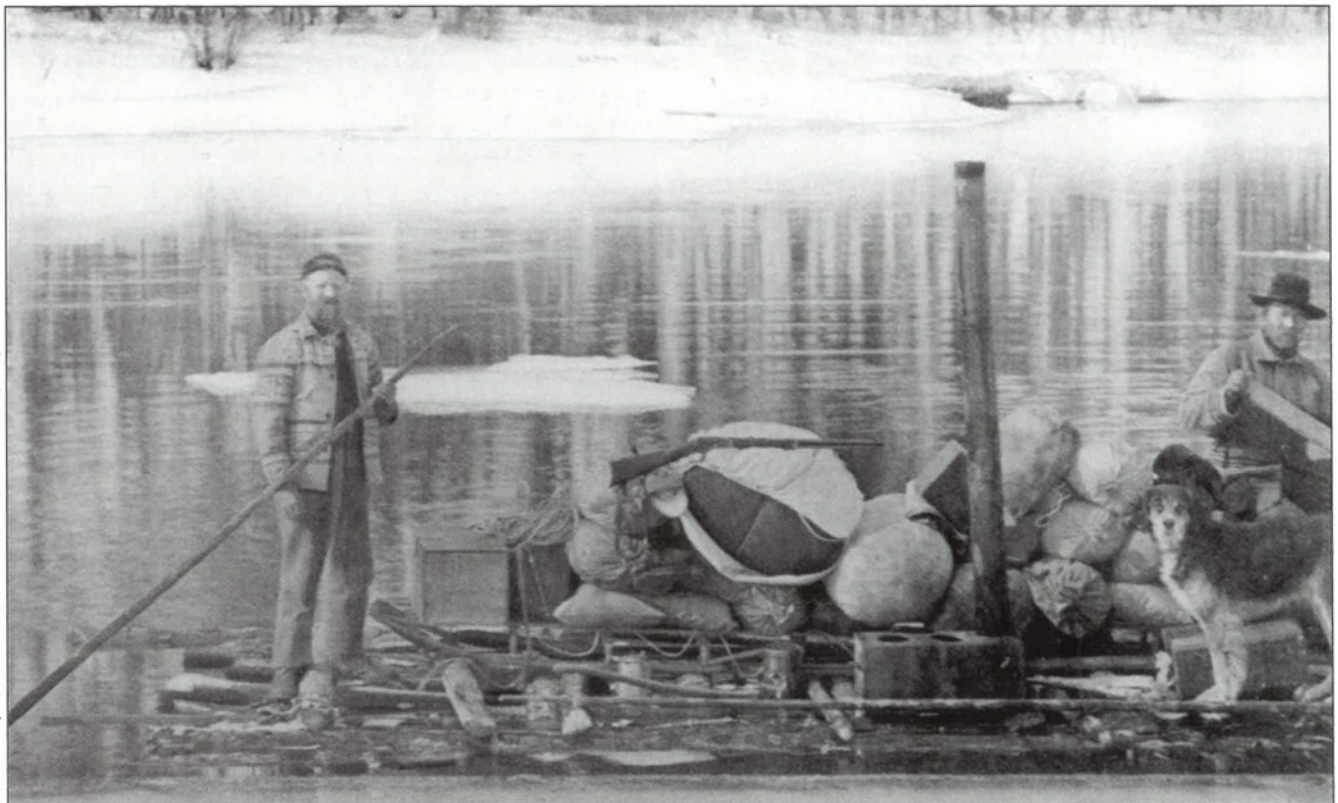


ASKELL'S PARTNER drowned in an accident on the trail as they were leaving the gold fields, and the tragedy left him numb with grief. Consumed with the bitter memory of his friend's death, he could barely comprehend the Klondike craze he found sweeping the country upon his return to the West Coast in early 1898. "To one who has just returned from a two-years experience in the gold regions of the Yukon, who has seen death and suffering as an incident of everyday life, who knows what mining in Alaska or in the Klondike means . . . and who has seen his dearest friend swept away under the ice by a raging river which can count its victims by the score, these preparations for rushing for fortunes into those frozen mountains appeared like madness."

His advice for those planning to head north was simple: Don't go! But the constant cry of the Klondike chorus drowned out sane discussion. "Wherever I went I heard little but 'Klondike' talked about on the cars, in the hotels, in the

On the weather: "Does it always rain here?" I once heard a traveler ask of an Indian. 'Snow sometimes,' replied the native in the most matter-of-fact manner."

"Rafting down the Yukon River." The mining outfit of these two Klondikers—consisting of provisions, arms, camp equipage, dogs and so forth—is piled on their rude raft.



From Haskell, *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Gold-Fields* (1898)



"Snowed in." Waiting for better weather, a gold seeker clad in his parka poses with dogs and horse near his snow-covered tent.

ON EXHIBIT

GOLDEN DREAMS
The Quest for the Klondike,
 Featuring Photographs by
 Asahel Curtis

The love of gold and adventure drove thousands to seek their fortunes in the goldfields of the Yukon. **GOLDEN DREAMS** recreates the journey, as seen through the eyes of photographer Asahel Curtis. His compelling visual images, coupled with integrated video productions using voices and the actual words of the stampeders, bring their stories to life. Recreated dioramas and stage sets work as well to transport the visitor into this most amazing journey.

GOLDEN DREAMS is on view at the Washington State History Museum

THROUGH JUNE 2, 1998

saloons, and even on Sundays at church. Whenever you observed a knot of men in the street, in a rural highway, or in any public place in California, you were pretty sure to find that the latest news of new strikes in the Klondike diggings was under discussion. . . . 'Yes, I'm going this spring,' was a popular button worn."

Demand for information about the Klondike, he said, "amounted almost to hunger. The public libraries all had constant calls for literature relating to Alaska. All the returned Klondikers were run after and appealed to by crowds of men and a few women for Klondike information. The more successful Klondikers were driven to exasperation by unaccountable questions from droves of people."



THE INSATIABLE PUBLIC desire for knowledge of the Klondike inspired Haskell to write his blunt account of the real conditions that he knew awaited potential gold seekers. No matter what the public wanted to believe, he wrote, "gold does not grow upon the bushes of the Yukon hills." Despite his conviction that anyone planning a trip north in 1898 was making a horrible mistake, he nevertheless included an entire chapter of practical suggestions for those who insisted on going anyway.

"Take no trunks. They are about as difficult to get over the passes as six-story buildings."

"It is constructive suicide for one to go to the Klondike with less than one year's supply of food."

"Fur coats might seem valuable, and some will say that they are. They are most usually worn when people are having their pictures taken to send home to their friends."

"Revolvers will get you into trouble, and there is no use of taking them with you. . . ."

Despite Haskell's hard-won knowledge, his readers were no more likely to find gold than anyone else. In the end so few individuals found gold that historian Pierre Berton called the Klondike gold rush "one of the most useless mass movements in history." Certainly the stampeders of 1898 would have never dreamed that after a hundred years one of the most lasting treasures from the gold rush would be a book some carried with them, a book about one man's adventures in the Klondike.

Terrence Cole is author of numerous works on the Klondike and Alaska gold rushes, and chairman of the History Department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

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FRONT COVER: *Hunting for Gold*, a novel about the great Klondike stampede of 1897-98, was one of many contemporary works published to satisfy the public's voracious appetite for information about the gold rush. BACK COVER: The New York Herald was less than enthusiastic about the prospects of success in the Klondike gold fields. (Both images courtesy of Terrence Cole.)