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JAKE DAVIDSON: FOUND FIRST SILVER IN KENO DISTRICT, 1903

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(Information for this piece relied on History of Keno Hill Mining District by Dr. Aaro Aho, unpublished manuscript, circa 1974; Free Gold: The Story of Canadian Mining by Arnold Hoffman, illustrated with exquisite pen-and-ink drawings by Irwin Hoffman, Rhinehart & Company, 1947; McQuesten Lake and Scougale Creek Map-Areas by Dr. Lewis Green, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, GSC paper 58-4, 1958; Geological Survey of Canada

Bostock Memoir 284, Selected Field Reports 1898-1933, Summary Report for 1904, Duncan Creek Mining District by Dr. Joseph Keele; Yukon Genealogy Gold Rush Database; Gold & Galena by The Mayo Historical Society, compiled by Linda MacDonald and Lynette Bleiler, 1990.)

Jacob Alexander Davidson (Hall of Fame) came from Ontario to the Yukon to join the Klondike gold rush. His party's two canoes, likely the birch-bark variety Davidson built himself, entered the Yukon River system on May 27, 1898, at Lake Bennett, British Columbia. The North West Mounted Police checked and registered the craft as #1561-62.

Jake Davidson was a big, furry-faced, laconic, talented prospector who disliked crowds and preferred roaming the hills alone, albeit he had plenty of partners during his illustrious career. It is said that more creeks were named after him than any other prospector in Canada.

One (NTS 105M) flows into the Mayo River east of Mayo Lake in the Keno Hill Mining District and is named "Davidson". He was first to discover gold on this stream shortly after he and three others staked the first mining claims on Duncan Creek in 1901.

The Davidson Range (NTS 106D) is bordered to the east by McQuesten Lake and to the west by the Beaver River. Some of the cluster of peaks in this range rise to over 6,000 feet and are noted for a number of silver, lead, zinc showings.

Davidson's oddities made for many colourful tales told about him around campfires. He was known for enduring all kinds of privations simply because he ignored any discomforts. He preferred natural caves as shelters rather than the confines of canvas tents. Neither did he like sleeping on the hard, cold ground. His bed was a hammock, fashioned from discarded clothing, and slung between two trees. He defied all kinds of weather and biting insects to enjoy fresh air.

Jake didn't mind black flies, deer flies, moose flies or any other kind of beasties anymore

than cream puffs. "Used to cover himself with grease," a Quebec colleague Paddy Plaunt related in the book *Free Gold: The Story of Canadian Mining*. "Stunk like hell, he did. He just didn't have no feelin's about anythin'."

It was in the summer of 1898, hundreds of disheartened Klondikers, who had chosen to stay in the Yukon rather than pushing on to Alaska gold rushes, were scouring the Stewart River to find paying quantities of gold dust on the lower bars. Some prospectors pressed farther into the Keno Hill area.

Keno Hill juts up over 6,000 feet between Christal Creek and the headwaters of Lightning Creek, a tributary of Duncan Creek, described geological engineer Dr. Aaro Aho (Hall of Fame).

Keno Hill is northeast of Galena Hill, a massive green mound in the central Yukon's mountainous plateau. Between the two heights courses Duncan Creek, a large southwesterly-flowing stream 14 miles long that branches and enters Lightning Creek 12 miles from its mouth.

Gustavus Gustavenson (Hall of Fame) and his two sons were among the first energetic prospectors into the area. The Gustavensons (a.k.a. Gustavsons) seemed to vanish into thin air and were forgotten until the fall of 1899 when they floated 200 miles into Dawson City and made a substantial bank deposit from three sacks bulging with placer gold. They set gossip swirling. Each subsequent fall, they bought winter supplies with a coarse gold, uncharacteristic in shape and colour to the gold from Klondike creeks.

Traditionally, prospectors observed the frontier code to share news of fresh gold strikes. Not the quiet, solitary Swedes, who were opposed to gold stampedes for fear of losing their discovery through foul means--a common practice in the Klondike. Instead of recording claims in the Dawson City mining office to become public knowledge, the Swedes kept their isolated quarters a secret.

In the vast country, they felt secure in their seclusion, each fall coming into town and managing for two years to lose anybody who attempted to trail them. Their luck changed in September, 1901.

Four Klondike stampeders were camped on the frosty ground on the McQuesten River's bank below Haggart Creek. One of the men concealed by heavy foliage was Jake Davidson. His companions were Duncan Patterson, Allan McIntosh and Colin Hamilton. When the Lucky Swedes made their annual supply treks downstream to Dawson City, the four men began the difficult task of tracing the hidden trail to the Swedes' gold sanctuary.

The four men headed up Christal Creek and located a trail that led between two hills. Keno Hill was to their left and Galena Hill was on their right.

They found the Swedes' possessions neatly tucked in a boxed canyon. The immaculate arrangement included a lone log cabin, a few smaller storage buildings and a sawmill operated with water power.

No staking posts were visible. Duncan Patterson cut poplars into posts and staked the Discovery claim on September 12, 1901. He named the creek "Duncan" for himself.

A few days later, the four men floated back to Dawson City and recorded their claims--the most important ones staked since the Klondike gold rush. In traditional frontier ethics, they announced a phenomenal new gold strike made on Duncan Creek.

Opportunists flocked overland with horses, mules, packdogs or on foot to reach the new bonanza. Within a year, Duncan Creek was soundly staked. Facsimiles of cabins hastily went up as miners got on with serious development preparations. From Duncan Creek to the mouth of the Mayo River, roadhouses popped up along a new 25-mile government wagon road.

Freight from Dawson was delivered by the steamer Prospector at Mayo Landing or roughly 15 miles farther up the Stewart River at Gordon's Landing for 10 cents a pound. In winter, this freight was distributed to the principal creeks at a rate ranging from three to six cents a pound.

During summer, the rate was 15 cents to Discovery on Duncan Creek or eight cents to Hight Creek. There were stores at Mayo and Duncan Creek where clothing and provisions could be purchased. "To work to advantage in this country, the prospector should be equipped with at least one year's outfit of provisions and clothing," reported Ottawa geologist Joseph Keele.

Keele wrote that an excellent road with good grades, suitable for either summer or winter travel, was located and partly cut out by George Gordon and Jake Davidson from Gordon Landing to Duncan Creek, a distance of 11 miles. "If a bridge were built over the Mayo River at the outlet of Mayo Lake this road could be continued at a small cost over the low divide to Duncan Creek. The distance then to Duncan Creek would be only 15 instead of 24 miles by the Mayo Road to the same point."

In 1904, Duncan Creekers realized that not enough gold was being returned in exchange for their two years of investing money and back breaking labour into their venture. Superstitiously, they blamed the curse on the Gustavensons who had left Dawson City and supposedly were never heard from again.

Only the hard toil and quiet patience of the Swedes, whose take was calculated to be \$30,000 in gold, had overcome the obstacles. Nature's barriers had been caused by a great ice tongue welling over the divide 10,000 years ago when only the tops of Keno and Galena hills protruded above the rubble-strewn ice that had scattered and buried the riches in deep overburden.

After Duncan Creek stampeders extracted another estimated \$70,000 in gold, they itched to move on to better diggings. Soon, pay was struck in the Minto Lake area. Former Duncan Creeker Pete Haggart sketched a map on a scrap of paper. Jake Davidson and Allan McIntosh accepted the invitation to stake adjoining claims to his.

Meanwhile, Davidson, a determined free spirit, had been off alone and found a short cut into Duncan Creek during its heyday of fortune seekers. He had ascended the winding McQuesten River to a small tributary and crossed a saddle in the shadow of Galena Hill into swamp and buckbrush and down to Williams Creek and Duncan Creek.

While packing over his newly-discovered trail, he panned the small creek, later known as Galena Creek. He broke open grungy rock to find spectacular silvery-blue minerals.

Davidson's interest was primarily gold. Nevertheless, on July 20, 1903, he staked the showing as the Hell's Gate where the silver vein outcropped in the canyon about three miles from (Galena) creek's mouth. He recorded the claim in the Duncan Creek Mining District on August 3, 1903.

Davidson was skeptical about the district for hardrock mining and did only token work. Yet he is celebrated as the first person to find silver-lead mineralization and stake the first silver claim in the Keno Hill Mining District.

His Hell's Gate silver claim eventually lapsed from neglect. Additionally, he thought his Duncan Creek claims were worked out. His sweeping prospecting and staking forays into Davidson Creek, Minto Creek, Haggart Creek, Dublin Gulch, Beaver River and other places did nothing to convince him the Yukon would ever be a prominent mining jurisdiction.

Before heading back to Ontario, Davidson told his friend Henry "Harry" McWhorter (Hall of Fame) about the location of the silver vein and presented his friend with the samples.

McWhorter had the samples assayed in Dawson City. The results were an astonishing 300 ounces of silver to the ton. But McWhorter thought the small, goldless vein to be worthless, anyway. He too looked for more golden pastures in Fairbanks, Alaska, but returned to the Yukon a few years later.

McWhorter went into partnership with Jack Alverson (Hall of Fame) in 1912. They snowshoed down Haggart Creek to the McQuesten River where they met two other men. The foursome searched the valley and easily found Jake Davidson's galena showing.

McWhorter re-staked the property as the Silver King on February 29, 1913. Jack Alverson staked the Webfoot; Mark Evans and Grant Huffman (a.k.a. Hoffman) respectively staked the Adam and the Mabel claims.

By spring, McWhorter was exhausted physically and financially. He leased the Silver King to Alverson and Huffman for a year, with the proviso that the vein be developed and a cabin be built on the bank of the creek which they named "Galena" to correspond with the massive green landmark to the northeast known as "Galena Hill". The part of the creek where they laboriously mined was given the self-explanatory name of Gamblers' Gulch.

Hardrock mining was scoffed as a risky venture in the Mayo remoteness. But the miners persisted, blasting goldless ore from the frozen rock until the silver vein widened into almost solid galena, sparkling sporadically with ruby silver. Mineral samples, sent to Dawson City's Bank of Commerce, yielded several hundred ounces of silver to the ton.

Alverson and Huffman had split a handsome profit of about \$10,000 from the smelter returns. Mayo buzzed with the news and a staking rush ensued around the Silver King workings.

McWhorter had a disagreement with Alverson and Huffman, no doubt over profit sharing, and he refused to renew the expired lease. McWhorter decided to mine the Silver King himself, only he didn't have enough money to even buy a bag of flour. He appealed to Thomas Aitken, a successful Nova Scotian gold dredge owner in Fairbanks. Aitken agreed to finance McWhorter's work with an option to buy the Silver King claim if it proved good.

McWhorter did sell the Silver King claim outright to Aitken, the principal owner, and his

partner, Henry Munroe. The reported sale price was \$75,000. It was years later before thought was given to the original discoverer, much to Aitken's credit. He at least dispatched a nominal payment of a thousand dollars to Jake Davidson in Ontario.

The first winter Aitken mined the Silver King was 1914-15. Mining and shipping costs outweighed profits. But deeper development had shown that the ore became richer with ruby silver.

The Silver King Mine closed in 1918, but only temporarily. It was destined to prove out as a rich centrepiece in what would become the Keno-Galena hill workings.

Although Jake Davidson preferred gold and hadn't fully appreciated the fantastic silver discovery he had made in 1903, the tough prospector did go on to other staking and prospecting adventures. He and Weldy Young formed the Young-Davidson Mine in 1916. The company eventually took an Ontario gold project into production in Matachewan, a short distance northwest of Cobalt.

Some wags rumoured that Davidson set bush fires to enable better prospecting of the land. " (B)ut from silent Jake came never an admission or denial," wrote Arnold Hoffman in *Free Gold*. "Matachewan, where he made his headquarters for many years, abounds with versions of his exploits."

One raucous story was told by Paddy Plaunt. It was about the time when Davidson's innovative brain turned to making money diving for pearls at the bottom of the Montreal River.

"Well, sir, he dives into the water and come up puffin', his hands full of clams--you know, them fresh-water things. And he keeps divin' and comin' up with them clams until he has a pile five feet high. Then he throws on his greasy pants and shirt and sits down to examine his ketch.

"With a knife he opens every single one of them things. Lookin' for pearls, he says. Yes, sir, he done that one whole summer. It was somethin' to see. I tell you, when he comes up for air, soundin' like a big fish, only he's covered with hair like a gorilla. You could folly his trail along the river by them piles of shells."

Quebec hosted Rouyn and Noranda, fantastic places in the 1920s--even the 1930s--in what was said to be a golden era when it was enough just to be alive; never mind the money, although construction jobs were plentiful as new minesites were built. Jake Davidson was early into Rouyn while ignoring Noranda, a place located a spitting distance to the south. Noranda, a contraction of "Northern Canada", was too danged crowded for him, he said.

Davidson also was renowned for making his own canoes, much like the Indians did in the time of Champlain. He covered the birch-bark sections with strips of metal salvaged from old tin cans, wrote Hoffman.

In the 1920s, his battered canoe pushed through the reeds of a twisty log-strewn creek leading from the Bend of the Kinojevis River. Davidson was immortalized when the creek and a regional geological fault were named in his honour.

Straddling the fault was the Rouyn Merger, a gold mine. His old, long-abandoned gold claims of yesteryears were later proven to be worth a bundle, as had been his Hell's Gate/Silver King discovery in the Yukon.

Although thwarted in Rouyn, he did live to see Hollinger Mine take over as operator of his Young-Davidson Mine. (It was reactivated and listed on the TSX Venture Exchange as of February, 2003, with the principal asset shown as the Matachewan Gold Project, 60 k/36 miles west of Kirkland Lake.)

Jake Davidson, believed to have died around the mid-1920s, was inducted into the Yukon Prospectors' Association's Hall of Fame in 1988. His name is inscribed on a brass plate attached to the Hall of Fame artpiece on display in the foyer of the Yukon government administration building. His name also is engraved in the base of the bronze prospector statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

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See related article Livingstone Wernecke: Geological Work is Legendary.

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