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**WHITEWATER MEN**  
**OF THE**  
**SKEENA**



*by Wiggs O'Neill*

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*W. J. O'Neill*

*by Wiggs O'Neill*

# Foreword

*No one knows the turbulent Skeena River of British Columbia better than Wiggs O'Neill. He was intimately connected with its steamboat days from 1899 to 1912 as a purser, boat operator and as a shareholder in the "Inlander", the last sternwheeler on the river.*

*Mr. O'Neill in his book "Steamboat Days on the Skeena River" told of the navigation hazards, the boats and their captains. Now he tells about some of the personalities who helped make the steamboat era a colourful and interesting one.*

*Mr. O'Neill, who at the age of 77 has an amazing memory for names, dates and happenings, is an accomplished story teller as I am sure the reader will discover.*

Stanley Rough,  
Kitimat, British Columbia  
15th August 1960



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# 1 THE HOLY CITY

In very early days a missionary and his family came to the Skeena by the difficult and round about way, by going up the Naas River and crossing to the Skeena Valley by the Grease Trail — the old trail used by the Indians to back pack their supply of oolichan grease to their homes on the Skeena to avoid coming in conflict with the warlike Coast Indians.

He spent the first winter at Kispiox camped with his family. The following spring he explored the Skeena Valley and found a place to his liking, where he could locate and build a village. It was a beautiful setting, under the shadow of the towering Seven Sister Mountain range. The land was good, the water supply was adequate and the location on the banks of the Skeena was ideal, all he needed was population. He set to work, built a Church and Mission and invited all natives who would care to join his community — he named the Village, Miniskinisht, meaning "Below the Pitch Pine".

The mission was a free community under the domination of no established Church or doctrine. Mr. Robert Tomlinson, as such was his name, was the minister in charge and all he asked of the natives who joined his community was that they respect him as their teacher and minister and live up to the teachings of Christianity. He had no salary from any source, made his living by farming and taught them also how to farm and make homes for themselves and families.

In spite of his very strict discipline and rigid rules in his village, natives gradually joined his mission, until it became quite a prosperous community. He was their Minister, taught them school and what trades he was familiar with and was very much honored and respected by all his people and by the white people who went up and down the river.

He did come in for some criticism on account of his extreme religious code and for this reason the village was generally known as the "Holy City". During the steamboat era, he had strict rules which had to be obeyed, one being that no boat could land there on Sunday, no matter how important it was. It was a rule and that was that, no argument. The boat captains would try and arrange their trips so as not to arrive on Sundays. If by some delay they had to arrive on Sunday, they would

pass by and deliver any mail or freight for the Holy City on the return trip.

Mr. Tomlinson had a community jail built, and if any of his flock got mixed up in any delivery or ran foul of any fire water, they would be tried and locked up in the Skookum house for a term.

On one trip of the Caledonia, Captain Bonser called at the village. It was the last trip for the year and it was getting rather late in the season. The missionary asked the Captain to be sure and call on the way down on Monday as he had a shipment of potatoes to go to the Coast. He said he would have them all sacked and on the river bank.

When the boat arrived at Hazelton on Saturday and unloaded, the river started to fall very fast and Captain Bonser felt he dare not wait until Monday for fear of getting caught up river for the winter, so left Hazelton in a great hurry on Sunday morning. When Bonser arrived at the Holy City to pick up the potatoes, Mr. Tomlinson arrived on the river bank, put up his hand and said "You know Captain you can't land here on Sunday."

The Captain tried to tell him he couldn't wait as he was afraid of the water situation — "Well" said the missionary "You know the rules, go on your way". "But" said the Captain "how about your spuds?" "Never mind the spuds, Captain, I'll put them back in the root house" said Mr. Tomlinson.

He had a code and that was that.

Reverend Tomlinson raised a fine family there and the natives were the best behaved people on the river.

The Village, now known as Cedarvale, has a beautiful setting under the shadow of the Seven Sisters Mountains.

## 2 MY FIRST TRIP UP THE RIVER

Records had been kept over a period of years at the Hudsons Bay Company's Post at Hazelton, and it was noted that invariably there had been a rainy period in the fall of the year,



causing the water in the river to rise to at least steamboat levels for a short time. The Company's steamer *Caledonia* had usually made three to four trips a season, the final trip the latter part of August. Freight and supplies taken up to Hazelton this last voyage had to last the up river communities over the winter, and on into the middle of May the following Spring, when the first boat of the season would arrive.

Commodities such as eggs, etc., had a chance to become extremely ripe by that time. We were told that during the few weeks before the arrival of the first boat, they had to use quantities of Worcestershire sauce and mustard to get a humble egg down. To shorten up the long period between August and May, the Bay decided to attempt a fall trip, taking advantage of the usual fall rains and rise of water. So about the first of October 1898, they made the try.

The *Caledonia* Captain, J. H. Bonser pulled out of Port Simpson, Company headquarters on the Northern Coast, called in at Inverness cannery at the mouth of the Skeena, and loaded a good cargo of supplies, which had been landed by coast steamers from Victoria. I had snagged myself a job as pantryman for the trip. I knew nothing about the duties but was willing to learn under the guidance of Chief Steward, Mr. Shaw. Pulling out of Inverness we started up the Skeena, calling at Port Essington, Robert Cunningham's headquarters, to pick up a jag of freight for his branch store at Hazelton and a few passengers, and started for Hazelton, 180 miles up river.

The river was very low yet, and our progress was slow, hunting for the deeper channels, and in some places winding her over the shallow bars with the help of wire cables and our steam capstan. As soon as it got dark we tied up to the river bank, a water gauge was put out, and read in the morning to see if the water had risen or fallen during the night, and away again at daybreak for another day of battle. On the fifth day we arrived at Thornhill's Landing. Old Tom Thornhill and his wife had a small log home fronting on a small sandy beach, just below the east end of the present Terrace bridge.

We tied up for a couple of days waiting for the water to rise. On the morning of the second day, the gauge recorded a rise of a couple of inches, so we started out. Those who have had no experience in river work may say "What's a couple of inches", but an inch or two of water sometimes made a lot of difference in navigating the Skeena.

We only got as far as the Copper River rapids, the water being too low to overcome this shallow riffle, we had to drop back to Stewart's Landing and tie up again.

Stewart's Landing was the beach in front of Sim Dobbie's home and orchard. Dave Stewart the owner at that time, was a Scotsman, who settled there and raised a big family, one of them being the present Mrs. Dobbie. At that time the children were all small and they used to come down every day and have a look at the Caledonia. As I remember, both Tom Thornhill and Dave welcomed our stay at their landings. The steamboat had a bar, which was well stocked with Hudson's Bay Company's special varieties, mostly overproof, and both old chaps used to come aboard for a drink.

We stayed a few days at Stewart's and finally one morning the gauge registered a sharp rise in the river and we proceeded on our journey and arrived at Kitselas Canyon in a couple of hours. There was only one man there at the time as I recall, by the name of Charlie Kendal who was a prospector. All I remember about him was he sported a huge walrus red moustache and he had a very novel old wagon — the wheels were made from four cuts from a very large tree. We only stayed there long enough to take on some cord wood from Charlie's wood pile. He also, like the chaps down the river patronized the ship's bar, but his style was cramped somewhat by our short stay.

We passed through the Canyon without incident, as the Canyon was no problem in low water stage, and headed on up river with high hopes of making Hazelton. From there on we had several days of pretty hard slugging, having to line over shallow bars every mile or two. One particularly hard place was the rapids near where Usk is now, that the Captain named "Hard-scrabble". This one held us for several hours. We finally arrived at the mouth of Fiddler Creek a short distance below Lorne Creek. The Captain decided to wait here for a further rise in water, as a very bad place was just ahead called the "Devil's Elbow" which we knew was impassable at that stage of water: the water gauge was put out as usual and we sat down for another waiting period. We were held here for two full weeks, and the water remained stationary. Time dragged on our hands during this long wait, so a fishing competition was got under way. There was a pool made, which went to the fellow who caught the heaviest dolly varden trout. Our Purser, Eddie Crickmay, from Vancouver caught a very big one, and the whole crew fished from morning

to night to try and beat him, with no success. Finally the Captain hooked one nearly as big, but not so heavy, so they stuffed it full of small stones and outweighed him. After kidding him for some time they gave him the prize.

During this waiting period, we ran out of soap and the kitchen crew were having difficulty with the dish washing and cleaning up. Our Purser refused to let them broach cargo and get some, so the situation was bad. I undertook to make some lye like my old grandmother used to do when I was a kid on the ranch on the Bonepart.

I got some wood ashes out of the furnaces and made a set-up on the upper deck. I misjudged the amount of water I put in the upper dripping container, consequently my lye can at the bottom overflowed all over the deck during the night. As the decks of a river steamer are covered with heavy canvas and heavily painted red, my lye took all the paint off the deck. The Captain went looking for his pantryman with blood in his eye but I kept well out of sight until his wrath cooled off. Anyway the lye was a success and relieved the situation.

It was getting well along in October, fresh snow appeared on the mountains, the water began to drop instead of rise and the fall rains had failed to materialize. Everything came to life aboard ship, everybody went into action, all the cargo was unloaded on the bank of the river and covered over with tarpaulins to protect it from the weather. There being no telegraph line at the time, a two man light canoe was sent on to Hazelton from the Indian Village a few miles up the river, with a letter to Dick Sargent, who was with the Hudson's Bay post there, advising him of the attempted fall trip, and its failure. Dick immediately went into action, organized a fleet of Haida built freight canoes, with five men to a canoe to freight the cargo to Hazelton, which he managed to do before the ice appeared in the River.

As soon as the Caledonia was unloaded we turned tail and headed down the river, it was a race against time with us also, the water was falling so fast that we ran the chances of getting hung up on a bar in the river and getting stuck there for the winter. Luck was with us, besides having in Captain Bonser an outstanding river man, who could read water like a book, we won out and arrived back in Port Simpson, all in good shape but of course disappointed we had not completed our fall trip.



### 3 THE SPIRITS OF LORNE CREEK

Lorne Creek, many years ago was the scene of a big placer gold excitement. Lorne Creek flows into the Skeena River about forty miles up stream from Terrace and produced quite a lot of gold in its time. Many gold miners heard of a big strike on Lorne Creek and hiked all the way there to be in on it.

When I first went up the Skeena in 1898 there were two or three small outfits still digging in a small way, hanging on in the hopes that they would be lucky and strike it big. Later on there was a fairly big outfit called the Dry Hill Mining Co., who tried hydraulic mining, but did not have much success. Still later there was a fellow who went by the name of Captain Jack who came in with a party and tried his luck for a season, but without success.

Russel Smith, a railway engineer sank some hard earned cash in another venture. Russel was told that if the creek could be diverted so as to get at the bottom of the Canyon a fortune would be lying there to pick up, but alas, when Russel got there the cupboard was bare.

One summer a man and his wife arrived from California to give Lorne Creek a whirl. They picked up a crew at Port Essington and proceeded to the gold country. Semon was his name, his wife was a big blonde woman who had had considerable success in California in finding things by the use of Spiritualism. Among the men they hired on the coast, was a French fellow I knew named Tony Minard, whom some of the old timers may still remember. He afterwards worked for many years as a Public Works foreman and finished his days in the Peace River country.

Tony was a real comedian and a fine type of fellow. I always remember his telling me about trying to find gold on Lorne Creek by using the Spirits while working for the Semon party. Of course half of the fun was hearing Tony tell it, which would be hard to duplicate. Tony said they had a fine outfit, good grub, good camps, and after they were set up, the prospecting began.

After breakfast they would all get ready with their picks and shovels and sit around and await the arrival of Mrs. Semon, who had her breakfast served in her private tent. After a while she would come out, Mr. Semon would put a blindfold

on her and hand her a wand. Tony in describing the procedure said Mrs. Semon would stand up straight like a post, she would snap her fingers and hum a little tune. Her husband would then guide her along the gravel bar. Pretty soon the spirits would get working and she would stop and jab the stick in the ground and yell out "Here is the gold." The party would get busy and start digging. After a few days there would be quite a hole dug and when bed rock was reached all would get excited, expecting a big strike, but — "No gol", said Tony and continued the story. "Well, Mrs. Semon she couldn't savay dat. She think maybe the Spirits dey make a mistake dat time, so she try again. After we hit bed rock in dat hole, same thing "No gol' ". Well we dig holes all over that summer, same thing "No gol' ". I don't know what Mr. Semon think. We don't mind, we get good pay and Mr. Semon good boss and pay up on time all da time. When fall time come and we never find one ounce of gol' I don't know what Mr. Semon think about dem Spirits, he don't say much, but he look pretty disgust."

"So he say one evening "Well boys, we call it off. To Hell with dem Spirits, I got to quit before I go broke". Well, he send a man up de river to the Holy City and get a big canoe with an Indian crew, and we all go down the Skeena river to Spokeshoot (Port Essington). He pay us all off and he and Mrs. Semon and all the Spirits hit out for south back to California. Mrs. Semon, she never say much, but dem dam Spirits sure let her down. I never see dem again, but Mr. Semon was sure one fine fella."

I don't think Lorne Creek ever boomed again as a gold camp, but no doubt there is still gold in them thar hills if you can find it. I would not suggest using Spirits.

## 4 THE LOST STEAMBOAT

The year 1894 was a flood year for British Columbia, all the rivers of the Province experienced a high water period and the Skeena was no exception. There are today drift logs on the top of Ringbolt Island and high up on the walls of Kitselas Canyon left there after the waters receded from this terrible flood. On some of the islands in the Skeena, where big spruce trees are

growing with drooping limbs downwards to the ground, you can today raise up a branch and see the muddy highwater mark still there as plain as if left there yesterday. There has never been a highwater to equal it since. Our highwater of 1936 was a baby in comparison.

The first Caledonia had made it through the Canyon and was fighting her way up stream, bound for Hazelton with a load of freight and a few passengers. The water was rising rapidly and was so swift that her progress was slow. Finally drift wood began coming down so that it was getting dangerous. Huge trees with their roots intact, as they had been uprooted from the banks of the river by the flood began to fill the river.

When they got to Kitwanga, within twenty five miles of Hazelton, it wasn't even safe to lay at the bank of the river, so Captain Bonser dropped down river and went up the Kitwancool river and tied up at a sheltered place. The Caledonia was marooned there for the duration of the highwater period. As the water began to recede she dropped down the Kitwancool a short distance each day, so as to avoid being stranded.

Finally on getting back on the Skeena, they found the driftwood had stopped and they were able to finish their trip to Hazelton and deliver the cargo. When the Caledonia arrived back at headquarters in Port Simpson the manager of the Bay was much relieved as he was in the process of organizing a canoe search party to proceed to the Skeena and find his lost steamer. She had been away well over a month, with no word of her, as there were no telegraphs or telephones in the country. Not even a message by Mocassin telegraph had come in.

## 5 A SACK OF FLOUR

Paul Kato, or Paul the Jap as he was usually called, was the biggest little man I ever knew. He held a very important position on the original Caledonia on the Skeena. He was ship's carpenter, cook, steward and waiter all in one, and general handy man when required.

On one trip up river the ship struck a submerged snag



and punched a hole in her bottom near the bow. The Captain acted quickly and ran full speed for a river bar and just made it in time before the bow compartment sank. They tied up to a big log jam and by that time there was five feet of water in the front hold.

Paul threw off his coat and shirt and dived in to make an examination of the damage. When he came up and climbed out, he said "Berry easy, fixem Capn", "You stealem one big sack flour". They kept an eye on old Bunk, the purser, who guarded his cargo like diamonds, and managed to steal the sack of flour for him. Paul went out on a drift pile, sawed a chunk off a big log and split a plank off it, cut braces and made some wooden wedges. When he was ready, he dived into the water again and took a good look, came up puffing and spitting water. He dived again and shoved the sack of flour in the big hole in the bottom, put the plank on top of it, placed his braces on top and drove in his wedges tight, coming up now and again for more air.

The Engineer rigged up a syphon and had it ready. When Paul was ready, he came up puffing and spitting and yelled out to the Engineer "Arright Mr. Hickey, go aheadum siphon". In a short time the hold was pumped out and the Caledonia was afloat. She went on, finished her trip to Hazelton, delivered her cargo and back to Port Simpson, where they put her on the ways and repaired the hole in her bottom.

That was a valuable sack of flour and Bunky the purser never knew that the sack he missed on checking at Hazelton was plugged in a hole in the bottom of the ship.

## 6 INGENUITY A MUST

In the steam boat days, there were no ship yards to repair ships of any kind. The crew had to have a little bit of know-how to be able to get along. The following is an illustration.

On one trip coming back to the coast after a good trip to Hazelton, just after passing through Kitselas Canyon, the Caledonia blew a cylinder head on the starboard engine. They were

lucky it didn't happen in a bad place, as they were able to launch a ship's boat and run a line ashore and snub her into the shore and tie up.

There they were, lucky but helpless. There being no telephones or telegraphs, it would be necessary to send a small boat or canoe to the coast to catch the coast mail boat and order parts from Victoria. Captain Bonser and Pat Hickey the chief engineer went into a huddle and put their thinking caps on. Pat said, "From my end of the ship I'm helpless, with only one engine, she will either stick on top dead centre or bottom, and that's it". Captain Bonser got an idea "Look, Pat" said he, "if I have Paul Kato (the ship's carpenter) remove a bucket from the paddle wheel, that is in the water, when your engine is on top dead centre, and on dead opposite when she is on bottom, there being no resistance she will roll over herself and the eccentric will open your steam valves — what you think?" — "Well" said Pat, "go ahead and we will try it, but be sure you keep a line ashore, while we're trying it". They tried it out, tied up to the bank, and lo and behold it worked. They made their way back to Port Simpson on their own steam on one engine. Of course there was a terrible vibration, caused by being two paddles short, but they made it. Afterwards Pat Hickey said he doubted if he had a sound tooth in his head left.

## 7 PAUL BUILDS A SCHOONER

Around 1894, as the steamboat was now a proven venture on the Skeena, the trade routes changed. Instead of Fort St. James and Fort Babine being supplied via the Fraser River route, they could now be supplied via the Skeena route at less cost.

Paul Kato was commissioned to take a crew of carpenters, their tools and construction materials needed and go to Hazelton on the Caledonia. His outfit was packed into Babine lake by pack train. There on the shore of the lake he set up and whip-sawed the lumber and built a large schooner. The sailing ship

was named the Edith and under the command of a Captain Charles H. French, she hauled the freight on the hundred and ten mile lake.

This was quite an achievement to turn out this vessel way back in the woods, even to designing and making the sails.

Paul was a remarkable fellow and to watch his Jap crew working with their back handed tools was marvelous. Paul was everyone's hero. He was in a great measure responsible for early steamboat days being a success. With no ways, or repair facilities on the river, the crews had to be resourceful and Paul could sure use his head and had lots of what they used to call "Savvy".

## 8 PAUL TAKES A CONTRACT

At the end of the season, the Caledonia was always pulled out of the ways at Port Simpson for the winter. They had three big hand capstans for doing the job, employing about fifty or sixty Indians for three or four days. They would pull the cradle down to the end of the ways, and load it with rocks so it would not float. When the tide was high the Caledonia would be floated in and held over the cradle until the tide dropped, then the rocks would all be unloaded and they would man the capstans and inch by inch she would be pulled up the ways. It usually cost the Hudson Bay Company twelve to fourteen hundred dollars to do the job.

Paul Kato went to Mr. Clifford the Bay manager and said he wanted a contract to pull the Caledonia up. "Oh, how much you want" said the manager, said Paul "I do good job, I makem berry cheap, two hundred and fifty dollars." The saving was so great, Mr. Clifford gave him the job.

Paul with his Jap crew, pulled the cradle down, tied it down to the ways with rope, made arrangements with Mr. Hickey, the engineer to keep steam up. He moved the Caledonia in on the cradle. As soon as she was fast on the cradle, he dived down a few times and cut the ropes with a big knife. As soon as he had cut the last rope and bobbed up blowing water, he yelled out "O.K.



Mr. Hickey, go aheadem, steam Captain." The Caledonia was up and in place that night.

Paul made good on his contract and the Indian capstan men who were looking on were "Delate Salex" (very mad).

## 9 A PURSER GETS A SCARE

The original Caledonia had a famous Purser by the name of Gordon Lockerby. We kids always called him "Old Bunky". He had been a deep sea sailor and was first mate on a sailing ship Star of Peace operating between London and British Columbia, handling freight for the Hudson's Bay Company. Bunky had made thirteen trips around Cape Horn in sail.

On his last trip while discharging cargo at Victoria a box had dropped out of a sling and came down on his right hand resting on a box, and smashed all his fingers. After his hand was attended to by the surgeon, all he had left was a big thumb on the hand. The Company gave him a shore job and sent him up the coast to work at Port Simpson. By splicing an extension on his pen handle and putting the end up his coat sleeve and hooking it up with his big thumb, he was able to write a beautiful free hand and was a wonderful penman. The Company made him purser on the Caledonia.

He and the second engineer Dave Good became great friends. In June when the high water period was on and the Caledonia was tied up at the Big Canyon waiting for the water to drop, Bunky and Dave used to walk up to the head of the Canyon for a stroll every afternoon. Time was heavy on the crew's hands, all they could do was wait so the Captain and some of the crew decided to have some fun. They found an old bear skin nailed on the wall of the warehouse, and dressed Eli Clappenburger the wood passer up as a bear and sneaked up the road. They all hid in the brush to watch the fun. Eli went in the brush up the trail a bit.

Bunky and Dave came down the road returning from

their stroll when Eli made a rustle in the bush and stood up on his hind legs and roared. Bunky and Dave took one look and hit for home. Dave was ahead and took off up a tree and yelled for Bunky to do the same. Bunky came flying past and yelled "Dammit I can't climb, only got one hand". He never looked back until he made the ship and fell on the deck exhausted. When the Caledonia got back to Port Simpson, Bunky told this terrible experience to everyone and every time he told it the bear got bigger and the roar louder.

That fall, someone wrote the story up in a Victoria paper and told all the facts and old Bunky was a pretty mad Scotsman.

## 10 JACKMAN'S EDDY

Heading up stream just before you come to Skeena Crossing, where the railway now crosses the Skeena, the Kitseguekla river comes leaping into the Skeena from the right. The Kitseguekla Rapids start right here, one of the hardest rapids the boats had to negotiate on the river. The water is very swift and all white water.

Where the Kitseguekla comes in and the force of its flow pushes well out in the river, a big long eddy formed. In entering the rapids a good handler would ride the ridge, the starboard half of his ship would be in the eddy and the port half in the Skeena. There had to be good timing, so just before the fast water of the rapids struck the bow of the ship, the rudders had to be hard over and the ship well on the turn before you hit the current.

One of the Captains invariably made a mess of this one. He would go too much in the eddy and when the current struck his bows, the ship would shoot across the river. He would have to back up and finally get turned around half a mile down stream—then he had to try it again.

This eddy was always called "Jackman's Eddy" by the steamboat men on the river. The eddy is still there, but there are no boats to challenge it any more.

## 11 THE SKY PILOT'S SCOW

There was a skipper on the river, who was what we used to call a "poor handler." That meant that he was not so skilful as might be in handling his ship, lacking judgment in some ways and not too good at reading water currents and shallows. He was evidently careful, an asset on the Skeena.

The other Captains were all familiar with his short comings and extreme carefulness. They made a lot of fun of him and accused him of always having the wind up; he was always a joke with them.

On one occasion he was coming down through Kitselas Canyon, as the water was a little too high to suit him, he turned around and resorted to wire cables and lined his ship all the way down and it took him four hours to make the half mile. After he got tied up below the Canyon, he went over to Jack Patterson's hotel and had a stiff bracer as he had been sweating all of the four hours in the Canyon.

He turned to Jack and said "Well Jack I got through and never even scraped any paint off the guards, guess that is as good as any of these other wise guys could do." He got no sympathy from Jack, who said "Oh Hell, anybody can come through the Canyon tail first, with a halter on all the way. That's the way Mr. Tomlinson at the Holy City used to bring his Potato Scow down, of course he didn't even have an engine or a paddle wheel." The captain wasn't too happy about this, when he expected a little praise.

## 12 THE MOUNT ROYAL'S STRONG BOX

After the loss of the Mount Royal in 1907, there was a lot of speculation up and down the river as to what was really lost on her in the way of valuables. As the story was hashed and rehashed, of course the loss grew until it was estimated that the company must have at least lost thirty thousand dollars worth of fur, being shipped to London. It was also estimated that there



was thirty thousand dollars worth of gold dust from the Manson Creek country being shipped out in her strongbox. People were sure that the receipts from freight collections and passenger fares for two or three previous voyages were also in the safe, as there was not much chance of banking at the time. The value of her strong box assumed wonderful proportions the more it was discussed.

A bunch of prospectors were sitting around the lobby of the hotel at Port Simpson discussing the subject. One fellow said he would love to fish that safe up and thought he would make up some good strong iron grapples and when the water got low, would try his luck at fishing it up. Mr. Rudge the owner of the hotel, spoke up "I think you better give up that idea Barney, I hope they never find that dang safe", "How come?" said Barney.

"Well you see, it was like this" said George, "The trip before she was wrecked, my wife and I were the guests of Captain and Mrs. Johnson on a trip to Hazelton. All the way up and all the way back when tied up at night, we had some pretty stiff poker games. There were such players as Tom Jefferson and Harry Howson in the game and Captain Johnson himself, who was no slouch, in fact it was often said that instead of his name being Stuart Johnson, it should have been Stoneface, as that mug of his won many a poker hand with a pair of duces. You see I was really outclassed and lost \$900.00 on the trip. Most of my losses were in cheques and as none of them have ever been cashed, I figure they are still in that safe, and I think that is a good place for them to stay."

## 13 A MURDER SCARE ON THE INLANDER

Our steward, Joe, was an old womanish sort of a guy, but a top dog man at his job. He was always immaculate, set a bang up dining table and did his part to catch the best of the travelling public as customers for the Inlander. His skill as a steward and the wonderful table set on our boat got around and the Inlander became famous in that respect.

One morning, Joe kind of staggered to the purser's office

and threw himself across the wicket and gasped out "Oh Wiggs, it's terrible". He was as white as snow and his eyes were rolling. "Come and see yourself, a passenger has been murdered."

I went with him, but Joe stayed back in the passageway, he couldn't take a second look. I opened the door of room 17 where he said it happened; I'll admit I got a bit of a shock myself. The fellow was on the floor with his feet towards the door and his head and shoulders against the wall. His eyes were wide open and glassy, there was blood all over his forehead and face and not a move out of him.

In the absence of a doctor, I remembered George Frizzell, the owner of the butcher shop was on board, making a trip up river. As a butcher was next best thing to a doctor, he could at least stand a blood scene, I closed the door and went for George. Much to our relief, on our return, we found the fellow was breathing and not dead at all. After washing him up we found he had a bad wound in his scalp and the blood had got all over his face. Then we found he was dead drunk and didn't know a thing.

We met the Distributor a few miles up stream, whistled her down and transferred our drunk and sent him back to the hospital at Rupert.

It was found out later that he had been in a brawl in Vancouver awhile before and one of his drinking companions had broken a bottle over his head and he had to get repairs in the hospital. When we were loading freight at Port Essington at night, he had gone ashore on another jag and coming aboard in the early hours of the morning had fallen against the wall in the room and opened the wound up again.

It took our Joe a long time to get over that scare.

## 14 THE ILLFATED GRIDER PARTY

One day just after Christmas the old steam boat Barbara Boscowitz steamed into the harbor of Port Simpson and docked at the Hudson's Bay Company wharf. The sleepy old place wondered what had struck it when so many passengers came ashore. They were all outfitted in mackinaw clothing for real winter

weather and all in great spirits. Everyone wondered why all the excitement.

The Captain, Sam Williams, held the ship in port all day while they scoured the Indian village and bought up all the dogs, sleighs, moccasins and buckskin clothing they could lay their hands on.

The story finally leaked out, that it was a mining party from San Francisco, bound for Manson Creek in the Omineca country where there was a big gold strike reported.

There were sixty in the party, all men but two, the doctor and another member of the party having brought their wives along. The party was well organized; a Mr. Grider was the leading light and top dog of the venture. They had their own cooks and camp hands, doctor and a great amount of supplies. Before they got on their way, the Hudson's Bay Company manager, Mr. Alexander Murray, who knew the country well, having been in charge of Fort St. James before coming to Port Simpson, persuaded them to leave the two ladies at Port Simpson for the winter. He pointed out they could go on to Hazelton in the spring on the Skeena River boat Caledonia, as they would never stand the trip in over the Grease Trail, both being city bred ladies. Mr. Murray arranged for them to stay at the company residence for the winter.

They finally proceeded on their way. When the expedition got to the village of Kincolith at the mouth of the Naas river, they bought up more dogs and sleighs and went up the river on the ice to where the Grease Trail started across country to Hazelton on the Skeena River. They had a terrible trip, as the trail was not broken, having not been in use that winter, and none of the party had ever had any experience as dog mushers and carrying big packs on their backs. Their progress was slow and they were a weary bunch of men before they got to Hazelton, but the promise of gold was strong in their minds and it spurred them on.

They had as their guide a fellow by the name of Jimmy Wells. Jimmy had gone to Mission school and was pretty smart — I remember he wrote a beautiful hand, the way he could sign "J. D. Wells" to a letter, one would imagine he was a bank manager or something. Jimmy had spent a summer in Manson Creek, where miners were working some placer claims. Jimmy managed to get himself appointed Mining Recorder — while he never made much on the job, he was full of importance.

When the mining closed down for the winter and things



were tied up until spring, Jimmy came out and went south for a trip. He managed to get down as far as San Francisco. He got talking "big" down there and as he was a Government Mining Recorder got people to listen to him. He ran into a man named Grider, who was quite a promoter. Jimmy Wells told him about this wonderful country at Manson Creek, where the nuggets were large and as thick as peas. Grider swallowed it hook, line and sinker and organized a mining company forthwith. The report was that every member had thrown in a thousand dollars for their share in the Company. How much our J. D. Wells got out of it, no one ever found out.

One can imagine the excitement that hit Hazelton when the Grider party hit town in mid-February out of the blue, with no communications — completely shut in for the winter.

After the American company got rested up and got talking and enquiring around, at the stores and having talks with a number of Manson Creek claim owners wintering in Hazelton, they began to smell a rat and wonder if they had been taken for a ride. It was not long before they realized that that was just the case. Being Americans, they decided that a lynching party was in order and that both Mr. Grider and Jimmy Wells would be the victims — Jimmy being smart and sagacious and a good woodsman and fleet of foot, hit for the tall timber and the ice on the Skeena and made for his old stamping ground at Kitselas Canyon and holed up.

Mr. Grider who was an innocent victim like all the other members of the party was having a bad time, until Indian Agent, Mr. Loring, and the officers of the Hudson's Bay Co., interceded and locked him up for safe keeping and explained to the riled up members of the party that no lynching was allowed in Canada. There was no police protection in the country at that early date and it was a delicate situation for the people of Hazelton to handle.

Most of the party decided to return home and trudged back out over the terrible Grease Trail. As they had broken the trail coming in, it was not so tough going back. Some however stayed and spent the rest of the winter in Hazelton and got down the river by Indian canoes as soon as the ice went out in the spring. A few waited and went out by the first trip of the Caledonia.

A party of twelve arrived at Port Essington at the mouth of the river and called on Mr. Jim Kirby the local Constable and

told him of all their troubles. They were still looking for someone to lynch.

He allowed them to camp in the Police station and jail, until the Coast steamer came in to take them south but warned them against any thoughts of trying a lynching party where British law prevailed. He gave them a letter to take to the Attorney General at Victoria, who was the man to take their troubles to. I never knew of any member of the Grider party who stayed in the country.

As for Jimmy, he staked some mining claims around Kitselas Canyon, one of them he named the "Golden Crown" which was supposed to be mostly gold and not much rock. He got mixed up in various deals, but managed to keep clear of the law. There was no doubt that he would eventually have landed in the Hoosgow, but one day he fell out of his canoe while crossing the river and was drowned.

Thus ended the career of a very colourful character.

## 15 BRAVE WOMEN

In September 1911 the water got very low on the river and all the steamboats were stuck on the shallow bars between the end of steel and Hazelton, stranding a lot of passengers in Hazelton. I was persuaded to make a trip with my gas tunnel boat "Kitchexchen" to relieve the situation.

Among the prominent passengers were Miss Sawl, a sister of the local editor of the Omineca Herald and a Mrs. Martin, wife of the railway resident engineer at Mission Point.

Miss Shawl had a couple of suitcases and an enormous trunk, her baggage was well overweight but being a lady the fact was overlooked. The trunk was so big and heavy it took up so much valuable room that we strapped it on the forward deck across the bow. We passed three or four stranded steamers on the way down, blew our air whistle and gave them the ha ha.

When we arrived at the head of the Kitselas Canyon, we

extended steam boat courtesy to all the passengers, they had the option to stay with the ship or walk down on the wagon road. Believe it or not, every man walked and the two ladies elected to stay with the ship. They sat on top of the pilot house, with their legs dangling over the side, cheering all the way through the Canyon.

We know this was true also on the River steamers, very seldom could you persuade a lady to walk. We called it bravery, but it may have been their love of excitement. I'll leave the reader to figure that one.

I was very surprised to find out something about Miss Sawl's huge trunk later on. The wily editor had filled it up with parts of his printing press needing repairs and put it in his sister's baggage.

## 16 A MEMORABLE TRIP

On the first trip of the steamer Inlander up the Skeena in 1911 we left Prince Rupert with a full cargo of freight and an overflowing passenger list. As always happened on the first trip we pulled out as early as possible to try and be the first arrival of the season. The water was pretty low and steamboat water had not really arrived but we wanted to be on the scene as soon as the water began to spurt.

On this trip we had seventeen commercial travellers and ten frontier ladies on our passenger list.

The first trip was always a heyday for the travelling men, as all stocks in the stores at Hazelton were depleted after a long winter and they all got bang-up orders, so they were in a jolly mood on the way up with their expectations high. Our steward besides being a top-dog steward, was a resourceful chap. He operated a blind-pig quietly as a side issue. He kept in the Captain's good graces by handing him a good stiff nightcap out the window to the upper deck before he climbed the iron ladder to the retreat in the Texas.



We got to Kitselas Canyon, but found the water still very low, as the snow in the Babines and Upper Skeena drainage basin had not melted. We tied up at Kitselas for a few days waiting for the water to rise. Our commercial men found time dragging on their hands and were very impatient, as they would much rather have been in Hazelton showing their samples and writing orders. They got celebrating a little and old Joe, our steward, was doing quite well. They would tie a string on a bottle of beer and lower it down from the upper deck into the icy waters of the old Skeena to get a good chill on it. The deck hands and firemen on the lower deck also liked beer and would cut the string and make off with the bottle while the owners thought a piece of drift had come down the river and broken the string. The lower deck crew got too rambunctious and stole the whole set one evening and the travelling men got wise so there were no more cooling parties.

Finally the water really began to spurt and during the third night the water on the Canyon gauge showed a whole foot of rise. We got up steam and as the water was rising steadily and getting to be nice steamboat water, we made good time the rest of the way to Hazelton. Everybody was happy and in fine spirits and bowler hats being in vogue at that time, the great fun was to sneak up on the other fellow and bash his hat in.

The day we were to arrive at Hazelton, we always had a pool, which was the custom on every boat. You had to guess the time to the hour and minute the boat arrives and everyone put a dollar in the pool. All the crew members who took a chance had to head the list with their guesses and the passengers guessed all around us. On this trip there was a great big bronze headed fellow, who someone had nick-named "Alfalfa". He was inclined to be quarrelsome and consequently everyone was pulling his leg. At the long dining table an argument started during the last meal aboard. Three commercial men had set their watches all the same and they were to judge the hour and minute when the Captain blew his whistle, which was always blown at a big cottonwood tree below Hazelton.

Alfalfa said he was told when he put his dollar in that they were to go by the Captain's watch and he was not standing for any damn drummers running the show. Tommy Stevens, Leckies' shoe traveller was sitting right opposite him. Tommy sung out "Oh get them to give him his dollar back before he cries". Alfalfa grabbed the big heavy water bottle on the table

and threw it at Tommy's head — luckily Tommy ducked and it split the panel of the state-room behind him.

There were too many commercial men on the boat, who are rather clannish and the way they ganged up and got our bushy haired friend out of there wasn't funny, they might have thrown him into the Skeena.

That was the nearest Leckies' ever came to losing a top-dog commercial traveller. "Alfalfa" who had been a tight wad on board ship, was seen in Hazelton trying to treat every travelling man he ran into, to square himself.

## 17 WE CROWN A KING

As Port Essington was the big town at the mouth of the river, we should include a story.

In 1902, which was to be the Coronation year of King Edward VII, Coronation ceremonies were to be staged all over the country, naturally a big celebration was arranged for at Essington. There were to be boat races, canoe races, foot races and other sports followed by ceremonies and speeches, and winding up with a big ball.

The morning of the day broke with beautiful sunshine and everybody donned their best gear for the big day. The river was full of sail boats and canoes bringing all the natives and whites, Japs and Chinamen from all the canneries at the mouth of the river to the big affair.

All the sports came off as planned, the Coronation ceremonies and pageants were grand. Old "Diamond C" Cunningham, the Father of Essington made a wonderful speech in an Irish brogue, and others, including the Indian Chief made suitable remarks and the fine Indian brass band rendered thrilling music. The ball was a gala affair and altogether a wonderful time was had and King Edward was put on the throne and crowned in grand style.

The Dominion Government Telegraph Line was only finished the year before and they had an office at a point across the river and provided a row boat messenger service to Essington once a day. The line was new and was down half the time. It was out of business at the time of the Coronation celebrations. The

next day after the big affair, the Telegraph line came to life and a message came across the waters advising us that the Coronation had been postponed until the following year.

It was a big joke on Port Essington but everyone had a fine time anyway — but King Eddie was crowned and didn't know it!

## 18 SALVAGED HOSPITALITY

When I was employed on the Telegraph line, Bert Kergin, afterwards Member for Atlin in the Legislature, was my partner. A fellow named Jack Harstone came along in a row boat and wanted to know if we knew anything about a place called "Hole in the Wall". He said he wanted to get up and look it over, with the idea of taking a contract for the rock work there. We told him he would never make it in a row boat and as we were going up river in the morning we persuaded him to camp with us and he could go up with us in our gas boat.

At the mouth of the small river coming in just above the Hole in the Wall bluff, a couple of Frenchmen had a cabin and were cutting wood for the steamboats. Mr. Phelan, the telegraph superintendent had made arrangements by letter with the two fellows to look after the telegraph line down past the bluffs as there was always plenty of line trouble in that area. They had not done a very good job on it, so we decided to have some fun with them.

Mr. Harstone got off and walked over the rock work and Bert and I ran up the river to their cabin. We told them we had brought Mr. Phelan up to look the line over. "Where is he" asked Mr. Vieux the tall Frenchman and they both got very excited. When we told them he had got off below the Hole in the Wall and was walking over the line, they fired up and started to prepare a spread. They opened up a trap door in the cabin floor and brought up a dozen bottles of all kinds of liquor, getting ready to treat Mr. Phelan royally.

Mr. Harstone arrived and was introduced as Mr. Phelan. The Frenchmen made a big fuss over him and went on to tell him about all the trouble they had all winter on that terrible piece of telegraph line on the bluff. They plied Mr. Phelan with liquor.



After a time Mr. Harstone forgot he was Mr. Phelan and said he was looking for a contract. Vieux stood up and pointed first at me then at Bert, "You O'Neill, you Kergin, you lie like Hell".

They claimed liquor in the cellar had been found floating in the eddy in the river. The wreck of the "North West" took place just a short distance above. This was a part of the river generally known as Hudson Bay Flats, where the steamer "North West" had sunk with a full cargo of booze. It was generally suggested they may have made a visit to the scene of the wreck where the harvest would have been easier.

## 19 I GET A BAWLING OUT

In 1910 the Inlander was lying at the river bank at Hazelton. I came ashore and proceeded up town collecting freight bills. I met Mr. Walter Willescroft the first road builder to hit the country. Walter said "I say, you're just the fellow I want to see, come on with me".

He led off down a side street, walking well ahead of me and puffing on his pipe. I was wondering where I was headed for and what was on his mind. Finally we wound up at the Government barn. There was a lot of hay scattered and tramped on the floor. Finally he kicked at the hay and said "You see that hay? What you think of it? I say what you think of it"? I said "Now Mr. Willescroft, you have known me since I was a kid, how would I know anything about hay, ask me something about a boat and I'll tell you". "Well" said Walter "That hay is rotten, I say it's rotten so it is". I said "Well what have I got to do with it"? "I say" said Walter "You got a Hell of a lot to do with it, so you have. You charged me fifty dollars a ton to bring it up the Skeena on your damn boat and we have a valley full of the finest timothy hay in the world at our back door. Don't you think I got a kick coming, my horses won't eat it either — so they won't".

I said "Your problem Mr. Willescroft, is with the politicians not our steamboat" — "I say" said Walter "that hay is Fraser Valley hay, so it is, shipped up the coast to Prince Rupert, shipped up the Skeena to me, so it was, and I say it's no good, so punk the horses won't eat it, they paw it out of the

manger and stamp on it, so they do. The Bulkley Valley is full of first class timothy hay, so it is,—don't you think I have a kick coming?" I guess he had.

## 20 THE OLD STONE CELLAR

When the Hudson's Bay Company established their Post at Hazelton using round rocks off the river bank and lime and mortar, they built the famous Stone Cellar behind the store, standing by itself in the centre of the log enclosure. It had a thatched roof and just a dirt and gravel floor. The Company had a whole-sale and bottle liquor licence and always did a big business. Although it did not resemble our modern B.C. Government stores, it was just as popular in those days.

Many a big deal for supplies from the trading post was put over in the Old Stone Cellar over a glass of rum. All down one side were big oak barrels of any kind of grog you would ask for, with a wooden spigot in each, all you had to do was take your glass, walk over, choose your own medicine and help yourself. On the other side, all the case goods were stacked up, even to Mum's extra dry Champagne. There was a well beaten trail between the store and the Cellar.

There came a time when the Old Cellar caught fire and burned down, leaving just the stone walls standing and a good amount of good spirit also went up in smoke. One old timer called it the greatest catastrophe and waste of good booze in a lifetime. As the Honourable Company was having difficulty about that time with their ancient licence, they did not rebuild, but pulled the walls down and cleaned up the yard.

Some years later I was reminded of the Old Stone Cellar. A fellow operating a hotel in Telkwa, had a special bottle of whiskey and a real story. When anyone of importance stayed at the hotel, he would give him a drink out of this special bottle.

His story was that when Johnny Boyd, a Company Manager was cleaning up the remnants of the stone cellar, he found a keg of rare old whiskey buried in the gravel floor, which had been there for a hundred years and was as smooth as silk, and had given a bottle to each of his special friends. As long as Bob ran the hotel, he still had that famous bottle Johnny had given him out of the keg. It never ran dry like the author.





