

The Trading Trio of Arthur Harper, Al Mayo and Jack McQuesten

by Jane Gaffin

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(Information for this article relied on **Cashing In** by Jane Gaffin, 1982; **Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush 1896-1899** by Pierre Berton, revised 1987; **Prelude to Bonanza** by Allen Wright, 1976; **Report on an Exploration in the Yukon District, N.W.T. and Adjacent Northern Portion of British Columbia 1887** by George M. Dawson, Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada; **History of Keno Hill Mining District** by Dr. Aaro Aho, circa 1974; **Yukon Places and Names** by R.C. "Bob" Coutts, 2nd edition, 2003; **Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Goldfields 1896-1898** by William Haskell, reprinted by University of Alaska Press, 1998; *Women of the Alaska Gold Rush*, University of Alaska Museum, updated 1997; **Prospecting in Canada** by A.H. Lang, Geological Survey of Canada, 1972; **Gold and Galena**, Mayo Historical Society, 1990; "Yukon Jack" by Cecil Munsey, *Bottles and Extras*, summer 2004 edition; **Early Days on the Yukon** by William Ogilvie, DLS, FRGS, 1913; **Dictionary of Alaska Place Names** by Donald Orth, 1967, U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 567; **Gold Rush Women** by Claire Rudolf Murphy and Jane Haigh, Alaska Northwest Publishing, 1997.)

Note: It has been difficult to discern precise dates of the famous trio's activities, for they were constantly on the move, sometimes together, sometimes independently. Discrepancies have occurred especially when events and associates' names were found in documents recorded long after they quit the country, as was the case with **Recollections of Leroy N. McQuesten, Life in the Yukon 1871-1885**.

Until the 1870s, the Yukon and Alaska were inhabited mostly by nomadic Indian and Eskimo tribes moving along their migration routes to fish, hunt and gather, and the 500 Russians scattered along the coastline harvesting furs.

Then came the Hudson's Bay Company fur traders in the 1840s. The 1870s were marked with the significant presence of American traders Arthur Harper (Hall of Fame), Jack McQuesten (Hall of Fame) and Al Mayo (Honour Roll), all who encouraged the goldseekers to come in the 1880s.

The American West had been conquered, the American and British Columbia gold and silver camps were in production as mines, and the tough breed of prospectors--composed of a motley assortment of adventurers, Civil War veterans, Indian fighters, frontiersmen, loners and misfits--pushed on to explore the great remote northern frontier where the mid-night sun shone most of the night and the incessant swarms of buzzing, biting insects drove sane men crazy--or, paradoxically, they had to struggle in the grim cold, silent wilderness under the exquisite beauty of the dancing northern lights.

Winter was an endless drag of depressing dark, exacerbated with temperatures dropping far below zero that turned whisky and Perry Davis' Painkiller to slush. This isolated hinterland was known as the Inside, and many of the first prospectors turned back in the fall months to winter "Outside", as they called the "civilized" world.

Soon, a few intrepid individuals forged deeper into the interior to battle heat, frost, famine and disease. They lived off the land with nothing more than hunting rifles, animal traps and fish nets.

The trailblazer was Arthur Harper, who is believed to be the first man to consider investigating the Yukon River basin as a mining field. Harper was bitten badly by the hunt for gold and definitely had a nose for where

to find the precious yellow metal. But fortune never favoured him, basically because he thrilled more to exploring new ground than the actual discovery. So, he kept giving away promising "leads" to others.

To keep rekindling his quest to look for untried places, he had obtained a copy of a London-published Arrowsmith topographical map of British North America which showed mostly features gleaned from Hudson's Bay, as the fur-trading company's information was primarily all that was available at the time.

Harper, who was a prolific letter-writer, kept sending glowing reports that eventually lured his prospecting friends and acquaintances north to check out the Yukon River valley, where he and his mates were headed in 1871. In this way, the Irishman was instrumental in helping populate the north country which would culminate into a Klondike gold rush that he would not witness.

Access into the Yukon River basin was difficult. The Yukon is hemmed in on the east by the Mackenzie Mountains and on the west by the glaciers of the Coast Mountains and St. Elias Range. It didn't deter either the European Hudson's Bay traders who came 5,000 miles overland by numerous rivers and portages nor the Americans who came in clusters of twos and threes, working up and down the Yukon River from Alaska.

In 1880, the coastal Indians opened the Chilkoot Pass to the white men who spearheaded a rush to the Stewart River gravel bars in 1885 and 1886.

In 1886, Howard Franklin (Hall of Fame) and Henry Madison (Hall of Fame) found nothing while prospecting one of the Stewart River's major tributaries, later named the McQuesten River. Under Harper's encouragement they went to check the Fortymile River which straddles the Yukon-Alaska border.

Miraculously, the Franklin-Madison team's discovery was the first coarse gold found in the Yukon. Stewart River miners, anticipating every next "strike" as the elusive Eldorado, rushed to Fortymile where an instant community of log cabins sprang up.

Jack and Kate McQuesten followed the rushes, and they would immediately set to building another trading post.

Freedom was a very important concept to these men who lived according to a frontier code. Only when a man's freedom encroached on his neighbour's did frontier justice come into play, and the judgements could be brutal.

Alaska was rawer and rougher than the neighbouring British Yukon District of the Northwest Territories. Before 1900 in Alaska, there was no law enforcement or court system. Important judicial matters were decided by majority vote in miners' meetings composed of white men only. Theft, a dastardly crime which could cost the victim his life, was punishable by hanging.

In **Klondike**, Pierre Berton recounted an incident in which a Circle City, Alaska, thief stole from another man's cache. But nobody wanted to do the duty with the hemp, so the sentence had to be commuted to banishment. The miners took up a collection to provide the culprit with tent, stove and grub and sent him packing alone into the wilderness.

"The U.S. government obviously considered these meetings lawful," declared Berton, "for the verdict of one of them was sent to Washington (D.C.) and confirmed."

It was about a murder case involving bartender Jim Chronister who killed Jim Washburn in self defence. Washburn, reputed as a brawling bully, was infamous on both sides of the border for disturbing the peace. Chronister offered himself to a miners' meeting trial and was acquitted in just 20 minutes, wrote Berton.

From these miners' meetings evolved the fraternal organizations of the Miners' Association and later the Alaskan Order of Yukon Pioneers, of which Jack McQuesten was the first elected president, and the Yukon Order of Pioneers, of which Mayo was a member. Their motto was the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you".

The motto may have sounded a bit sappy coming from a bunch of tough hombres. But many of these men held to Christian values and knew proper conduct. They definitely knew their life in the wilds depended on their fellowman. Each member took the oath to help every other member whenever need arose and always share the news about the locations of any new gold strikes.

Nobody heeded the philosophy more than Jack McQuesten, Al Mayo and Arthur Harper who provided customers with a remarkable frontier credit system based on honour. Only a few rich folks carried cash. Traders accepted gold, fish, furs, labour--whatever would barter in exchange for merchandise--rifles, ammo, bedrolls, boots, calico fabric, canvas, cast iron cooking utensils and staple food products such as bacon, flour, sugar, coffee, tea and dried beans and dried fruits.

The prospectors were dependent on the trading posts for gold pans, tools, ax heads, picks, shovels and saw blades. Any person who had nothing to barter could cart off all the provisions he needed without the burden of terms or contracts, other than to observe payment was due after the next gold cleanup, whenever that might be.

McQuesten recognized the ritual sprees for miners coming in from the creeks. The trader wouldn't ask for payment until the creditor had his night on the town, which usually resulted in a broke miner coming back for more credit without the wherewithal of paying his outstanding bill of \$500 or so. McQuesten would outfit him again and again and again, always letting him have the spree first.

Is there any wonder men adored McQuesten and never uttered a disparaging word about him or his partners.

It was an incredible trait for early prospectors to have the ability to travel and live under primitive conditions and still retain a buoyant optimism, dogged perseverance and still show a charitable hospitality to others. These men were stellar examples of the special breed of men who worked the Yukon River valley above a segregation line that would one day specially define the district as North of 60.

The bush legend that the laid-back McQuesten never sent out a bill and was seldom short-changed for his generosity should be interpreted in one of two ways: either his thrifty wife Katherine was looking after business and collections, or the non-billing yarn isn't true.

Here's one rendition: Arthur Harper, who had joined McQuesten and Mayo in the trading business in 1874, was in charge of Fort Reliance with Mayo in 1875. McQuesten had gone up to the trading post of Fort Yukon and on to St. Michael's at Norton Sound to replenish supplies.

Seemingly, while McQuesten was away, Harper and Mayo had a bit of trouble with the Indians whose level of agitation was measured in direct proportion to the expansion of the white invasion. Harper and Mayo decided it was wise to leave the post until the Indians readjusted to their amenable attitude. The merchants concealed, as best they could, all the supplies, including an arsenic-grease mixture used for mice poison.

The Indians, not having any place to trade for supplies, looted the store. They found the compound and mixed it with some flour to make bannock. The results were fatal for two elderly Indian women and a blind girl.

In the fall, McQuesten ferried a fresh outfit up river for the store and faced the dilemma of reaching terms with the Indians. After a pow-wow,

McQuesten billed them to the hilt for the stolen goods. But the Indians didn't want compensation for the women poisoned.

"(They) were not valued at all, being a nuisance, and for the young one, ten skins, the current terms of the country, about six dollars, was demanded," advised Dominion land surveyor William Ogilvie in his memoirs. "This amount was cheerfully paid, and some presents given besides, and the prompt payment and kindness established the very best of feelings."

One of the gifts was one of McQuesten's best dogs he wasn't eager to part with and had to think about his decision for a couple of days. If the canine brought peace, so be it. He let the tribe keep the dog.

The prospectors worked along the valley of the Yukon River which is North America's fifth largest river basin and the Yukon Territory's and Alaska's major waterway. It was first explored from one end to the other in 1883 by Lt. Frederick Schwatka, a U.S. cavalry officer, whose irritating habit of flippantly changing place names was contested by other explorers like Dr. George Dawson (Honour Roll) of the Canadian geological survey.

The river starts from the Pacific Ocean, twisting and turning about 2,000 miles across the girth of the Yukon and Alaska before emptying into the salt chuck at St. Michael's. The Indians, Eskimos and Russians had their own words for the Yukon River, each invariably translating into English as "great" or "big".

Before the Klondike stampede, goldseekers and traders had approached the country in a wide, flanking route, and travelled to the Inside from the top down.

That is the route used by the famous McQuesten, Harper, Mayo trio who were instrumental in helping to open the Yukon valley and make life tolerable for the hordes of prospectors who followed 25 years later.

More than any others, the notable trading trio was directly responsible for the mining development that occurred in the Yukon while they were commissioned traders for the Alaska Commercial Company or working together as partners or sometimes independently.

The Harper and McQuesten parties had fortuitously met each other in 1873. Arthur Harper, an Irishman born in Antrim County in 1835, had immigrated into the United States as a young man and drifted west to the gold diggings of California, then up to British Columbia, which maybe was getting too civilized and orderly for his liking. The region was proclaimed a province in 1871 and he was moving on.

Harper had a rectangular face, piercing eyes and a severe, no-nonsense demeanour that belied his patience and personality. When his great beard, which he trimmed neatly for a formal photographic portrait, turned snow white he took on a persona of a terse "frontier patriarch".

Yet it was Jack McQuesten with his luxurious flowing blond moustache who became legendary as "the father of the country".

Gold had drawn Harper north on the stampedes to the Fraser canyons and Cariboo grasslands in the 1850s and 1860s. Unsuccessful in finding gold, as would be his life's curse, he convinced four others to undertake a protracted journey into unknown northern wilderness to look for gold-bearing creeks.

One was his life-long pal Frederick Hart, also born in County Antrim, Ireland, in 1835. The others on the roster were George Finch (Hall of Fame) of Kingston, Ontario, Andrew Kansellar from Germany, and a Brit named Samuel Wilkinson, who soon abandoned the party to carry on up the Liard River, hopefully to easier pickings.

The placer gold they chased was called "free gold" for more than one reason. It needed no great monetary investment to harvest it. The gold had been deposited by nature in such a loose fashion that any person

with a strong back and weak head could sluice the flour and coarse gold from the creeks with nothing more than a gold pan, a shovel, and a pick and carry the rewards away in his backpack.

The five men set off on their odyssey to the Yukon valley, paddling down the Peace River in dugout canoes in September, 1872. In their outfit was a five-gallon keg of strong black rum. At every Hudson's Bay post visited the jug was tapped and a cordial drink passed around. Every now and then, a thirsty soul would pull the cork and take a greedy swig instead of pouring out a shot. The results were hellish!

They crossed the height of land in winter that separated them from the Liard Basin. After the ice went out the next spring, 1873, they came by way of Sikanni Chief River and the Fort Nelson River. At the confluence, they encountered another party.

The leader appeared to be Leroy Napoleon "Jack" McQuesten, a Maine farm boy, born in Litchfield, New Hampshire, in 1836. The McQuesten name seems to have originated across the pond in England and appears in America's New England history around 1720. The names of William, Edward and S.T. McQuesten are listed on an 1830 New Hampshire tax roll.

Jack was only 13 years old when he spirited off to the 1849 California gold rush, either on his own or with his family, who had at one point uprooted from Maine and migrated to Illinois country. Then he fought Indian wars in Oregon Territory before moving north to British Columbia in 1858 and on to the Northwest Territories. He had worked as a prospector, trapper, trader and, early in his career, he had entered employment at Fort Garry (Manitoba) as a Hudson's Bay Company voyageur.

McQuesten was travelling with two partners. One was James McKniff. The other was Alfred Henry Mayo, born in Bangor, Maine, on February

7, 1847. Despite an 11-year age difference with the older McQuesten, it is likely Mayo and McQuesten knew each other back in New England.

Mayo was a Mason, a highly-influential service brotherhood seeking to better society through ethical behavior. He was blessed with a dry wit and prone to practical joking. He was thin as a rake and wiry as a coat hanger, his physique contrasting drastically with McQuesten--a big, stout guy, standing over six-feet tall and weighing 200 pounds. Both were patient, personable, fearless and observed Christian values. McQuesten said Mayo was the best guy a man could ever want for a trailmate.

While the two parties wintered at Nelson Forks, they decided they would go back and pick up the Mackenzie River. They could drift downstream, cross the Arctic Circle and enter the Yukon River valley via the Hudson's Bay Company's portage west to the Porcupine River. Then they could intersect the Yukon River and carry on to their destination, which turned out to be Fort Yukon, Alaska, at the rivers' confluence at the Arctic Circle, and on downriver to Tanana, an important trading centre on the Yukon River at the confluence of the Tanana River.

At Nelson Forks, Wilkinson, who maybe wasn't an explorer at heart, declined Harper's theory about abundant gold along the unknown Yukon. He departed up the Liard River on his own, reducing the Harper party to four men; the McQuesten party of three was still intact.

It was an arduous and circuitous journey. Yet they seemed to have made good time, despite splitting company at Fort Simpson, N.W.T., where McQuesten was delayed taking care of trading business.

In 1873, Harper and his companions continued prospecting and paddling their way to the mid-point of the Yukon River. Harper reported that on the Peace River everywhere were colours; on the Liard were colours; on the Mackenzie nothing; on the Peel fair prospects; on the Porcupine

some colours; and on the Yukon prospects everywhere--just as he had imagined.

They had left Fort Yukon to go upriver about 400 miles to White River before McQuesten and Mayo showed up at the post with 1,400 pounds of goods and four skookum dogs.

Moses Mercier, a French Canadian from Montreal, Quebec, was the Fort Yukon agent for the Alaska Commercial Company, a San Francisco-based enterprise descended from the old Russian American Trading Company after the United States clandestinely negotiated to purchase Alaska for \$7.2 million, or two cents an acre, in 1867.

This huge land mass was shaped like a gigantic version of a kitchen saucepan with a handle that Johnny Appleseed wore upside down on his head. The southeastern coastal appendage of Alaska became colourfully described as the pan's handle, or Panhandle.

The public was outraged with the purchase of good-for-nothing real estate.

But mercantile companies, smarter than the average polar bear, didn't view the huge chunk of frozen real estate as a worthless icebox for storing glaciers. They saw Alaska, the Aleut word for Great Land, as a lucrative business opportunity.

Two San Francisco businessmen, the mutton-chopped Lewis Gerstle and his partner Louis Sloss, formed Hutchinson Kohl & Company to buy the Russian trading company's physical assets and commercial interests.

The Russian American Company's roots traced back to 1776 when Russian Empress Catherine the Great granted it fur-harvesting and trading rights. The new American firm paid \$350,000 to the Russian owners and

immediately re-opened the series of trading posts under the banner of Alaska Commercial Company.

In 1869, the Jewish owners exercised their influence through political connections in Washington, D.C., and convinced the government to conduct a survey of the lower Yukon River valley to set boundaries.

Although this spat was considered resolved between Great Britain and Russia in 1825, the U.S. Corps of Engineers was assigned the surveying task. The calculations of Captain Charles Raymond determined that Fort Yukon indeed was on the American side of the border.

The representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company, whose Fort Yukon post was established in 1847, were notified of the illegality of foreigners trading goods with the natives in American territory. As soon as practicable, Hudson's Bay relocated up the Porcupine River to build another post called Rampart House because of the river's steep banks.

As soon as Hudson's Bay vacated Fort Yukon in 1869 an American flag was raised and Alaska Commercial Company assumed ownership of Hudson Bay's expropriated property, which some beholders described as rickety and dilapidated while others spoke of the buildings as neat, tidy and sturdy.

McQuesten, Mayo and the other men who hadn't gone with Harper's party to White River, moved upriver for the winter. Wild game and fish were plentiful but trading was poor. They came back to Fort Yukon on May 10, 1874, then moved down to Alaska Commercial's Tanana post where Harper and his party soon showed up. They reported food plentiful but prospecting lousy at White River.

There are five Alaskan rivers blessed with the name "White". But the White River where Harper and his party went prospecting was the 200-mile-long stream that heads in Alaska and flows northeast into Canada

until it finds the Yukon River. This large stream, referred to by the Chilkat Indians as Sand River due to its countless sand bars, was discovered and named White in 1850 by Hudson's Bay explorer Robert Campbell because the silty water looked like liquid mud.

"There are immense deposits of volcanic ash up it which is in the form of an impalpable white powder, which is simply pulverized pumice-stone," explained William Ogilvie. "In rainy weather this washes into the river in such quantities that the water is actually thick with it and has a creamy white colour."

When Mercier announced he was making the run down to St. Michael's to deliver furs and replenish supplies for Fort Yukon and Tanana, the whole party went along. Moses Mercier's 36-year-old brother Francois (Franc) was based at St. Michael's. He was manager of the Yukon valley district that encompassed a goodly portion of interior Alaska and was helping Alaska Commercial monopolize the fur trade through good trading relations with the natives.

The French Canadian fur trader had come to St. Michael's originally with the Pioneer Company in 1868. The short-lived Pioneer fur business dissolved the next year and Franc Mercier finally signed on in 1872 with Hutchinson Kohl and Company, the precursor to the Alaska Commercial Company.

At St. Michael's, McQuesten, Mayo and Frederick Hart signed on as agents. Harper and three others simply bought supplies on this round. With five boats in tow, the whole lot started back up river on July 7, 1874, as passengers on Alaska Commercial's tiny steamer *Yukon*, the first vessel ever to operate on the Yukon River.

In 1833, the Russians had established a stockaded post on the Bering Sea coast at Norton Sound. It was named after Captain Michael Dmitrievich Tebenkov, who, afterwards, governed the Russian-American colony of Alaska. Quite early, the post's name was changed to Michaelovski and was sometimes referred to as Redoubt St. Michael.

When the Harper and McQuesten parties accompanied Moses Mercier to St. Michael's, the village population of 109 was predominantly Eskimo.

The expedition was headed upriver after taking care of business in St. Michael's in the summer of 1874. The little Alaska Commercial Company steamer was dropping in for cordial and trading calls at various villages along the waterway.

One anchorage was at Koyukuk Station, a small Indian village at the confluence of the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers, where the Koyukons were suffering a common malady of famine.

Among a fishing party camped on the Yukon River bank was 14-year-old Jennie Bosco. The 39-year-old Harper asked to marry her and the parents eagerly arranged a hasty marriage and pushed Jennie into Harper's care. She was not formally educated and had no familiarity with Western culture.

Another 80 miles farther upriver, they anchored in Kokrines, located on the left bank. The little trading post, near a hot springs and backset by the lovely Kokrines Hills, is roughly 80 miles west of Tanana and 300 miles west of Fort Yukon.

Only a handful of people lived in the tiny interior Alaskan village where life revolved around Old Man Kokrine, one of very few Russian traders who had remained on the river after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867.

The trading village was named for the Russian trader whose own name has been spelled and misspelled a variety of phonetic ways over the years. In 1887, it was "Cochrein". Earlier, in 1871, the village was called "Newikargut", a name adopted from the stream across the Yukon River.

The 14-year-old Katherine (Kate) James was born in Kokrines in 1860 and had evidently come home for summer break from Russian Mission, the home of the first Russian Orthodox Church, located farther down the Yukon River at Ikogmiut. She could speak the Russian language of her father, the Koyukon Athabaskan of her mother and could converse in English.

On McQuesten's stop-in at the trading post is where she and her 38-year-old husband-to-be first met.

She was as equally smitten by McQuesten as he was with this young schoolgirl. But she was a respectable 18 by white society standards before they married in 1878. Why they waited four years to get together is anybody's guess. And, if there was an Athabaskan and/or church ceremony, the place and date were never recorded. But each waiting for the other adds an essence of a love story which McQuesten's friend Jack London spun into a fiction story.

Staying on the romantic theme, Kokrines was where 27-year-old Al Mayo met Jennie Harper's 14-year-old cousin, Margaret, who was there tending the Russian storekeeper's young son.

Margaret, whose Western surname was never revealed in family or historical records, was the daughter of the chief at Nuklukayet, a little Indian trading village located upriver near Tanana at the junction of the Tanana and Yukon rivers.

For Mayo to ask permission a few days later from the parents to marry Margaret meant mamma and poppa were visiting Kokrines, otherwise the expedition must have stopped in at Tanana, a major centre upriver, on their way home. Mayo might have dashed a half mile next door to Nuklukayet to request Margaret's hand in marriage.

Regardless of how it transpired, the parents arranged an Athabaskan-style coupling and the pair became life-long companions and business partners of 50 years.

From 1874 onward, wherever Mayo or Harper are credited with building and running trading posts or taking on any other endeavour, their backbones were their hard-working wives Margaret and Jennie and the children, albeit invisible; the same rings true after Kate James and Jack McQuesten married in 1878.

Although chroniclers have chosen to ignore the wives of the famous trading trio other than to say the men all took native wives, they were never belittled with the derogatory tag "squaw men". That in itself speaks volumes about the character of Harper, Mayo and McQuesten and the mutual respect that existed between the husbands and wives. Nobody considered making any racial slurs.

McQuesten had selected a spot up river to set up shop six miles down from the mouth of the Trundeck, as McQuesten called it, Trundeg as William Ogilvie spelled it, before the word Tronduick, meaning "full of fish", was subsequently coined into "Klondike" through misspelling and mispronunciation.

McQuesten wrote that the steamer *Yukon* discharged and returned the next day leaving F. Barnfield and him to build their winter quarters in August, 1874. (Historians contest Frank Barnfield's surname as Bernfield, Bernstein and Banfield.)

"I employed some Indians to carry logs and some went to hunt," wrote McQuesten. "The hunters returned in a few days with plenty of meat before it froze up. We had our house and the store completed and the Indians brought in plenty of dried meat to last us all winter. I sold all the goods we had for furs during the winter."

Fort Reliance, like most trading posts of the day, was not a real "fort" in the true sense of the early day fortresses built by the Russian American and Hudson's Bay companies. Rather, the structures were simply log general stores.

Reliance was a focal point for trappers and travellers between 1874 to 1876 at Mile 0 on the Yukon River. From the post, distances were measured to other places along the river. For instance, the settlement of Fortymile was 40 miles downstream from Fort Reliance while Sixtymile was 60 miles upstream.

About a year after opening Fort Reliance, the partners went to St. Michael's to deliver furs and take on new supplies. They learned that Alaska Commercial Company had reorganized. Its new policy was to put their fur traders on commissions.

At this time, McQuesten went to work at the Fort Yukon post while Harper and Mayo returned to Fort Reliance. For three years, the pair came down to winter at Fort Yukon with McQuesten. The company's little steamer took them back up river in summers to Reliance.

It was during this timeframe of 1875 that the Indians looted the store and the elderly women and a blind girl were said to have died from eating bread baked with the poisonous grease reserved for rodents.

After a few years, McQuesten abandoned Fort Yukon and moved down to the post at the mouth of the Tanana River before deciding to re-open Reliance in 1877 on a year-round basis.

An interloper had moved into the Tanana scene and was paying high prices for furs that prevented other free agents from earning a living on commissions.

Franc Mercier had joined the rival company in 1877. By 1878, the company was operating a second steamer on the lower Yukon River in competition with Alaska Commercial's little steamer *Yukon*.

The Western Fur and Trading Company, also based in San Francisco, didn't last long. So, Franc Mercier returned in 1882 to Alaska Commercial which had bought out Western. Alaska Commercial's representatives, McQuesten & Co., ended up with the little steamer *St. Michael*, which was a godsend to providing better customer service to whites and natives on both sides of the border.

A settlement at the junction of the Yukon and Tanana rivers had supported a well-established Indian trading locality long before the Europeans came on the scene. It was near what was later called Tanana Station and where, in 1880, Arthur and Jennie Harper established an Alaska Commercial trading post which was sometimes referred to as Harper's Station but which he named Nuklukayet--probably under his wife's influence.

The most essential but oft-ignored people who played a vital role integrating the white men into native culture were their Indian wives. They were translators and ambassadors. All three wives knew the land and taught their husbands a few tricks about living from it.

As expert seamstresses, they sewed practical garments from the skins of wild beasts to be worn in the forest and dressed every family member elegantly in clothing made from manufactured fabrics for formal occasions.

They kept houses in the style of typical American housewives and read books and periodicals, while, at the same time, maintaining strong ties with their Athabaskan people, who, to a certain degree, were being consumed by famine, filth, disease and alcoholism.

McQuesten's resourceful wife Kate had brains and was a builder like her husband. She became known for her well-attended social functions and for trying to train a harnessed moose to pull the plow to till the soil for her lush vegetable gardens she grew behind the McQuestens' neat, square-logged house at Fortymile. Nobody ever said if the moose experiment worked.

The husband-wife team, generations ahead of their time, worked together in the truest sense of a partnership before the concept was fashionable, as did the Harpers and the Mayos.

The three couples appeared to have enjoyed the most stable, healthy unions possible when considering these mature American males plucked Indian girls from the riverbanks and probably saved them from a life of impoverishment. They paired off in threes, setting up individual households, running businesses, and they all prospered as a team. Each adapted to the other's culture.

The McQuestens and Mayos had 11 children, respectively. The Mayos' sixth child was born prematurely and died in 1884. The three oldest McQuesten youngsters supposedly died of unknown causes before 1888.

The McQuestens' four oldest surviving children were named Crystal (born 1888 or 1891), Henry, Julia and Lizzie (Elizabeth).

The Mayos paid tribute to the Harpers and McQuestens by naming some of their children for their good friends and partners. There was Katherine (Kitty), Arthur and Lee (Leroy).

Some of the others were named Charlie (born April 5, 1881 at Old Station), the twins Antoinette (Anto) and Annette (Nettie) (born at Tanana Station) and the youngest, Florence (born November 19, 1897 at Rampart). When the Mayos moved permanently to Rampart in 1897, Captain

Mayo built a trading post, saloon and a hotel he named Florence for his darling baby daughter.

Just as the McQuesten and Harper children were educated Stateside, mostly in boarding schools in San Francisco--the base for Alaska Commercial Company which maybe sponsored a learning centre for agents' children--likewise goes for the Mayos' three oldest sons and two daughters.

The Harpers had seven children, all educated Stateside, except maybe the baby of the brood, who is revered in Alaskan mountaineering history.

Walter Harper, born in 1893, became a protégé of Hudson Stuck, Episcopal missionary and later Archdeacon of Alaska. In 1913, the 20-year-old Walter Harper led Stuck's three-month climbing expedition up Denali (Mt. McKinley) and is heralded as the first person to set foot on the summit of North America's highest peak.

Unfortunately, the story ended prematurely. Walter and his new bride, Frances Wells, died in the sinking of the Princess Sophia in Lynn Canal in 1918.

Between the years 1875 and 1877, the three trading partners had found time to fan out prospecting the Yukon valley, which, as one might imagine, they practically had to themselves. McQuesten struck good pay in places but found nothing sustainable. Besides, he didn't have gold fever and neither did Mayo; Harper did.

Sometime between 1872 and 1878, George Holt (Hall of Fame) came into the Yukon River valley from the Alaskan coast at Dyea (Skagway) on the Panhandle. He had somehow crossed the Chilkoot Pass although the militant Indians guarded it tenaciously. He hoofed along an Indian trail to the Tes-lin-too River, then retraced his steps to tidewater and reported gold to miners at Sitka, the Panhandle capital of Alaska.

Another rendition of the mysterious Holt story came from Dominion land surveyor William Ogilvie. He said the first gold known to have come from any part of the Yukon basin to the Outside world was sent to St. Michael's in 1880 by Holt, an employee of the Alaska Commercial Company. It consisted of two small nuggets. Holt stated the gold was given to him by a Tanana River Indian. "But just where they were found does not appear," wrote Mr. Ogilvie.

Holt's daring junket opened the imagination to other bold prospectors to go investigate, which they did, returning to the coast before they were trapped on the wrong side of the mountains in a winter deep freeze.

A change in habit came in 1882, however. Instead of prospectors returning to overwinter at their point of origin in Sitka, a dozen curious men ventured deeper into the interior. McQuesten was glad to see the newcomers at Fort Reliance, the first trading post built in the Yukon since Hudson's Bay withdrew in 1852 when the Chilkats burned and looted the Fort Selkirk post.

McQuesten supplied the prospectors as best he could. Although some provisions were low, starvation was not a threat to resourceful men. "They all built cabins and went into winter quarters," he wrote in his memoirs. "It was the first time, with the exception of one year, that anyone was living near that I could converse with. Most of the men would meet at the Station in the evening and we would play cards, tell stories, and the winter evenings passed away very pleasantly."

It was these particular gatherings that spawned a fraternity that grew as the number of miners grew. It was 12 years later, in 1894, before the organization was formally incorporated as the Yukon Order of Pioneers (Honour Roll).

During the tediously cold months at Fort Reliance, the innovative McQuesten devised a life-limb-lung saving method of gauging the

Yukon's cold so people knew when to stay close to a crackling hot stove and not chance freezing vital organs.

Outside the window, he placed an "official sourdough thermometer". It was simply a set of four bottles containing substances that all froze at various and dangerously-low temperatures. On a Fahrenheit scale, mercury freezes at nearly 40 below zero; coal oil at minus 50 degrees; Jamaica ginger extract at minus 60 degrees; and the popular, potent, patent medicine Perry Davis' Painkiller crystallized at minus 70 degrees and froze solid when temperatures dipped to 75 below zero.

The prospectors who wintered at Fort Reliance worked the Fortymile and Sixtymile rivers in the summer of 1883. At the end of the second season most were forced to finally return over the Chilkoot Pass. This time they headed for Juneau, which had since replaced Sitka as the prospectors' Outside retreat.

Juneau was originally called Harrisburg for Richard Harris, who, with partner Joseph Juneau, discovered gold and staked their claim in 1880. Soon, a mining camp was booming.

Two men from the original party stayed behind in the Yukon valley, though: William Moore of Victoria, British Columbia, would become prominent as a steamboat captain and dog driver; and Joseph Ladue, a French Canadian of New York State heritage, who had indomitable enthusiasm for overblowing every strike as the next Eldorado.

Ladue would become a trading partner with McQuesten and Harper, as well as a sawmill operator, a saloon keeper, and the father of the town-site he staked at the mouth of the Klondike River where he sold postage-sized building lots for atrocious prices.

He and Harper named the place Dawson for the eminent government geologist Dr. George M. Dawson who never saw his namesake city. De-

spite his commercial successes, Ladue didn't live long enough to enjoy his wealth. A few years after the Klondike madness struck, he died of consumption, an old-fashioned term for tuberculosis of the lungs.

McQuesten and his partners were completely forthright in their dealings and earned the respect of everybody in the country. The trio was described as having a childlike faith in human nature. They were trustworthy, therefore always treated their fellow pioneers to be of the same integrity, which was incongruous to the many crooks and cheats who contaminated the country during the Klondike gold rush madness of 1896-1899.

One story goes that a long-awaited shipment of goods finally arrived by boat at Fort Reliance. Impatient customers, needing provisions fast, were told to help themselves, keep a tally of goods taken, and pay when they could. One historical account claims that only six cans of condensed milk were in discrepancy.

Another time, Captain Mayo tacked a note to the door of the Stewart City trading post. "Gone to St. Michael for load of grub. Will be back about the middle of September with the (steamer) *New Racket*. Nothing but beans and flour in the grub line. If you are short, you'll find the key in the moss between the door casing and the fourth log from the bottom. Leave a memorandum of what you take."

Twelve years or so after the traders had set up shop at Fort Reliance, some 200 prospectors had trekked in over the Chilkoot Trail in 1886 and sifted along the Yukon River 300 miles down to the Stewart River's mouth where fine placer material captured the attention of gregarious gold miners.

Besides the trading posts doubling as a social drop-in centre for idle chit-chat and cards, the first miners' meetings in Canada's Yukon District

were staged at the McQuesten post at the mouth of the Stewart River, Al Mayo presiding.

It happened in the fall of 1886 when events were occurring in rapid-fire succession and food supplies were skimpy. McQuesten and partners, wanting to strike while the iron was hot, had taken advantage of yet another opportunity and quickly erected a log trading post at the mouth of the Stewart River in early 1886 to supply the increasing number of miners gathering on the creeks.

Sensing a human tide who would need feeding, McQuesten had spirited off for Alaska Commercial's head office to order more supplies to avert a famine. He had taken one of the company's little shallow-draft steamers designed for river travel down to St. Michael's, then boarded one of the company's southbound ocean-going freighters that carried furs and gold from St. Michael's and backhauled foodstuffs and other cargo north from San Francisco.

While he was away, two men were sentenced to be banished from the Stewart camp. One "bushed" guy had attempted poisoning his two partners with an arsenic-laced supper.

While they tried sleeping off agonizing stomach cramps, one poisonee caught the would-be poisoner in the act of pulling a gun on the other poisonee who was dozing in his bed.

The second man to be banished was found guilty of the graver crime of thieving. He had stolen butter from McQuesten's store when the coveted commodity was in critically short supply.

In McQuesten's absence, Harper and Mayo were looking after business on the homefront. The merchants took the census and reserved a share of what was in stock for every man. Many prospectors were still out on the creeks and might not reach the Stewart River post until well into winter,

probably dead broke, which didn't matter an iota when the sterling traders calculated how the scant provisions would be equally and fairly distributed, gold dust or not.

The merchants looked upon butter as luxury fare reserved for holidays. Still, all their customers loved the tasty grease and thought the two-pound tins or big tubs should be imported in goodly portions, which simply wasn't always possible.

As each man dribbled in from the creeks, he received his allotment of the coveted butter and whatever other stores were reserved in his name to supplement an existence on a fish and wild game diet.

One evening, in grand storytelling style, Bill Love, the camp's witty wag from Nova Scotia, provided the details of "the butter trial" to William Ogilvie.

A man known only as Missouri Frank bluffed his reputation as a tough, gun-notched hombre and he wanted everybody to respect him as a bad guy whose patience shouldn't be tested.

Frank was camped about 15 miles up the Stewart River with another miner. Early in the winter months they ran short of some food articles, mainly butter. Frank hitched himself to his sleigh and hurried to the Stewart trading post primarily interested in replenishing their butter stores over anything else.

But no amount of gold dust was sufficient to bribe Harper. Four men were delayed on the creeks and hadn't come in yet to collect their share of the remaining butter which was not for sale at any price.

Frank upped the ante several times but Harper wouldn't budge except to offer to sell him such items as were plentiful, which wasn't much. "Now this Missouri Frank had a reputation to live up to," reflected Love.

But instead of confronting Harper with a gun which wouldn't have been wise, he chose the route of a sneaky thief, which wasn't wise either.

Stealing was punishable with a noose.

Frank waited until Harper locked the store for the evening then broke in and stole all the butter reserved for the four delayed miners. It was a few days later before one of the fellows came in for his share and the theft became apparent.

Harper called one of those rare and infamous miners' meetings. He laid out the facts the best he could, telling the audience about the tampering with the door fasteners, and three deputies were appointed to call on the southern gentleman from the "show me state" and set about "showing him" some northern protocol.

Storyteller Bill Love headed the deputation. "We reached Frank's cabin after the evening meal was over," he began.

Immediately upon entering, two of the deputies covered that gentleman with their 45s, and the other deputy covered the partner with his gun. The two complied with the "Hands up!" order, for it was bad manners not to, Love suggested. "I then told Frank that we were a little short of butter in the camp, and thinking maybe he had some, we came to borrow a little till next churning time."

Missouri Frank denied all knowledge of any butter. Love gave him time to re-think but warned him to be quick about it. "Lest my hand gets shaky or my finger cramps, or something like that happens, which might prove unfortunate for some one," he told Frank.

The nameless partner advised Frank to confess, otherwise he threatened to tell everything he knew that just might incriminate the man with the imaginary notched gun.

What made the partner exceptionally angry was Frank defrauding him. He had come back to the cabin with supplies and a good deal of butter, which Frank said he had bought from Harper at a high price. Now the innocent, lied-to partner was libel for half the amount of the stolen butter.

The butter was dug from a snowbank cache and tied to Frank's sleigh as was Frank himself who was driven to camp like a harnessed dog hauling the stolen butter, bedding and some extra food.

In camp, Mayo presided over the miners' meeting when Frank was arraigned before an assembly of miners and the butter identified. Frank said nothing in his own defence, so the men unanimously voted to exile him from camp at least 150 miles. If the criminals showed up within that distance from camp, it would be their death knell.

When the verdict was rendered, both the man who tried poisoning his two partners and the butter thief were furnished free-of-charge with sled, tent, ammunition and other essentials and escorted out of the camp up the Yukon River half a day's journey and watched until they disappeared from sight.

The story goes that both exiles survived and successfully reached the Alaskan coast. But their off-season arrival raised eyebrows in Haines Mission on the Lynn Canal.

The would-be murderer caused additional alarm covering up the truth with his wild rantings of restless Indians gone berserk and the two men barely escaping with their scalps.

Travellers, like William Ogilvie, who were venturing Inside on business did so with nervous apprehension until they reached Stewart where they heard the other side to the tale and sighed with relief.

Meanwhile, two Stewart River prospectors, Howard Franklin and Henry Madison, had heeded Arthur Harper's suggestion to prospect the Forty-mile River that flowed into the Yukon River 100 miles farther downriver where Harper sensed gold would be found. Previously, he and his party had neglected prospecting the appealing stream where the first coarse gold in the Yukon was destined to be found.

When the word "strike" rent the air, the fickle prospectors abandoned the Stewart bars, drawing down the mining population there to go concentrate on the new zone. As soon as word reached the Outside, more men poured into the country.

By now, Harper's hopes were fairly well dashed for him to find the gold that eluded him but was actually beneath his feet on the Stewart, Forty-mile, Tanana and Klondike rivers. Harper relented and became more attentive to bartering hardtack and hardware for furs.

In an attempt to take the discovery news Outside and get word to McQuesten to double the order to thwart any possibility of a winter famine, Tom Williams had been chosen to deliver the message; Indian Bob was hired as his guide.

The Fate of Tom Williams and Indian Bob

It was October, 1886.

The Yukon's first coarse gold had been discovered at Fortymile. But Jack McQuesten didn't know it.

He and his two trading partners, Arthur Harper and Al Mayo, had earlier built one of their trading posts at the confluence of the Stewart and

Yukon rivers. The place was named Fort Nelson for one of the long-time area prospectors.

Sensing a hoard of humans coming to prospect the Stewart River in the spring, McQuesten departed for Alaska Commercial Company's head office in San Francisco to order more supplies and grub for the next season.

After McQuesten went downriver just ahead of freeze-up, two Stewart River prospectors, Howard Franklin and Henry Madison, had discovered gold on the Fortymile River that flows into the Yukon River 100 miles downriver from their Stewart post.

In keeping with the frontier code of prospectors disclosing gold discoveries, the word "strike" rent the air. Hyped on hopes that Fortymile was the next Eldorado, the fickle prospectors abandoned the Stewart bars, drawing down the mining population there to go concentrate on the new zone.

Inevitably, as soon as word leaked out to the Outside world, more men would pour over the Coastal Range into the interior or come upriver from their Alaska diggings.

The traders wanted the country populated and were sending invitations to entice their prospecting friends north. But a sudden influx could spell famine.

The trading trio, working the Yukon River basin of Alaska and the Yukon for 24 years, were authorities on the difficulties of keeping adequate foodstuffs in stock until spring break-up when their little river boat could haul provisions upriver from St. Michael's.

A perplexed Arthur Harper had to somehow get word to his partner McQuesten to increase his order to thwart any possibility of a Fortymile famine.

But how? There were no telephones or telegraph services in this part of the world. And this wasn't the time of year to set out over the trail for the coast.

Except in dire emergencies, the only travellers who went over the winter trail were convicted murderers or thieves whose banishment from camp usually meant a death sentence.

Knowing the terrible conditions, nobody was eager to go. But somebody had to risk the gruesome, three-month, 500-mile journey through untrodden frozen wasteland.

Tom Williams volunteered. He was a seasoned steamboat man but not an accomplished bushman nor was he an experienced dog-team driver. He knew the dangers but was willing to flirt with death for the benefit of his fellowmen.

Williams hired Bob, a skillful, intelligent, English-speaking, 18-year-old Stick Indian who lived nearby on the Yukon River. Bob knew the value of furs but he didn't quite understand the fuss over gold.

Williams and Bob were given the mailbag before leaving Stewart Camp one day in early October, 1886. Three strong dogs pulled a sled laden with their frozen fish for the dogs, human rations, tent, sleeping bags, rifle, ammunition and other survival accoutrements.

Keeping with gold camp protocol, when the messenger reached Dyea he would report the Fortymile gold discovery so news could reach the 200 interior prospectors who chose to overwinter in Sitka, Juneau and other coastal towns.

The lonely travellers' destination was the tiny community of Dyea at the trailhead of the Chilkoot Trail. All 138 Dyea residents were Indians except George Washington Carmack who lived among the Tlingits; George Dickson and Mr. and Mrs. John Jerome Healy were merchants and traders.

The Healys supplied miners entering the country with necessary goods which might constitute anything in view of Healy's eclectic background. He had been a soldier, Indian scout, prospector and trapper. He even had been a whisky trader in southern Alberta, selling a spirituous concoction to Indians living across the border in Montana where he was once a county sheriff.

Williams and Bob followed the frozen rivers and threaded their way through silent forests. The temperatures were fierce, dipping between 40 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit below zero.

Sometimes swirling snow blinded them. Their toes, fingers and faces were first to numb and darken with frostbite.

The relentless elements were exhausting. Their rations grew dangerously meager because they were on the trail much longer than expected.

The dog team was reduced to two when one dog died from fatigue and hunger at Lake Lebarge.

Williams was succumbing to confusion and disorientation. His life depended on Bob. Despite the fierce cold, blizzards and the pair's gnawing hunger, the heroic and reliable Indian stuck with his bewildered and helpless white companion.

They staggered on up the formidable Chilkoot Pass, where the other dogs died within 25 miles of their destination. As usual, foul weather

prevailed at the higher altitude. It was impossible to see. For five days without food, they huddled in a snow cave.

On the sixth day, they tried to walk out but Williams was too ill to stand. Bob hoisted Williams onto his back, lugging him short distances before having to drop his load in a snow bank.

This routine went on for another five days. At treeline, the half-dead pair was fortunately spotted coming out of the mist by some Chilkat Indians who took Williams in tow. They hauled him down the mountain on a sled to the warmth and shelter of Healy's store. There, the frozen men were carried inside and fed hot soup and coffee.

The local Indians went back to the mountain to retrieve what remnants they could find from the gear deposited along the way to lessen the load. The mailbag was nowhere in sight but might surface after the spring melt.

Dyea residents crowded around, wondering about the men's arrival in late January, 1887.

On his deathbed, Williams warned them about a miner named Leslie trying to poison two partners and trying to shoot another named Patterson. He said Leslie had made a run for it. At the time, nobody knew Leslie's fate, or if the guy telling the story was Leslie.

Another rendition of the story said Leslie was exiled from Stewart Camp by a no-appeal Miners' Meeting decision as was Missouri Frank, who was banished for stealing the last precious tins of butter from the McQuesten and Harper store.

Unknown at the time, both Leslie and Missouri Frank, who may have met on the trail, miraculously threaded their way safely to Haines Mission, about 16 miles from Dyea. It was possible they chose the longer,

less-travelled, easier Chilkat trail, finding refuge along the route in Indian villages, rather than trying to negotiate the more precipitous Chilkoot Pass.

Arrival in the off-season of March, 1887, created much alarm in Haines Mission, as the January arrival of Williams and Bob caused a stir in Dyea.

Why would these two men attempt a hazardous winter trip on the trail unless they too were escaped or banished criminals? The Indian allegedly scooped up a handful of dry beans from a sack and tossed them across the wooden counter top. The seeds clattered like “nuggets”.

“Gold! Like this!” explained the Indian lad, who passed on the news of the rich Fortymile gold strike and assured that a message was sent to McQuesten in San Francisco.

Williams lasted two days at Healy’s store before dying exhaustion and exposure. Bob was badly frost-bitten, too.

As reported in the March 19th edition of the newly-founded Juneau-based *Alaska Free Press*, Bob was taken to Juneau where one blackened toe had to be amputated.

He was a bright, alert fellow who showed great interest in new and strange city sights, said the news item. Bob, familiar with white folk, had never before seen a black man or a horse. In Juneau, he was acquainted with both.

He stared in wonderment upon seeing Jimmy Shake’s col cart pulled by a big, four-legged, hornless creature. Then, upon seeing Cato, the black tinsmith, Bob remarked to the reporter: “That must have been badly frozen to come out so black.”

Bob had to recuperate in Juneau, awaiting warmer weather before returning to his interior home on the Yukon River. His stay cost money and the newspaper appealed to residents to come to Bob's aid.

A fund-raiser had already collected \$131.75 in cash; \$70.95 for clothing and shoes; \$4.00 for medicine; and \$8.00 for a sled.

McQuesten & Company quickly established a trading post at the mouth of Fortymile Creek in the spring of 1887. The supplies did not come over the Chilkoot portage but were brought to this point by small stern-wheel steamers which ascended the length of the Yukon River from St. Michael's. Goods did not arrive until late summer and any accident or detention could prevent arrival altogether.

Geologist George Dawson reported winters in the country were long and severe, and the season of low-water suitable for working on river bars short. "It is also found that beneath its mossy covering, the ground is often frozen, presenting difficulties of another character to the miner, which have prevented the working of many promising flats and benches. This, however, is likely to be remedied before long by the general burning off of the woods and moss in the mining camps."

Dr. Dawson was forever optimistic in his predictions that the country would someday support a considerable mining population.

But without McQuesten, Harper and Mayo, whose associate Joseph Ladue joined them 10 years later, the series of events that culminated into the Klondike discovery would never have been possible, contended Pierre Berton.

"Without the string of posts they set up along the Yukon, the systematic exploration of the river country could not have taken place. They guided

the hands of the prospectors, extending almost unlimited credit, sending them off to promising sections of the country, and following up each discovery by laying out a townsite and erecting a general store."

Their little steamboat, the *New Racket*, had been purchased from Ed Schieffelin, the gaunt, gray-eyed, scarecrow of a millionaire hardrock miner with long black hair.

He came into the north country in 1882 from Arizona where he got rich off a mountain of silver and was responsible for the Tombstone Silver Mines and founding of the town of Tombstone.

He theorized that a mineral belt encircled the earth and was looking for lode deposits, not placer. His party had a small paddlewheel steamer for the trip upriver from St. Michael's. But the vast emptiness of the land and its cold, stark winters didn't impress him, evidently. He cut his exploration program short and sold his riverboat to McQuesten & Co.

Al Mayo became captain of the *New Racket*, a curious name that Schieffelin had bestowed on the little craft, although the Koyukon Athabaskans jested that they named Captain Mayo's little steamboat for the racket it generated.

"Their arrangement with the great Alaska Commercial Company in San Francisco was a casual one," noted Berton. "In the early years they were on its payroll, but remained free to prospect if they wished. Later they operated as independent contractors, buying their goods from the company but trading on their own."

Following a gold strike on Birch Creek, a tributary of the Alaska Yukon River about 60 miles below Fort Yukon on the Arctic Circle, Jack and Kate McQuestens' two-storey trading post became the centre of the Circle City universe in 1894. The store doubled as a post office and meeting place in the instant town that soon housed a thousand bodies.

The original Birch Creek discovery was made by two Russian Koyukoners, Pitka Pavaloff and Sergai Cherosky who was married to Pavaloff's sister, Erinia. Pitka's and Erinia's mother, Malanka, an Athabaskan, and their father, Ivan, a Russian-Tlingit, managed the Alaska Commercial Company trading post at Nulato, just below the junction of the Yukon with the Koyukuk.

Like many creoles of mixed blood who lived along the Yukon River basin, Sergai and Erinia Cherosky spoke their native tongue and other dialects, plus Russian and English, which made the couple invaluable to the white traders as translators.

The Cheroskys worked for the famous trading trio of Harper, Mayo and McQuesten, whose wives Jennie, Margaret and Kate, were descendants of the Russian and Athabaskan bloodline and grew up in the Yukon River basin. They each befriended the other and their children played together at Fort Reliance, Stewart City, Fortymile, and, later, Circle City.

It was natural that Jack McQuesten grubstaked Pavaloff and Cherosky to prospect Birch Creek where they made fantastically-rich discoveries in 1893.

Over a hundred white prospectors poured into the creeks and found more fantastic discoveries on Mammoth and Mastodon creeks.

Unfortunately, some of the uncharitable white prospectors who weren't doing so well on their own ground, seized the gold claims belonging to Cherosky and his brother-in-law Pavaloff who were not recognized as American citizens, although they were Alaskan-born natives and life-long residents.

It was one of the rare times McQuesten couldn't talk reason into men's noggins. He tried to convince the claim-jumpers to allow the two native

fellows to hold onto their property in view of the fact that their Birch Creek discovery was the *raison d'être* for Circle City's birth.

In the end, the claims were taken from Pavaloff and Cherosky, who were unwelcome in the very settlement they were responsible for creating. How McQuesten finally managed to untangle this wrong-doing has been lost in antiquity. But it is likely the man known as "the father of the country" was influential in changing attitudes.

Tribute was paid to Jack McQuesten as "the father of the country" in prospector William Haskell's book **Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Goldfields**.

McQuesten also was known at various times as "Father of Alaska" and "Father of the Yukon" and other choice names like "*Yukon Jack*", "Cap'n Jack" and "Old Jack". The old pioneer's name, Haskell stressed, was synonymous with honesty and integrity. McQuesten had come in contact with nearly all the men who had risked their lives in the search for gold in its frozen soil and had ever been their friend.

"It has been said that he was outfitted, supported and grubstaked more men, and kept them through the long winters when they were down on their luck, than any other person on the Yukon. Hundreds of men now on the river owe all the success they have to his help, and they know it and appreciate it."

Haskell reminisced the great night at Circle City when McQuesten was presented with a gold watch and chain, bearing the insignia of the Order of Yukon Pioneers. Because the fraternity abided by the Biblical motto "Do unto others as you would be done by", its first elected president was dubbed "Golden Rule McQuesten".

"It was said the watch cost five hundred dollars," wrote Haskell, "but McQuesten's bill for entertainment was probably much more than that,

for there was no half-way business about his generosity, and the boys needed no gold dust when they stepped up to the bar."

There is an old adage about the mining business that still rings true. It takes enthusiasm to sustain a miner in such country, and happy is he who is ultimately rewarded by having his visions realized.

McQuesten was the rarity who both achieved wealth from the Klondike and had the pleasure that comes from it. He did not squander the gold he earned from trading.

As soon as the news came about the Klondike goldfields, prospectors vacated Alaska's Circle City for Canada's Dawson City. McQuesten, of all people, knew how hard it was to keep an adequate food supply in the cupboards. He accurately predicted that the sudden onslaught of thousands of stampeders would create a dangerous shortage of food for the district during the winter of 1897-98. He moved his wife and four children to safety in California.

The San Francisco-bound Alaska Commercial Company *Excelsior* steamed out of St. Michael's in early July, 1897. Besides furs, the ship was carrying Klondike gold, mainly belonging to the company and to McQuesten. It was worth roughly \$600,000 to \$700,000. When the ship docked at the foot of Market Street on July 14, the rumoured value had increased exponentially to \$2.5 million.

However, the *Excelsior's* arrival didn't received as much press play as did a Pacific Whaling Company rust-bucket that docked in Seattle three days later. A "ton of gold" off-loaded from the *Portland* under protection of Wells-Fargo guards is what lit people's imagination and ignited the Klondike gold rush in earnest.

Among the 25 *Excelsior* passengers was the six-member McQuesten family, Arthur Harper, the Ottawa-bound William Ogilvie, and one of the owners of Alaska Commercial.

Gerstle and Sloss were philanthropists who helped civilize the North, founding schools, churches, care facilities, trading posts and providing work to thousands of northerners. Their benevolence could be counted on to give sympathy and aid to every worthy cause.

One of those causes was the tubercular Arthur Harper who had bequeathed his modest assets to his family before going Outside to die. As a final salute to a loyal and dedicated agent of over 20 years, Alaska Commercial covered passage for the 62-year-old Harper, who, while gaining little from his independent prospecting, left a legacy as a highly-regarded individual and company representative.

Of the three visionaries, Harper was the only one with gold fever. His pointing goldseekers to the most promising prospects, coupled with the company's philosophy of nearly unlimited credit, determined a series of events that culminated into the Klondike gold rush, which ironically Harper did not get to witness.

Harper may or may not have spent time in the company-sponsored Commercial Hotel, a San Francisco-based rest and medical facility known as the "Yukoners' Home", where worn-out old-timers could while away their twilight years in easy chairs.

At some point, perhaps to be near friends or relatives, Harper had gravitated toward the therapeutic heat of Yuma, Arizona, where he died in November, 1897, only four months after departing Alaska.

William Ogilvie, who surveyed the International Boundary between Alaska and the Yukon in 1887-88, attached the name Mount Harper to a high peak in the Ogilvie Mountains (NTS map 116-B).

As previously mentioned, McQuesten's name is attached to a major river tributary flowing into the Stewart River (NTS map 115-P).

Jack McQuesten either built or bought a Victorian mansion across San Francisco Bay in the beautiful setting of Berkeley. He settled Kate and the kids, who could rely on Alaska Commercial if need be while adjusting to this strange place in his absence. Then he returned north for one last fling before re-joining his family permanently and siring four more children.

McQuesten was too late to stake open Klondike ground--not that he was particularly interested in mining the creeks himself. As usual, he participated as a grubstaker who would receive a share of the profits if the owner struck paying dirt. He purchased interest in gold claims on Eldorado and Bonanza in 1898, around the time an exodus was favouring Nome and other Alaskan gold diggings. McQuesten, however, did receive modest dividends from Klondike investments on two of the richest creeks in the 800-square-mile area.

One of his last hurrahs performed for Alaska Commercial was supervising construction of another one of its ugly sheet-iron storage warehouses like the others he had built at strategic places along the Yukon River. This was his last and by far the largest.

When McQuesten quit the north in late 1898, he was a multimillionaire. His wife managed their business affairs as well as the estate after her 72-year-old husband died while tending to ambassador duties for the Alaska Yukon Exposition staged in Seattle in 1909.

Kate, 61, died in 1921. The eldest McQuesten child, Crystal, lived out her longevity in the family's Berkeley home.

McQuesten, Harper and Mayo had all married intelligent, resourceful Indian women, who seemingly curbed their husbands' restlessness--or maybe as they aged the men wanted to settle down. The families had lived in neat, sturdy log homes and most of the handsome, dark-skinned, dark-eyed children were educated in Lower 48 private schools.

Of the three partners, Al Mayo was the only one to spend the rest of his life in the north. He and his wife, Margaret, moved to a village about 50 miles up river from Tanana called Rampart, where the venerable Mayo was the de facto "Mayor".

Rampart became a supply point when the 1896 Minook Creek gold strike created action. The Rampart population swelled to 1,500 during its best days in 1898-99. The settlement was graced with a mission, post office, agricultural experiment station and a newspaper.

One of the town's earliest residents was author Rex Beach, who made more money writing stories about gold rushes than as a serious participant.

Many of the Mayo offsprings joined their parents who were running the Florence Hotel, saloon, blacksmith shop out back, and Captain Mayo was servicing the Rampart trading post with the steamer *New Racket*.

Margaret, an expert on babies, mid-wifery and care-giving, died at age 65 during the flu epidemic of 1925. Her 77-year-old husband predeceased her on July 17, 1924.

The name Mayo is attached to a Yukon lake, river and village, thanks to early explorer and prospector Big Alex MacDonald. He named Mayo Lake after Al Mayo for his unwavering faith in the prospecting potential of the upper Yukon River valley.

In 1887, on MacDonald's suggestion, Dominion land surveyor William Ogilvie officially named a tributary flowing into the Stewart as Mayo River. When a village was founded at the mouth of Mayo River in 1902-03, it naturally was called Mayo Landing.

McQuesten and Harper were inducted into the Yukon Prospectors' Association's Hall of Fame in 1988 as two of the earliest prospectors coming into the Yukon in 1873.

Their names are inscribed on brass plates attached to the Hall of Fame art piece in the foyer of the Yukon administration building. Their names also are engraved in the base of the bronze prospector statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

Al Mayo was inadvertently overlooked for induction originally, but the Prospectors' Association's named him to the Honour Roll in 2005.

See related articles *George Holt: First White Man Over the Chilkoot Pass*; *Edmond Bean Led First Prospecting Party Over Chilkoot Pass* and *William Ogilvie: Dominion Surveyor Made Order Out of Chaos*.