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COLONEL JOHN HOWARD CONRAD: CONRAD CITY NEVER FULFILLED HIS EXPECTATIONS

by Jane Gaffin

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Colonel John Howard Conrad probably meets all the qualifications as a folk hero.

Yet the Colonel's great-grandson expressed doubts in his family biography whether anybody other than a Conrad would be interested in a Conrad, writes Murray Lundberg in his new book about this one-man wonder who's been all but forgotten for almost a century.

It wasn't until 1990 that the decaying remains of a stamp mill, Riblet tramway and other mining artifacts in the Windy Arm area grabbed the attention of Lundberg.

The local historian immediately saw the answer to 'where' an 18-month segment in the Yukon's life had evaporated. But it took a while longer for the part-time Yukon Archives employee to sleuth out the answers to Who? What? When? Why?

Now Conrad has leaped to life in a delightful new northern book that reads like a 'whodunit' and 'whodun what to whom.'

"Fractured Veins & Broken Dreams: Montana Mountain and the Windy Arm Stampede" is a gem of a story that fills a niche in the Yukon's post-Klondike history.

Lundberg kindly refers to his protagonist as a 'colorful character.' But Conrad actually crashes boldly and brashly onto the book's pages as somewhat of a jewel and jerk.

"Conrad is even more interesting as a example of the type of men who were instrumental in opening up the frontiers of North America," continues Lundberg, who is held spellbound by these historic figures.

Conrad, an ambitious and optimistic capitalist, had a cathedral-sized ego and liked publicity ladled out in big scoops.

He was a high-rolling scoundrel who lived fast, made decisions faster, imbibed generously in booze, and could be mean-spirited. It probably was not wise to get in his way.

An ostentatious American financier, Conrad was responsible in the early 1900s for

consolidating a string of gold and silver claims on Montana Mountain which stands sentinel to Carcross.

The Colonel's namesake, Conrad City, sprang up in 1905 on the banks of Windy Arm, an extension of Tagish Lake. With great hoopla, he predicted that what is now a ghost town would grow and replace Dawson City as the Yukon's capital.

Conrad perpetrated the idea -- and accepted the credit -- for solely pulling the Yukon from an economic mire that followed on the heels of the 1898 Klondike gold rush.

The honorary title of 'Colonel' was soon bestowed on Conrad by a newspaper reporter in 1905, writes Lundberg, a former long-haul trucker in B.C. The Colonel tag stuck to the imposing, towering, gregarious Southerner, who was born on a large Virginia plantation in 1855.

Conrad's parents, who had 13 children, were descendants of colonial settlers. The family suffered the Civil War in the front yard.

A 15-year-old John Howard pushed westward to join a couple of brothers in the rough-and-tumble frontier lifestyle. Their trading businesses prospered. The boys were joined by the other Conrads who engaged in cattle ranching, townsite speculation, shipping, banking and mining.

A confident John Howard soon embarked on his own ventures. "(He) was achieving fame in his own way during the 1880s," writes Lundberg.

"In his search for larger grazing ranges for his thousands of head of cattle, he became notorious for his refusal to abide by the traditions of Montana's old range system."

Conrad met and married a young daughter of a wealthy Eastern merchant. The marriage was stormy and ended in a nasty divorce. Each accusation and ugly detail in the protracted affair was flung across The Helena Independent's front pages.

Prior to this ruckus, Lundberg's skilful ferreting turned up another juicy tidbit. Upon the death of Mabel Conrad's father in 1889, the bulk of his \$1.7-million estate was divided between Mabel and her sister.

Their mother, Josephine Barnaby, contested the will and won the suit. She received the lion's share of the estate but paid the ultimate price for her boldness. Mama foolishly drank from a bottle of whiskey, mailed in the guise of a gift. Who really sent the amber liquid that was found to be colored water laced liberally with arsenic?

After these misadventures, the promoter extraordinaire hit the Yukon like a whirlwind. He was soon in the throes of his mining ventures at Windy Arm, maybe looking for a source of arsenic.

By January of 1905, he had set up Conrad Consolidated Mines and J.H. Conrad Bonanza Mines.

The two newly formed companies and 10 claims quickly evolved into what Lundberg describes as "an intricate web of nearly a dozen companies and more than 100 claims."

As the saying goes, the rest is history. Only this time the intriguing facts are neatly packaged into Lundberg's illustrated book that is available wherever northern books are sold.

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Fractured Veins & Broken Dreams: Montana Mountain and the Windy Arm Stampede, by Murray Lundberg, Pathfinder Publications of Whitehorse, Yukon, 160 pages, paper.

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