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Sam McGee
By Dick McKenna

“The northern lights have seen queer sights, but the queerest they ever did see, was the night on the marge of Lake Lebarge, when I cremated Sam McGee.”

- Robert W. Service.

William” Sam” McGee had no idea that an innocent trip to the local bank where Robert Service worked would turn his name into a household word. Upon filling out the deposit slip, Service noticed a poetic ring to the name and the rest is history. Actually the “real” Sam McGee was not from Tennessee (as noted in the poem) but was born near Peterborough Ontario in the year 1867. In 1898 McGee came to the Yukon via San Francisco and the Chilkoot Pass and in 1899 he built and settled into his little cabin at Whitehorse (still in perfect shape in the local museum). That same year he discovered and staked the War Eagle copper deposit which eventually produced over \$20,000,000 worth of copper, gold and silver.

Although Sam liked to dabble in prospecting, his main occupation, or claim to fame, during his years spent in the north was building roads. Some of the roads he oversaw construction of are the Whitehorse-Carcross waggon road (1906), the Conrad-Carcross waggon road (1905), the road to War Eagle Mine (1906) and sections of the Whitehorse-Kluane road(1904).

Road building was not McGee’s only line though. For several years prior to 1905 he operated a roadhouse at Canyon on the Kluane Road and from 1905 to 06 he operated the Racine Sawmill at Tagish catering to the town of Conrad during it’s boom. While occupied in that section of the Yukon, McGee prospected the Windy Arm district for gold-silver veins staking the Blue Grouse 2 Claim.

By 1907 McGee was back in Whitehorse where he built a rather “imposing” two-story log home for himself, his wife Ruth (married 1901) and their two children; daughter Emil (born 1903) and son Barney? (Born 1902). By 1909 however, after spending over ten years of his life pioneering in the Yukon, Sam who in the poem was said to be permanently “chilled”, opted for sunnier climes, moving with his family to Summerland British Columbia to become a fruit farmer. Upon McGee’s retirement from the Yukon, the Whitehorse Board of Trade held a banquet in his honour, presenting the “pioneer pathfinder” with a solid gold watch and chain for his unwavering service to the north country.

Following a three year stint in Summerland McGee and family moved to a farm in Ferguson Flats near Edmonton and in 1923 again relocated, this time to Great Falls Montana where he worked “for quite a long time” as a contractor on road and railroad grades in Idaho and

Montana. During this period McGee also worked on the road to Yellowstone National Park.

In his later years McGee did return to the Yukon though, twice. Once in 1918 to look after his interests in the War Eagle Mine (in partnership with Robert Lowe) and again in 1938 for one last prospecting trip via bush plane to the headwaters of the Liard River. On the later trip north McGee was rather amused to find his fellow steamship passengers buying “genuine ashes of Sam McGee” as souvenirs.

Two years later, on September 11th 1940 Sam McGee died of a stroke while helping out at his daughter’s farm near Calgary Alberta. He was 74 years old. According to his last wishes rather than being cremated he was buried in a plot next to his wife.

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